Body, Heart and Soul

A light scattering of snowflakes pattered softly down, dusting the hard packed ground of the central square of the Amazon village. Figures moved through it, long cloaks covering their bodies briefly kicking free of fur lined boots as they walked along.

Most were headed to a newly built dining hall, with neatly fitted stone walls and a slate roof. To one side of the roof was a chimney, where the smoke from cookfires was rising and creating a clear spot briefly free of the snow.

Outside the hall three Amazons were chopping wood for the fire, boots braced against cutting blocks and axes rising and falling in a regular rhythm.

Next to the dining hall another recently refinished structure stood, a round building with a covered porch surrounding it. On the porch were workbenches, and on the workbenches were Amazons busy about any number of tasks.

The doors to the round hall stood open, and a small group of women were in the doorway, having a discussion, the light sound of laughter ringing out over the central open space, echoing softly back from the walls of small dwellings scattered around the edge of the clearing.

From a slight rise behind the dining hall, down a rock lined path two women emerged, both in thickly lined cloaks, and headed towards the round hall. Both were blond, both were of medium height though one was slightly taller.

"Y'know, Gabrielle." The taller woman said, as they walked. "It's really damned nice to be able to afford all this stuff." Ephiny indicated the cloak, and the heavy boots she was wearing. "I didn't realize really how much colder it would be up here than where we lived before."

"Oh yeah." Gabrielle agreed. "Cyrene told me this morning that they've spotted another trader wagon train heading this way. I guess word's good and out that we've got coin to spend." She waved her hand at the group in the doorway. "Let's go inside, folks."

She put her cloak's hood down as she entered the gathering hall, exposing her pale, straight hair to the lamplight inside as she looked around the busy interior. "Ah, there you are." She detoured around to one side, where six Amazons were clustered, surrounding a table full of rocks.

Behind the table was a tall woman with dark hair, wearing a sleeveless leather tunic and long hide pants tucked into sturdy boots. One hand was resting on the table, the other hand a piece of rock in it. "Here I am." Xena agreed. "I think we've got enough ore here to see what kind of steel we can make out of it."

"This the new load that came down yesterday?" Gabrielle picked up a piece and examined it.

"Yup." Her partner said. "They dug this out of that cave midway down the slope."

"Could we sell the ore off to someone who wanted to use it too?" One of the Amazons asked. "I heard some of the traders talking about a city south of here that wanted stuff like this."

"We could." Gabrielle answered. "We can sell some, and use some, especially since Xe's agreed to teach everyone how to smelt iron and steel, and make armor and stuff from it." She bumped her soulmate affectionately. "But let's put that off until after council."

The small group broke up and went to take their seats, as the rest of the tribe filed in the doors and started to fill the room. Gabrielle watched them, her elbow resting casually on the knee Xena had braced up on a bench.

Xena leaned closer and blew gently into her ear, making Gabrielle smile. “And stuff?” The taller woman uttered. “They all want crossbows and swords.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle agreed. “But you’ll teach them to make pots and pans too, right?”

“Heheh. What makes you think I know how?”

“C’mon, Xe. If you can make that hammered leg armor, tell me you can’t figure out a fry pan.” Gabrielle gave her an indulgent look.

“You don’t hammer those.” Xena responded, in an absent tone “You cast them.” She watched the gathering Amazons. “Hard work. I think I can get these guys to learn to make arrowheads, not sure they’d buy into putting that much effort into a soup pot.”

Gabrielle turned fully and looked at her. “What?”

Xena straightened and patted her on the back. “We can talk about it later. Your court awaits, your Majesty.” She indicated the raised platform at the back of the hall. “G’wan.”

“Join me?” Gabrielle extended a hand and waited for Xena to take it. Then she led the way up to the platform, climbing up and releasing her consort as Xena detoured around to the back of the dais and her customary seat near the wall behind her.

Customary seat, in this, their newly redone gathering space that now sported river stone walls and a slate rock roof like the dining hall, replacing the wood and thatch that had previously let in wind and dampness.

Three sets of doors, that could be thrown open during the summer heat, and sturdy windows that could likewise be opened, but now were fastened firmly shut against the cold.

Along one side of the hall there was a fireplace, and there now was a neatly built fire in it radiating warmth into the room. Gabrielle untied her cloak and removed it, draping it over her chair next to the one Ephiny was already sitting in.

She was in leather, but not the brief, revealing outfits they wore in the warmth of the spring and summer in deference to the cold outside, and she looked out over the crowd who likewise, were clad in furs and hide and in some cases, wool.

Different.

Gabrielle smiled briefly and took a seat. Her body was covered with a beautifully cured overlay, laced down the front neatly fitted, over a long sleeved linen shirt and her rank tokens were woven into the leather and draped over her left shoulder. “Good morning, everyone.”

Xena relaxed onto her little ledge, folding her arms over her chest and regarding the now attentive crowd. Pretty much every bench was filled, and as she watched the faces that were now focused on her soulmate she had to acknowledge the wave of change that had overtaken them.

The core of the tribe was still there, of course, though many of the older faces were gone now. Unable to cope with the new direction Gabrielle was taking them, they had taken a share of the newly mined wealth and left gone on to different tribes and a more traditional way of living.

But still the core was there, warriors roughly the same age as Ephiny and Eponin, contemporaries of Solari who were scattered in the crowd, content to be along for the ride. Around them were the youngers, Gabrielle’s contemporaries and the newly feathered warriors who were now coming into their own.

And the elders, those who were content to have their retirements now shored up by the tribe’s new wealth and to live in well built huts with a bit more creature comforts.

Different, but, they had decided in a good way. Xena muffled a smile as Gabrielle started on her daily announcements, this council encouraging the exchange of information and designed to draw out thought and objections rather than allow them to fester.

Also different. Also, Xena decided, in a good way. She drew in a breath, feeling a bit of warmth against her bare shoulders from the fire, appreciating the slight ache of muscles well used in demonstrating the art of the anvil since just past dawn.

She had two promising apprentices. One being a newcomer to the tribe, who had traveled with them back from the coast, a burly woman who didn't talk much, but who had a nice way with a hammer. The other was Paladia, who had stepped up and showed a surprising knack for the art, though given her drawing ability perhaps not so surprising.

All in all, positive changes. Xena herself was no longer loathe to spend time in the village, though she spent more of her day down in the town with the militia – grown into a more formidable force as the town once again started to cautiously expand.

"So the news we've had from down river is that the train heading this way is twelve wagons." Gabrielle was saying. "That's good news, lets make sure the trading goes both ways as much as we can. I want people to know we've got good products that they can come here for, not just that we want to buy stuff."

"We've got some new stuff." Das spoke up from one of the closer benches. "Renas and I took some of the chips and bits and made some ear cuffs and necklaces. Town likes em."

Gabrielle smiled at her. "Thanks, Das. I heard the miller down in town saying he'd bought some for his wife."

Renas merely nodded, but her expression was mostly content.

Big change there. Xena studied the elder. Figurehead in the last attempt to oust her soulmate from her position, the older woman had apparently turned over a new leaf. She'd turned her back on the rest of the schemers, at least, and when a slew of them had left, she'd stayed behind.

Stayed behind and what was more, went along with the changes, dropping her protests of the new and ignoring the jibes of others who accused her of changing sides at the breath of the wind.

Smart, Xena reflected. She'd never considered Renas ignorant, just stubborn and maybe seeing their hierarchy, known from birth, shattering beyond recognition.

"Okay, so that's all the announcements for today. Anyone got anything for me?" Gabrielle rested her elbows on the table and regarded the crowd, her mild expression open and inviting. "Nothing? Wow. Okay, we've got four hunting parties going out today, so anyone who wants to be a part of one, hook up with Eponin after the meeting."

The buzz of conversation rose immediately, as Gabrielle sat back in her comfortable chair, a beautifully carved wooden item with colorful seat and back pads tied onto it. "Quiet day."

"Mm." Ephiny agreed, her hands resting on her visibly rounding stomach. "You're good at this." She complimented her friend. "It's damn nice to not have everyone squabbling like chicks at feeding time all the time, you know?"

"Well." Gabrielle hiked up one knee and circled it with both hands. "I had a Hades of a lot of help getting this turned around." She smiled at her regent. "But yeah, it's a nice change. I think most everyone's gotten used to me by now."

"Oh yeah." Ephiny nodded. "Either they agreed with you, or they took off. I was scared we'd end up with ten of us and the nutball twins but it's worked out."

"Mm." Gabrielle watched the groups form and slowly move towards the doors, then her eyes lifted to the entrance as two newcomers entered. "Ah. Speaking of the nutball twins… Hey Cait!"

The one in the lead was a slim, blond haired young woman, dressed in green leathers and carrying a long bow, and she was followed by a much taller companion, who was covered in a russet leather cloak.

The two walked down the left hand aisle towards the dais against the flow, but they were made room for as Amazons stepped aside between the benches to let them pass.

This seemed to amuse the taller of the two, who glanced up at met Xena's eyes, smirking a little.

Xena eased off her perch and strolled over to Gabrielle's chair, draping her right hand over the top of it as the two arrived. "What's the word from the border Cait?" She asked, without preamble. "Any sign of raiders?"

Cait climbed up onto the platform and came over, while her partner Paladia just took a seat on the edge of it to wait. "Hello." She greeted Gabrielle politely, before turning her attention to the taller woman behind her. "Not a bit of a sign." She said. "Its all rough and nothing the whole track we took when we found the Spartans."

Xena nodded. "Didn't expect any different, but it never pays to take a chance."

Cait nodded. "Just so. I did find a herd of goats, though." She added. "I left them down by the town. They weren't at all marked or anything like that."

"Just running loose?" Gabrielle asked. "Really?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Cait leaned on her bow a little. "Pally found them, really. " She glanced over her shoulder at her companion. "Was it by that pond?"

Paladia nodded. "Weird." She said. "They were just standing there." She said, briefly. "Followed us right off. We didn't really find em as much as they found us. " Her brow creased. "We didn't have to even herd them, it was like they were just waiting for us to get there."

Gabrielle's brows lifted, and she turned to look up at Xena. "That is sort of weird."

"Sort of?" Xena regarded her "You better go take a look at them. You know a Hades of a lot more about goats and sheep than I do."

Gabrielle lifted a hand and dropped it on the chair arm. "Well that's probably true." She said. "I've got to go down and meet with the settlement committee in town anyway. I'll look at them on the way. But nothing else, Cait?"

Cait shook her head. "It seems quite quiet. I didn't even find any old campfires."

"Good." Xena said.

"Did you expect to find something there, hon?" Gabrielle asked. "I know you've got people keeping an eye out for Hercules."

"Wasn't sure. After the Spartans came through, I wondered if any of the chieftains on that side might try their hand." Xena said. "Glad they're not. I want a chance to finish the new barracks and palisades."

"Ah." Gabrielle stood up. "Well, let's head on down then. We can do all that, then get some lunch with our kid down in the school." She went to lift up her cloak, only to find it already being settled over her shoulders. "Thanks."

"Let me get mine." Xena circled the table and started towards the work table she'd been perched behind. Amazons got out of her way in a hurry as she passed and she paused to regard the contents on the surface as she settled her cloak around her.

Really good quality ore. She picked up a piece and examined it, juggling it and slipping it into her belt pouch before she shrugged the lined and wax surfaced garment into place as she moved to join Gabrielle who was heading towards the door.

"Cait." Xena called out as she threaded through the benches. "C'mon."

Looking quite pleased, the young Amazon hopped off the platform and followed them out the door. "Pally, why don't you.."

Paladia had stood up and started towards the anvil Xena had left behind. “Yeah, whatever.” She waved a hand at her friend. “Later.”

Ephiny chuckled, watching them. She was content to relax in her chair, waiting as she knew there would be one or two or maybe more people who would want to come up and talk, more privately.

More confidentially, not easy in standing up in council and having their say and hoping they could get a word in her ear that would find it’s way to Gabrielle’s.

Hilarious, in her mind, since of the two of them without doubt Gabrielle was the more receptive. But she’d found a lot to like in her new role, sitting back quietly and being more of a resource than a leader in the tribe.

It had a peaceful vibe to it. She looked around the room with a sense of satisfaction, watching Paladia sit down in the corner and pick up a small hammer, as Das and Renas settled near the fire with their jewelry tools, and a dozen of the youngers took stools near the back of the chamber to work on their arrows.

“Nice.” Ephiny said, to herself, twiddling her thumbs a bit. “Wonder how long it’s going to last?”

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“What do you think about those goats?” Gabrielle asked, as they rambled side by side down the slope towards the town. “I halfway wondered if it was a trap of some kind, like they were sick or something.”

“Mm.” Xena was bouncing a little, her boots pattering lightly over the stones in a jaunty rhythm. She hopped up onto one of the boulders that lined the path and ran along the top of it, tucking her cloak around her before she launched herself into a flip. “I doubt it.”

Gabrielle exchanged wry glances with Cait. “Watch it hon, there’s ice on those rocks.”

“I know.” Her partner landed neatly and caught up to her. “We’re not generally known for livestock here. Not sure it would occur to someone to do that, or why.”

“We’re known for horses.” Gabrielle objected.

“Only very recently.” Xena said. “No real point in it.”

They reached the back gate, now visibly and substantially a gate, and Xena lifted a hand in greeting to the militia on guard at the structure. “Morning boys.”

“Genr’l.” One of them hurried to open the portal, now a well built wall that delineated the town’s rear border. No longer could someone merely pass through the town and come up the path to the Amazon’s village, or the higher plateau that Xena and Gabrielle’s home stood on without challenge. “G’morning to ya.”

They passed through, the smell of freshly cured wood and newly packed earth strong in their noses as they moved past the guard towers and the doors pulled shut behind them.

Now they were in Amphipolis proper, the back part of the upper town that was now neatly laid out with cobblestone paths and lanes, with cabins set back into the trees that looked well kept and tidy.

Xena nodded a little as she strode past, lifting a hand in greeting as two or three of the town’s tradesmen came up the lane in the other direction. There were shops mixed with the cabins, and more activity than there had been but it was nothing like the chaos of their previous growth spurt.

They came to a crossroad and went through it, and up the slight rise that led to Cyrene’s inn and the town stable behind it. On the other side of the road was the schoolhouse and the newly finished council meeting hall, rebuilt after the last burn out before the Spartan invasion.

Beyond that was the militia compound and the lower town, where merchants had also rebuilt, and then the fortification that now guarded Amphipolis from the river approach, thick and sturdy gates also manned by Xena’s troops.

Above the gate? The banner flying was the town colors. But over the barracks? A yellow and black banner floated, Xena's hawkshead symbol being dusted now with still falling snow. Xena found it catching her eye and it made her smile, a little, seeing it.

"There they are." Cait pointed at the guest paddock, just to one side of the barracks. Usually it held visitor's horses, but now it held a small bunch of thickly pelted goats, huddling against the snow as they rooted in the light cover and pulled up the last bit of grass from the ground.

"Well." Gabrielle said. "They're goats."

"Mm." Xena agreed. "Nice looking." She said. "I'm going to the armory. " She patted Gabrielle on the back and slipped past, heading down a side lane towards the barracks as the snow continued to drift down and dust her shoulders.

"Yes, they are." Gabrielle went over and leaned on the paddock fence, studying the animals. There were no markings on them, as Cait had mentioned, and a few of them stared back at her stolidly, munching the dry, wispy grass.

Potadeia had raised goats, along with the sheep that could handle the rough scrub that was the best her hometown had been able to offer. She remembered helping her mother make cheese from the goat's milk, and watching her father use the pelts of them to make cushions for the rough wooden chairs in their homestead.

She hadn't really been fond of them. They had tended to use their hard horns to poke her in unlikely places, and one of them had enjoyed snacking on her skirt whenever the opportunity presented itself. But these looked like a likely herd and they seemed content to be in the somewhat sheltered paddock, with snow covered branches overhead.

"What are we going to do with them?" Cait asked. "I heard that lot up there talking about having some of them up by where we live. "

"They're useful." Gabrielle said. "They give milk, and their hair can be woven into rope and cloth." She straightened up. "So I'll send a dozen Amazons down to see if they can figure out how to get them up to the plateau."

Cait chuckled.

"Be good for them." Gabrielle turned and started towards the inn, pausing when she heard shouting nearby. "Uh oh. I think I recognize that voice."

Cait came to her side instantly. "Goodness, is that Dori?"

"It is." Gabrielle changed her direction and headed for the schoolhouse. "C'mon."

Since Cait had fully intended on sticking to her queen like a burr this suited her admirably and she followed closely as Gabrielle strode along the walkway, her cloak bouncing slightly. She reached out to open the schoolhouse door when it pulled back ahead of her, and a woman appeared holding the hand of a small dark haired child.

"Mama!" Dori let out a yelp, twisting free from the hand gripping hers and bolting for her mother. "Mama!"

"Easy honey. I'm here." Gabrielle knelt to put her arms around her daughter. "What's wrong?" She saw the tears, and looked up sharply at the teacher. "What happened?"

"Oh, Gabrielle." The teacher exhaled. "I'm glad you're here. I just can't keep her in the class. She keeps interrupting everything." She looked exasperated. "I've been trying to teach a lesson all morning and it's impossible!"

Gabrielle looked steadily at her, then looked back at Dori, who had thrown her arms around her mother's neck. "What's going on, Dor?" She gave her a squeeze. "What's bothering you?"

Dori sniffled back her tears. "Mama she's telling it all wrong!" She pointed at the teacher. "She makes the story bad!'

The teacher sighed. “She keeps saying that.” She said. “I was going over the Trojan War, and she just kept getting up and telling me I was wrong.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle used a bit of her cloak to dry off Dori’s tears. “Well the problem is, Sara, Dori knows my version of that story like the back of her hand. Don’t you honey?”

“Mama tells good stories.” Dori leaned against her.

“Well, but..”

“And,” Gabrielle interrupted her. “When you tell it differently, then to her its like you’re saying her mother’s a liar.” She looked up at the woman. “She doesn’t like that, and actually neither do I.”

Sara fell silent.

Gabrielle stood up and took Dori’s hand. “But I can’t expect everyone to tell stories like I do, so when you get to those parts of the lessons, just let me know and I’ll come get her.” She looked down at the child, who now had one arm wrapped around her leg. “Okay with you Dor? Boo asked me to come see if you wanted to have some lunch with us. Isn’t that nice of her?”

Dori’s face creased into a grin. “Boo! Where is Boo?”

“She’s talking with her friends the soldiers. Let’s go find her.” Gabrielle said. “See you later, Sara.”

“Yes, okay.” The teacher said. “Sorry about that, Gabrielle. We’ve got a big crowd of kids in ther.e I’m doing my best.”

“I know.” Gabrielle lifted a hand. “C’mon people, let’s go find Xena.”

“Boo.” Dori trotted along at her mother’s side. “Mama, that was a mean lady.” She looked up at her mother. “Don’t like that school.”

Cait chuckled again.

Gabrielle sighed. “Well, my wild child, you should be a happy little girl that you’ve got a school to go to. I had to learn everything the hard way.”

“Too right.” Cait agreed. “I don’t think they meant to be mean, Dori. They just don’t know as much as your mother does you see.”

“Mama knows evry’thing.” Dori agreed.

“Oh ho ho ho no I don’t.” Gabrielle spotted the tall, dark, cloaked figure heading in their direction at a good clip. ‘Look Dor, there’s Xena.”

“Boo!” Dori pulled her hand free and raced towards her other mother, her little boots sending spurts of snow along the path. “Boo! Boo!”

Gabrielle smiled indulgently as she watched their daughter bolt into Xena’s waiting arms, squealing in joy as she was lifted up and over Xena’s head. “They’re so cute together.”

Cait smiled as well. “I think she does a bit better up by the village.” She said, diplomatically. “They’re always teaching practical things there.”

“It’s true. But I also want her to learn other stuff.” Gabrielle said. “And play with kids from the town. She should get exposed to more than just the Amazons.” She smiled as Xena tucked Dori into her shoulder and started towards them. “Someday she’s going to have to choose if she wants to be an Amazon so I want her to know what she’s deciding.”

Cait blinked. “Well, gosh.” She said. “I never thought of that.”

“You knew what you were doing.” Gabrielle said.

“I did.” The young Amazon agreed. ‘Though I do think they’re a bit silly at times.” She confided to her queen. “It’s much better now, you know.”

“Is it?” Gabrielle eyed her. “You mean now that I finally decided to do my job?”

“Not that exactly.” Cait flushed a little. “Just that everyone’s stopped arguing so much. Its more fun now.” She explained. “It’s actually quite all right to spend time in the big hall.”

Hm. Gabrielle pondered that, realizing Cait was right. The gathering hall had become a far more friendly place, and she’d started to hear more laughter than sniping. She wasn’t nearly egotistical enough to think she really was the reason though.

Dori was busy chattering to Xena, who had slowed to a stroll as she listened. “They gave her trouble at school?” She asked Gabrielle as they met up, expression shifting to indignant.

“Not really. She was giving them a hard time because their version of the Trojan War didn’t match mine.” Gabrielle tweaked Dori’s booted foot. “I need to check the curriculum they’re using and be more careful about when I send her there.”

“Mmm.” Xena rumbled low under her breath.

“I told them to just come get me next time.” Gabrielle said. “She knows what she knows, you know?”

“I know.” Her partner bounced their daughter up and down a bit. “I don’t like people giving my kid a hard time though.

Gabrielle took her elbow and steered her towards the inn. “Come with us, Cait. Let’s see what grandma has in her kitchen before this snow buries us.”

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Cyrene’s inn was busy, all the tables were filled and it was only due to the back table nearest the kitchen was traditionally reserved for family left them a place to settle into.

The crowd was a mixture of townsfolk and visitors, and Xena spent a moment studying them before she turned as one of the server girls put down a mug and plate by her side. “Thanks.”

“Anytime for you.” The girl grinned cheekily at her. “Hey Dori, here’s your cup.” She gave the child a smaller utensil, which she gripped, and winked at Gabrielle. “Her nibs says she’s sending something special out.” She said, before she disappeared back into the crowd.

“Eh heheh.” Gabrielle bit into a slice of roast lamb. “I foresee nutbread in my future.” She chewed, then looked up at Xena. “Did I see more recruits by the armory?”

“Ten more.” Xena was sharing the contents of her plate with Dori. “Three of them from the Athenian army.” Her lips quirked a little bit. “Apparently they’ve started using their troops to clean the streets there.”

Gabrielle’s eyebrows lifted.

“Ah, there you all are.” Cyrene appeared at the side of the table, letting her hand rest on the back of the chair her daughter and granddaughter were seated in. “Trader wagons’ll be here tomorrow morning. They’re getting the fairgrounds ready across the river.”

“Uh huh. Save a big stall for us.” Gabrielle said. “I’m hoping we sell more than we buy this time.”

“I told them to rope off that section near the stage.” Cyrene said. “I figured you could knock off two birds with one stick.”

“Gramma!” Dori tugged at her tunic.

“Yes?” Cyrene looked down at her. “What’s up, cutie?”

“Look I found dis.” Dori held up a feather. “Pretty!”

“That sure is.” Cyrene examined the feather. “Did you find this outside?”

“Up with the fevver people.” Dori said. “Mama you make a story with it?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle agreed amiably. “I bet that’s a magic feather, don’t you think so?” She rested her chin on her fist and bit off a chunk of bread. “A magic feather that came all the way up our mountain on the back of a turtle.”

“Turtle!” Dori looked at the feather in amazement. “Wow, mama!”

“See?” Xena said. “That’s how I end up fifty cubits tall with three heads.” She offered Dori her cup of cider. “By the time she’s done, the turtle will be speaking Persian and have wings.”

Everyone chuckled.

Gabrielle munched a bit of tuber reflectively. “You’d look cute with wings.” She said. “I already know in my head what you look like with a tail.”

Cait leaned forward. “I’m sure if you’d like to describe that to Pally she’d love to draw it.”

“Hey.” Xena nudged her with one boot. “No tails!’

“Do do doo..” Dori waved her feather back and forth. “Boo, can we go fly now?”

“In a little while, munchkin.” Xena leaned back in her chair. “I’ll take you up to our house and we can play some games, okay?”

“Fly.”

Gabrielle chuckled.

“Don’t start, mama.” Xena tipped her seat back, bracing her boot against the base of the table. “I can remember some very single minded times of yours especially when nutbread was involved.”

“Hah hah.”

Cyrene patted her daughter on the shoulder. “If any of your boys are going down the river, can they check the ice, please? One of the travelers who checked in here this morning said he was seeing hard skin near the narrows.”

“Sure.” Xena said. “I’ve got a patrol going out past Potadeia later. I’ll have em look.”

‘Thank you dear.” Cyrene leaned over and gave Xena a kiss on the head, then she tweaked Dori’s nose before she retreated back into the kitchen.

It made Xena smile, and she exhaled in contentment as she gazed around the inside of the inn, busy and full of patrons as it usually was these days. The inside walls had been freshly relined with bark lifted from the trees cleared for the new housing, and she could smell the tang of the lime whitewash they’d painted it with.

There were more tables, squeezed in where they could be, and on the other side of the far wall, a new section of the inn was in progress – the first expansion in many years.

Oil lamps had been added to the walls as well, though they were doused now in deference to the pallid winter light coming in the lead paned windows, and between the lamps the spaces were filled by woven mats and skins, and above the big fireplace a neatly painted scene of the town itself, as seen from the river crossing.

Paladia’s work. Xena smiled every time she saw it, though she was glad the other bits of the ex-renagdes talents were kept for the inner, private rooms where she knew smaller pictures of Cyrene’s family decorated the walls.

Toris, Granella and the twins, and of course, herself and Gabrielle with Dori. It seemed a little hard to believe, looking at them how much their lives, all of them, had changed over the past few years.

“Xe?”

Xena glanced up as Gabrielle’s warm touch circled her wrist. “Hm?” She noted one of the town councilors seated next to her partner and gave him a nod. “What’s up?”

“Xena.” The townsman said. “Just had a bunch of travellers come up the road, saying they’re looking for shelter. Don’t have much in the way of coin, but one of them says they know you.”

“Know her or just know her name?” Gabrielle asked.

The townsman shrugged. “Said he knew her, but who knows right?” He admitted. “Anyway, could you have a word with them, if you have a minute?”

Xena pondered the question.

“Want me to go check them out, hon?” Gabrielle offered. “You can finish your lunch and Dori’s.”

“Nah.” Xena stood up and put Dori down in her seat. “Be right back, kiddo.” She said. “You keep your mama company, okay?”

“Boo!” Dori, predictably, protested. “Don’t go!” She started to scramble off the chair but was pre-empted by her mother who slid into the seat with her. “Mama, want to go with Boo!”

“Yes, I know, but you let Boo go talk to her friends and she’ll be right back.” Gabrielle took a precautionary hold on the child as she watched her partner thread her way through the crowd. “I’m sure it’s someone nice.”

Dori scowled.

“Or maybe not.” Gabrielle sighed. “With Xe’s old friends, you just never know.”

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Toris came in from the back door and went over to the big family table, settling next to Gabrielle with a long, drawn out sigh. “Whoof. Snow’s getting worse.”

Gabrielle had been tearing a piece of bread in half, putting some soft cheese on it and handing part of it to Dori. “Xe’s sending a patrol to check the ford.” She told her brother in law. “But the elders up in the village all told me they felt it was going to be a hard winter.”

“Not so hard as it could have been, with that valley.” Toris remarked. “Gran said she’s seen a big change up there.”

They both paused as the door swung open and Toris’s twin boys ran in, spotting Dori and rushing over to the table. “Dor Dor!” Little Lyceus yodled. “Dere’s a baby cow in the stable!”

Dori’s eyes lit up. “Mama, let me go see!” She wriggled loose of her mother’s arms. “Want to see the buppit!”

Gabrielle released her. “Okay, but you guys be careful, all right?” She held on to Dori until she got nods from all three children. “Don’t get near the mama cow, she might not like you touching her baby.”

“Okay mama.” Dori tugged against the hold. “We’ll be careful, and we can stay by Rusty okay?”

“Okay.” Gabrielle let her go, and watched the kids scamper off through the back door, and through the kitchen where another back door would let them out near the path to the stables. “Oh my gosh those little rugrats”

Toris chuckled. “They’re growing like weeds. “ He smiled as the server came back and offered him a plate of lamb and tubers. “Thanks.” He put the plate down and started eating. “So, I hear Dori got in trouble at school today?”

Gabrielle picked up her mug and sipped at the cider. “Yeah.” She admitted. “It’s my fault.”

“Your fault?”

“Yeah.” The bard nodded. “Shes too young yet for me to explain to her about shades of gray. Everything for Dor’s black and white, right or wrong, and she thinks whatever comes out of our mouths is right.”

“Ah.” Toris looked sympathetic.

“It’s hard, you know?” Gabrielle sighed. “I know more than anyone how fallible the two of us are, and yet it just makes me hurt to imagine her face when she figures it all out.” She glanced past him at the crowd, then met his eyes again. “I remember how I felt.”

“When you saw through my sister’s act?” Toris smiled, to take any sting out of the remark, but Gabrielle shook her head. “No?”

“No.. Xe.. I always saw more than one side of her. I mean.. the second time I met her, I was trying to keep your hometown from stoning her to death, you know?”

“Oh. Right.”

“She never pretended to be one of Aphrodite’s cherubs.” Gabrielle smiled, then went pensive. “But no I was thinking of my own childhood. I remember getting beaten by my father the first time, and just not understanding what I’d done.”

Toris reached over and put his hand on her arm.

“I remember that moment of everything I’d believed being turned up side down.” Gabrielle sighed. “How much that hurt.”

“Sure, but she’ll never have to worry about that.” Her brother in law said. “Hard to think of a more devoted pair of parents than you and Xena.”

“Now, sure.” Gabrielle smiled faintly. “But someday I’m going to have to sit down with her and explain to her things she’s going to hear about eventually like Xe’s son, and her older half sister.”

“Ah.” Toris’s face scrunched up. “You know, it’s so hard for me to think about that, knowing you guys now how you are.” He admitted.

Gabrielle’s smile broadened a little. “Yeah, me too to be honest.” She got up and set her cup down. “Let me go see who these old friends’s of Xe’s are. Then I’ll go make sure the kids aren’t making horse turd sculptures out there.” She patted Toris’s arm as she went past, and acknowledged the greetings as she headed for the door.

Toris tucked into his lunch. “Glad the worst my kids are going to hear about is me falling on my head and getting dragged behind the plow horse.” He shook his shaggy, dark head.

**

The man was tall and thin, and though his brown hair was now liberally spiked with gray, Xena recognized him. “Timos.” She extended a hand and he clasped her arm without hesitation. “Been a long time.”

“It has, Xena, it has.” Timos perched on the fence post, just inside the sturdy new gates of the town. “After I retired from the raiding biz, I settled out down south of here, little town, had me a little family, you know how it is.”

“I do.” Xena was sitting on a barrel, hands braced on the edges of it. “What happened?”

“Fate caught up with me.” Timos said. “Town got overrun by a warlord last spring. They took everything wasn’t nailed down, including women and children.” He glanced past her, his eyes unfocused. “I was out hunting. Came back to nothing but ashes.”

“Damn.” Xena murmured.

“Some refugees from the next town, said they saw them taking the plunder with them to the west. My wife and son were with em.” Timos exhaled. “Maybe they’re gone by now, but I want to find out.’

“Sorry to hear it, Timos.” Xena said. “That’s tough.”

“Hey, we used to do stuff like that.” Timos shifted his eyes to her face. “Though I heard you got reformed.”

Reformed. Xena smiled with a touch of grimness. "You could say that." She said. "Though, I tell people it's a Hades of a lot more trouble to be hero than a villain."

Timos nodded. "I heard. They tell stories of you around." He agreed. "Anyway, I spent the summer trying to track the bastards down, but no luck. They had too long a lead on me."

"Probably holed up for the winter now." Xena said.

"Figured the same. So I hooked up with a bunch of stragglers and we ended up here." He said. "Wasn't till I saw the banner I remembered this is where you're from." His lined face, with a deep scar across the side of one eye, tensed into a wry smile. "Thought I'd drop your name, see if I could work for my keep until spring, and then go out looking again."

"Sure." Xena answered easily. "Got plenty of work here.. as you can see." She indicated the stockade fence, which was being worked on despite the snow. "What about the rest of them?" She asked, glancing through the half open gates and the party that he'd come with.

"They been on the road a while. Three of them are buskers." His face showed a touch of disdain. "Older guy's a vagrant who got kicked out of his house by his kids when they had two kids of their own and were out of room."

Xena's eyes widened slightly.

'Not bad people." Timos said. "The busker's probably be some entertainment.. that an inn up there?" He indicated the rise behind them.

"Yes." Xena said, getting up off the barrel. "My mother's." She added, with a brief grin as she pushed the gate open wider. 'C'mon in, boys." She motioned the small, somewhat woebegone group inside. "Halston, take this bunch and get them a bed and a meal, wouldja?"

"Genr'l." The soldier/woodsman came trotting over, shaking his cloak free of the still falling snow. "Right you are. Come with me."

"Timos, we'll talk later." Xena said. "I've gotta get back up the hill." She watched the small group, relieved looks on their faces, follow Halston off towards the barracks and found herself shaking her head.

'Thanks Xena!" Timos called back, as he caught up to the group, lifting his hand to wave at her.

Xena waved back, then turned and headed back up the rise to the upper part of town, her boots crunching lightly in the snow. Timos had left her army about a year before she had, and she remembered him as a mediocre fighter, but good with horses, and possessing a reasonable singing voice whose echo faintly sounded in her head.

He'd also been a skilled leatherworker, she recalled, and remembered him spending time in the down times taking old hides they'd scrounged and making them into shoes and sacks.

She drew up her cloak hood and settled it around her head, blinking the snowflakes out of her eyes and licking her lips to find a few on them.

The lanes were mostly empty now, as everyone got out of the snow, and she made her way up unhindered until she spotted an equally cloaked figure heading her way, easily recognizable despite the thick fall.

They met at the crossroads. "Hey." Gabrielle said. "What's up?"

"Old soldier of mine showed up with a bunch of buskers and a vagrant. I gave em house space." Xena told her. "Figured they might be useful."

"Buskers?" Gabrielle's voice lightened with interest. "I'll check them out later." She pulled Xena's cloak a little closer to her. "You ready to collect our child and head up?"

Xena tipped her head back, then looked back down. "Sounds like a good idea, since this isn't showing any signs of stopping. Hope it settles out before the train gets here tomorrow."

Gabrielle nodded.

Xena rested her forearms on her partner's shoulders. "You okay? You sound a little down."

Instead of answering, the bard stepped forward and pressed her body against Xena's, circling her with her arms and giving her a hug. Xena returned the embrace, sensing the turmoil but not really understanding the source of it.

"Lets go." Gabrielle released her, but took hold of her hand and turned as they walked along the path towards the stable. "Apparently we have a new family member."

"Ah, the calf?"

"Yup."

"Hope Dori isn't trying to ride its mother."

**

It was an all out snowstorm not long after they got up to their cabin on the top of the mountain. Gabrielle was glad to hang their cloaks out to dry as she listened to Xena playing with Dori near the fire.

It felt very good to be in the quiet of their snug home, and Gabrielle felt herself fully relax for the first time that day. She went over to the couch in front of the fire and dropped into it, extending her legs out and stretching. "Ahhh."

Xena looked over at her. "Tough day?"

Gabrielle had one arm over her eyes and she kept it there for a moment, then she turned her head and returned the look. "It shouldn't have been." She said. "I thought the council went okay this morning, and the mood in the village's really improved hasn't it?"

"Yeah." Her partner agreed, focused on playing patacake with their daughter. "It really has and not just because you finally taught some of those women to cook." She watched Dori grab her hand. "Everyone just seems to be chilled out."

"Uh huh."

Xena picked up Dori, then rolled onto her back and lifted the delighted child up waving her back and forth as she extended her arms and legs in a flying motion. "Helps that most of the cranks left."

"Xe."

"Well it does." Her partner shrugged. "I think your idea to pay them off and get rid of them was right on."

Gabrielle studied the ceiling. "That makes me sound pretty ratty."

"Why?"

"I'm supposed to make people work with each other, hon. Not just throw coins at them."

"Eh." Xena swung Dori around in a gentle circle. "You can only do so much leading. Eventually the horses have to decide to drink. I'm glad they took off. Less crap."

"Boo Boo Booo…" Dori burbled. "You know what Wusty told me?"

"What did he tell you?" Xena let her down and sat up. "Ya can't always depend on what ponys say y'know."

"Boo he said the cow said she wants to run away." Dori told her in an earnest tone. "To go to a circus!"

Xena looked over at Gabrielle, lifting her eyebrow.

“Not mine.” The bard held up a hand, palm outward. “I promised you I’d lay off the cow stories with her, and I did.”

“Why does the cow want to run away to the circus, Dor?” Xena asked.

“I dunno Boo.” Dori pulled her legs up under her crossed on the thick bearskin rug. “To have fun?”

Xena scooted over to the couch and leaned back against it, extending her legs out as Dori clambered over them. “Not sure being in a circus is fun.” She said. “What do you think, mama?”

“Having been in the center of a bunch of people wanting to be entertained, I’d have to agree, Boo.” Gabrielle reached out and tangled her fingers in her partner’s thick, dark hair. “You know what I was thinking?”

“Bet I’m about to.” Xena put her arms around Dori, who was leaning back against her. “You ready to take a nap, kiddo?”

“Boo, can I bring Rusty up here? I want to play with him.” Dori asked, turning around and looking up beseechingly at her parent.

“No.” Xena replied, smoothing her hair down. “He can’t come up here, Dori, it’s too hard, and too dangerous for him. You don’t want him to get hurt.”

“Not to mention, mama really doesn’t want to clean up his poop in your room.” Gabrielle added, wryly. “So you’ll just have to visit him down in the town, my little horsey girl.”

Dori poked her lower lip out in a pout.

Xena got up and picked Dori up in her arms, carrying her into her room. She put her down in her bed and sat down next to her, taking off her little boots. “How about we see if you can sleep over at your cousins for a night or so. You like that, munchkin?”

Dori considered that. “With Lolo and Lesus?”

“Uh huh. They live right near the stable. You guys could..” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Talk my brother Toris into letting you stay in there overnight.” She tweaked her toes. “Your mama and I used to stay overnight in that barn.”

Her daughter looked intrigued. “Was it fun?”

Xena smiled at her, blue eyes twinkling. “Some of the best fun I’ve had.” She said. “So let me see if I can set that up for you, okay?”

“Okay.” Dori grinned. “Dank you, Boo.” She lay down and reached out to pull Xena’s nose. “Love you.”

Xena leaned over and gave her a kiss. “Love you too, Dor.” She tugged the light fur up over Dori’s small body and got up, moving back into the main part of the cabin where Gabrielle was still sprawled bonelessly on the couch.

She gently lifted Gabrielle’s upper body up and slid underneath her, settling her back down in her lap and wrapping her arms around her. “Now.”

“Now.” Gabrielle repeated, hearing the wind whistling outside and the hiss of snow falling down their chimney. “What was I saying?”

“What were you saying?” Xena stroked her hair back. “You said you had thought of something.”

“Ah.”

When the bard didn’t say anything else, she gently started massaging her partner’s temples, watching her eyes close and a faint smile appear. “Here’s what I was thinking.”

“Mm?”

“I was thinking it’s gonna snow all night, and there’s no place I’d rather spend all that time than in our bed.”

“That sounds great.” Gabrielle said. “But hardly a shock, hon. I kinda assumed that’s what we’d be doing.” She looked up at the planed, angular face regarding her. “Glad we’re here tonight though. I felt like being by myself.”

Xena’s brow lifted sharply.

“Tcha. You know what I meant.” The bard pressed her cheek against her partner’s stomach. “Im just fidgety today and I don’t really know why.” She could feel her body relaxing though, savoring the warmth of the contact with Xena’s. “Hey, by the way, thanks for staying down in the village with me. I know the tribe really appreciated that”

“I don’t mind it.” Xena kept up her massage. “But I told Dori I’d arrange a sleepover at Toris and Granellas so she could spend time with her cousins and that damned pony.”

Gabrielle peered up at her, a surprised but pleased smile appearing.

“See if we can run out those fidgets.”

**

Xena woke in the pre-dawn quiet, only the faint sounds of the creaks and pops of the wood frame of their home under the weight of a new coating of snow. She kept her eyes closed and let her ears wander, detecting the faint patter of a rabbit running over the icy ground and then the soft crack as an overloaded branch broke and caused a tiny avalanche.

Inside the cabin there was still a small residual warmth from the fireplace, and an unusual peace that would remain due to Dori’s absence down the hill.

She was looking forward to a quiet morning with Gabrielle. Her partner was still deeply asleep, her gentle breathing warming the side of Xena’s neck and the weight of one arm thrown over her bare midriff doing likewise.

There was a lot going on. They were both very busy, Gabrielle with running her tribe and Xena with building up her army, and the growth of Amphipolis keeping them really occupied and she’d been looking forward a little to the cold season when things tended to slow down and there was less chaos.

Though, with them, she’d come to realize, chaos was a given. Xena smiled a bit, letting her eyes drift open and waiting a moment for the interior of the cabin to come into focus around her. If they’d been down in the village, she knew, she’d be hearing the morning watch stirring, and the sound of the dining hall getting their breakfast on.

But here, they had some provisions by the fireplace and a sense of isolation. They would break a leisurely fast together, and then go down to meet the incoming traders, along with a honor guard of Amazons and a handful of her soldiers.

Hopefully the quiet time would make her partner’s mood better. Xena studied the pale head tucked into her shoulder. Certainly it had been as they dropped off to sleep at any rate. They had some level of privacy in the Queen’s quarters of course, but Gabrielle was always mindful of how close the village was to them and it was just different when they were up here in their home.

She took a deep breath and let it out, enjoying the comfort of the featherbed as it cradled her body, easily the most decadent thing they both owned. Their garb was rough leather and cloth, the cabin’s other furnishings sturdy and functional, but the bed?

None finer anywhere. Xena watched the dim gray winter light start to peek in through the leaded glass and as it did, she felt Gabrielle stir, nestling closer and then giving her a one armed hug. “Morning.”

“Morning. “ Gabrielle burred in response. “Thanks.”

“Thanks?”

“Thanks.” The bard repeated, pressing her body against Xena’s. “For being so smart, and caring so damn much about me.”

Xena returned the hug. “Good thing for both of us we met after I grew out of being such a teenage jerk with a sharp sword and no brains then.” She advised her partner. “I finally got some sense in my old age.”

“Aw, grandma.” Gabrielle kept her eyes closed, just enjoying the banter and closeness. She could hear Xena’s heartbeat and feel the steady breathing under her arm, and she rubbed the edge of her thumb against the skin her hand was resting on.

All that smooth surface, still a bit strange for her to slide her hand over and not find any trace of the scars that were taken from them both on Mount Olympus. Gone, along with the aches and pains that had started to truly plague her, returning an energy and resilience that made Gabrielle’s heart glad to see.

If only that apple seed had worked. She sighed a little. But maybe they were both a little bit, back in the back of their hearts, glad. “Ah, Xe.” She tickled her partner lightly around her navel. Just let it go, Xena had told her, if it’s gonna happen, it will.

“Yeees?” Xena rumbled in response. “Ready to go stir up the fire and get our butts out of this bed?”

“Hm.” Gabrielle let her hand slide lower, her thumb tracing the soft skin over her hip bone. “Stir up a fire…” She felt Xena chuckle soundlessly. “I might be into that.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

**

Xena sat down on the couch to pull on her boots, listening to the faint scratching of Gabrielle writing on a scroll nearby. She tugged the lambswool lined footwear up over her left calf and tightened the gut laces, luxuriating in the ability to perform the task without Dori trying to help her out.

“You still expecting an emissary from Thrace?” Gabrielle asked, after she’d paused for a moment.

“Probably not until spring” Xena pulled on her other boot. “Give us a chance to get things built up here. I’m hoping they agree to an alliance.”

“Why not? You hornswaggled the nearest Amazon tribe into one.” Gabrielle glanced over at her, a distinct twinkle in her eyes. “Of course, I hear the crazy chick in charge has a thing for you.”

Xena chuckled audibly. “Yeah, I heard that too.” She stood up and stamped a few times to settle the boots fit. “Unfortunately the warlords west of us probably won’t have the same kind feelings for me. I think I ambushed a few of them with my army back in the day.”

Gabrielle folded and sealed the parchment she was working on, then put it in her carry bag. She went over and donned her cloak, then put the bag on it’s shoulder strap over it. “Ready to go see what the road’s brought us, General?”

“Yes, my queen.” Xena got her own cloak on over her winter leathers and fastened it, then reached back to sort the hood of the garment and set the slit in place that allowed her sword hilt to pass through “Let’s go see what calamity our child has caused overnight.”

Gabrielle picked up her staff and pushed the door to the cabin open, emerging into the chill winter light to find the ground thoroughly covered in snow that showed no signs of melting. “Brr.”

“Brr.” Xena agreed, shutting and fastening the door behind them. She joined Gabrielle as they walked down the steps to the path and started down the steep slope that would eventually deposit them at the town gates below.

“Got cold fast this year.” Gabrielle commented, as she used her staff to poke the ground ahead of them. “Feels like it was just harvest time.”

“It did. Glad we got all the crops in” Her partner said. “But you know what I am kinda worried about?”

“No sign of Hercules.” Gabrielle said. “Maybe he figured out how to get them back up there by himself, hon. He’s a demigod.”

“True.”

They came to the hanging bridge, and crossed it confidently, the sturdy planks spaced far enough apart that the snow hadn’t covered them. Below the bridge the dry chasm was a vast tangle of dried, dead foliage and snow cover. “We should watch the floods this spring if the snow’s sticking this early.”

“We get floods, I’m staying up at the village and so are you.” Gabrielle stated. “I don’t care how many lambs drown. I’m not doing that again.”

Xena put an arm over her shoulders. “Right there with ya.”

They walked along the path and within a few minutes they were at the entrance to the Amazon village, where a cluster of fur wrapped warriors were hanging out waiting for them.

Each of them had the usual Amazon feathers and rank markings, but they all also wore a simple silver disk with a quill and a staff crossed on it.

Queen’s guard. Xena had been tickled to see the disks, even more that the women had made them on their own, from ore they’d dug up in the valley. There was no question in anyone’s mind of course who the Queen’s actual guard was, but still and all she enjoyed the sentiment and was glad the whole attitude of the tribe towards her soulmate had shifted.

In the three months since they’d come back from Therma, Gabrielle had become their queen in fact, as well as in name.

“Morning, people.” Gabrielle waved at them. “Let’s head on down.”

“Your maj.” Solari saluted her with a grin, then she and Nala fell into place behind her as Cait and Paladia, Aaliene and Pasi joined them. “Gotta tell you, that stone bathing room was total awesome this morning. Didn’t freeze any parts of my body off.”

‘Yes!” Nala added with a fist pump. “And the changing room so you don’t have to break icicles off your hair on the way back to your hut.”

Xena chuckled soundlessly.

“Yeah.” Gabrielle nodded. “I thought Xe was coddling me when she built on the tub area in our place, but boy, mornings like this it’s the best.”

“Coddling you?” Her partner eyed her. “What makes you think I enjoyed breaking ice all those damn ponds in the morning?”

“You didn’t?” Gabrielle affected astonishment. “Xena!”

They were on the bottom slope of the mountain and as they emerged into the approach to the gates they swung open, the guards recognizing them at once. “Morning, boys.” Xena lifted a hand in greeting. “Any news?”

She was fairly sure there would be none, as the guard had orders to relay anything important up the ridge regardless of the time.

“Morning, Xena.” The nearest guard said, with an easy smile. “Only that the trader wagons are coming into the lower town, says the watch. They’re getting them set.”

“Good.” Gabrielle patted her bag. “I’ve got some birthday shopping to do.”

The Amazons all laughed at Xena’s exaggerated eye rolling on hearing that. “Hey, Champ, you’ve only got yourself to blame, you know?”

“I know.” Xena lifted her hand and waggled it. “Someday I’ll learn not to egg her on by upping the ante every year.”

The group of women walked along the fence lined road through the back half of the town and then took the turn that would take them up to the front door of Cyrene’s inn. There were already people out on the porch, and the windows were half open to allow air to cross through the interior. “Must be busy in there.” Gabrielle commented.

They pushed open the door and almost wished they hadn’t. The inn was stuffed full of customers, getting some breakfast before the traders set up camp, and they had a slow go to make it through the crowd to the back of the inn.

“Kitchen.” Xena said, pointing to the door, edging past a group of men with thick hide tunics as she pushed open the panel and ushered the rest of her gang inside.

The cooks looked up in surprise then paused and waved as they were recognized. “It’s crazy out there!” Eustace said, turning back to her pot. “Have a seat there, ladies.”

The Amazons looked at Xena and Gabrielle, who looked back at them, shaking their heads. With shrugs, they all took seats except for Gabrielle who patted Xena’s shoulder. “I’m going to go check on Dori.”

“Okay.” Xena relaxed, as one of the cooks hustled over and put down a platter of assorted goodies on the table. “Thanks, Softe.”

“Go on with you, Xena.” The older woman smiled at her. “Your little one was here already, with those rapscallion cousins of hers. Ate us out the whole pot they did.”

“Not surprised.” Xena waved off the platter but accepted a mug of morning ale from Eustace. “She and her mother eat twice what I do. No idea where the Hades it all goes.” She took a sip. “Bet she grabs off this platter when she gets back even though we just had breakfast at home.”

The outer door swung open and Cyrene appeared. “Ah! There you are.” She came over to where Xena was sitting. “You in the mood to chase chickens?”

Xena eyed her.

“All fifty of them.” Cyrene tapped her on the head. “It’s like having you all over again. The Fates must be laughing their behinds off at me.”

“We’ll go find them.” Cait stood up and tugged Paladia up with her. “Come on you lot, it’ll get the blood going.”

The Amazons got up and followed her, leaving Xena at the table. Cyrene sat down in one of the vacated chairs, and picked up a mug. “You know the old saying?”

“ The one about wishing your kids have kids like they were?” Xena’s eyes twinkled. “But let’s hope that only goes so far, know what I mean?”

Cyrene lifted her mug in silence.

**

Gabrielle could hear the giggles when she was still several steps outside the barn. She let a smile appear as she pushed the door open, sticking her head inside. “Hey kiddos.”

Dori was at Rusty’s side, and she turned at the voice. “Mama!”

“Auntie Gabwielle!” The twins chorused together.

Gabrielle came all the way inside and closed the door. The barn smelled of hay and animals, and in big stalls along one wall were comfortably ensconced Argo and Iolaus, Shadow and several other well cared for horses along with the sturdy enclosure that held Dori’s shaggy pony Rusty.

Against the other wall was a set of stalls that held three of Cyrene's treasured milk cows, one of who had given birth to a small, wisp haired calf who was drinking from it's mother as she watched.

It was a friendly place. There was a hayloft overhead and if Gabrielle turned her head and looked up, she would see the faint outlines of letters carved in the beams of the roof and there were memories popping up in her mind of long, chilly nights spent sleeping under those marks wrapped up in Xena's arms. "What are you kids up to?"

Rusty was chewing some hay, and he stepped forward as she approached and nuzzled her hip, sprinkling bits of the dried grass on her cloak. She rubbed his ears affectionately, looking around at the almost random scattering of boxes and bits of hide that were apparently being used for..

"Mama, we're doing a story." Dori pattered over. "See, dere's the town, and the riber." She pointed at a box, and the water trough.

"Yeah yeah." Little Solon tugged on her cloak. "Come see we made a fort!"

Gabrielle allowed herself to be pulled over to inspect the fort, which was a crate covered in an old pigskin. "That's amazing, guys. What's in the fort?"

"We gots rocks" Lyceus showed her a handful. "And this!" He lifted something else.

Gabrielle reached down and took it. "Where did you find this, Ly?" She asked, turning it over in her fingers. "Somewhere here?"

Lyceus nodded vigorously. "By the riber."

"Mama what is dat?" Dori came over and looked at it. She extended her hand and touched one of the several points on it. "Pretty?"

"Well." Gabrielle exhaled. "Not really, kids. I think mama should keep this. If it gets around in here, it can hurt our friends the horsies."

All three young faces were stricken. "Mama how?" Dori's eyes were big. "No hurt anyone!"

"Let mama show you." Gabrielle knelt and brushed the straw away from the ground. "See, something like this can fall, and it falls this way." She dropped it. The iron pronged item clattered on the stone and came to rest. "see how this points up?"

Dori had crouched next to her. She put her hand out and touched it. "Sharp. It gets in the horsies foots, right mama?" She looked up at her mother. "Owie!"

"Yes, Dor, that's right. You remember Boo taking pointy stones out of Argo's feet right?"

"Gogo!" Dori said. "Boo made it good."

"Right, so let mama take this, and I'll put it somewhere safe so it can't hurt the horsies." She dug in her pouch, and handed Lyceus a wooden ball in return. "Here, you take that instead. Xena made it, so I'm sure it's perfect for a fort."

Lyceus' eyes lit up as he took the ball and examined it. "Pretty!" He held it up for his brother to see. "Thank you Auntie Gab!"

Gabrielle put the caltrop into her bag and glanced at her daughter, who was watching with mild interest. Dori had, after all, dozens and dozens of carved items from Xena's skilled hands but also, she'd noted, her daughter wasn't possessive about her things.

Curious, a little. "Okay, so you made a fort." Gabrielle returned her attention to the play. "What are you protecting against? "

"Wusty." Dori supplied instantly. "He has big feets, mama, and he goes boom boom boom!" She went over and lifted up one of Rusty's hooves. The pony allowed this, picking up his foot and letting Dori inspect it. "See?"

“I see.” Her mother said, gravely. “Why would Rusty want to go boom on the fort though, Dor?” She asked. “He looks like he’d rather just have an apple.”

“You have happles?” Dori pulled at her bag. “He’d like that!”

Her mother produced one, with a smile. “That’s from our tree near our house, so it’s very special.” She told her. “How about you split it up and share it with your cousins.”

Argo let out a snort, tossing her head at the little crowd.

“And Argo.” Gabrielle pulled another fruit from her bag and broke it in half, walking over to deliver the treat to the two golden horses as she heard a soft creak and turned, as the door opened and a stranger came in, closing the door behind him.

He had a thick beard and a hat pulled down over his eyes, and he was covered in mismatched furs.

Gabrielle casually crossed the floor and got between him and the children. “Hi. Can I help you?”

The man stared at her, then pulled the hat off. “I sure hope so.”

“Iolaus!” Gabrielle yelped in surprise. “Wheres..”

“Don’t ask.” He blinked exhausted, red rimmed eyes. “At least not in front of the kids.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle exhaled. “One of those things, huh?”

“Boy is it ever.”

**

Gabrielle guided Iolaus into the back room of Cyrene’s inn, the small bedroom that had a single mattress, a worktable against the wall and a couple of chairs. It was mostly being used for spare storage at the moment but at one time it had been a recovery haven for Ephiny.

“Okay.” She watched him sit down in an exhausted sort of way, sprawling on the bed and extending his booted feet out. “Want something hot?” She pumped some water into a basin and brought it over to him, along with one of the towels hanging on the wall nearby.

“Yes.” Iolaus was glad to put the basin on the footstool near the bed and plunge his hands into it, then scooped up a volume of water and washed his face. “I’ve been on the road for three weeks. Nonstop. This is the first civilized place I risked coming into.”

Gabrielle had been starting a fire in the small fireplace. Now she stood as the tinder caught and turned to look at her old friend. “Risked?”

Iolaus wiped his face off, the thick beard and moustache making him seem almost a stranger to the bard’s watching eyes. “Can I get something to drink before I start this? I’ll be talking a loooong time.”

“Hang on.” Gabrielle ducked through the door and went up the dark hallway that lead to the inn’s kitchen. She pushed open the door and entered just as Xena entered from the other side, both of them stopping and looking at each other for a long, silent moment.

Then Xena grabbed a pitcher and went to the hearth, using a dipper to bring up a portion of steaming mulled wine and filling it.

Gabrielle picked up a wooden platter and got some meat slices on it, and greens and tubers, and then she met Xena at the back door and they left together without a word.

Eustace continued stirring her caldron. “Wonderful, isn’t it? Never seen two people who understood each other so good.”

“Creepy.” One of the other cooks said. “Those two are unnatural, I’m telling you.”

“Shut your mouth, woman” A third cook said. “Unless you want to be out in the snow looking for a new place.”

Xena ignored the commentary behind her as she followed Gabrielle back down the hall. “I knew I jinxed us saying how quiet it’d been.”

“Well, hon, you were wondering what happened to Hercules.” Gabrielle shouldered the door open. “Careful what you ask for.”

They entered to find Iolaus sitting on the bed and leaning against the wall, eyes half closed. He opened them when the door opened and managed a brief grin. “Hi there, Xena.”

“Hi there.” Xena came over with the pitcher and picked up a cup off the table, and filled it. “Here.”

He took the cup gratefully and took a swallow of the mulled wine. “Mm.” He looked at the platter Gabrielle set down next to him and picked up a piece of meat off it. “I feel like I’m in Elysia.”

“Less comfortable furniture, more grass and blissed out people.” Gabrielle took a seat on the edge of the bed and leaned back against the post on the corner. “But thanks for the compliment.” She smiled.

Xena set the pitcher down and sat down in one of the chairs, tilting it back a little and bracing her boot against the bottom of the bed. “Gabrielle said you’ve been traveling a while?”

Iolaus got another few swallows down, holding up his hand with one finger extended. They waited in silence until he finally drained the cup, then stuck his tongue out . “Pah.”

“Not good?” Xena examined the pitcher.

“No it’s great, it’s just been a long time since I’ve had anything but pond water.” Iolaus sighed and let the mug rest against his thigh. “Okay, so where do I start?”

Xena poured herself a cup and refilled his. “Hercules first. Then his sisters.” She requested. “I’ve got to take care of some business down across the river, but I want to hear this first.”

“What she said.” Gabrielle agreed.

“Okay well.” Iolaus alternated words with sips and bites of food. “After we left Therma we headed out towards Delphi. Caught a ship, much as I hated to and a day out from land a storm caught us.”

“Another one?” Xena’s voice lifted. “You should have stayed on land.”

“We should have.” Iolaus agreed. “But Herc was all hot to get to Apollo’s temple and oracle there, to see if he could get Apollo on his side and help with that whole mortal thing.” He swallowed a couple mouthfuls of the wine, and extended his cup again to be filled. “Figured Apollo would do it just to get one over on his sisters, and because he wasn’t around during all that stuff up stairs.”

“Reasonable.” Xena said.

“Yeah, I thought so too, and besides you guys needed a break.” He said. “That’s what I said to Herc, too. That we should be able to deal with this without having to get you involved and he agreed. Said you earned your peace and quiet for a while.”

“We appreciate that.” Gabrielle said. “We’ve been kind of busy here ourselves.”

“I noticed.” Iolaus regarded them. “Lots of change here.”

Xena merely nodded.

“Anyway, so we got caught in a storm, and in the middle of that I was trying to help tie down some sails and lightning hit us. I thought I was a goner.” Iolaus told them. “Felt every single hair on my body stand up then the next thing I knew the mast was falling and I was under it.”

“Oh, wow.”

‘Huh.” Xena grunted.

“Yeah, so now I know what that feels like.” Iolaus met her eyes. “But the ship heeled over and it rolled off me, and when it all got sorted out and done I got up and looked around for Herc and the girls – and they were gone.”

Both Xena and Gabrielle looked at him in surprised silence for a long moment. “Gone?” Xena finally said. “They fell off into the water or… just gone?”

Iolaus looked off into the distance then back at her, the hurt so evident on his face it was painful to them to see it. “Yeah. Just gone. No sign of them or their gear.” He took a sip of his wine as they waited for him to continue. Gabrielle leaned over and put her hand on his arm in silent comfort.

“One thing I’m sure of.” Xena said, after the quiet turned a little uncomfortable. “Is that they were taken somewhere, you weren’t left behind by him on purpose.”

Iolaus looked up from his mug at her, eyes bleak and red rimmed.

“The lightning blast – you think that was Poseidon?” Gabrielle asked. “I could see him getting involved.” She glanced at the man sitting next to her. “Because Xe’s right. There is no way they just left you, Iolaus.”

He managed a smile. “Y’know, you two are two of my very favorite people.” He remarked. “And that’s why I headed here, because you’re the only ones I could have told that to that would have said exactly what you did and made me feel so much less of a damned loser.”

Gabrielle gave his arm a squeeze.

Iolaus drew a breath “And I sure hope you’er right, because since they were gone, and since the ship was wrecked, the captain decided that the whole thing was my fault.”

Xena frowned. “Your fault???”

“My fault.” Iolaus sighed. “They managed to limp into port and he turned me into the authorities. I had no idea what was going on.” He said. “Told them I called down the wrath of the gods on him and since we hadn’t paid for the passage since Herc talked his way on…”

“Bastard.”

“Exactly. I managed to get away, but they spread the word and I’ve been on the run ever since.” Iolaus said. “I was just lucky I managed to break out my white mare. She’s in the paddock out there with those goats.”

“Yeah I saw her. That’s how I knew you were here.” Xena said. “I told my troops to bring her in the barracks stables and clean her up.” She braced a knee up and leaned her arm on it. “So you don’t know what happened to them? No word, no nothing?”

Iolaus just shook his head.

“Wow.” Gabrielle said, after a moment’s silence. She looked over at Xena, who was slowly shaking her head. “Okay, so – what can we do for you,Iolaus?”

He pondered the question then half shrugged. “Nothing, really. Just give me a space to bunk if you can.” He responded. “I guess I just need some time to figure out what I’m going to do next.”

“Of course.” Gabrielle responded at once. “In fact, you can stay right here if you want to. Cyrene doesn’t give this room to paying guests. She said you never know when you’re going to need a little space.”

Iolaus looked around at the room, which was snug and cozy, and managed a smile again. “I”d like that.” He said. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Xena said, standing up. “We’re going down across the river for a little while. Can we get you anything? Some clothes?”

“A razor?” Iolaus smiled more easily. “I’ve got a little coin, I’ll go down later and get some stuff and see my little mare after I get washed up a little. I don’t want to scare your mother’s cooks.” He glanced down at himself.

Gabrielle reached over and ruffled his hair a little. “I think it looks cute.” She said. “Relax, and we can talk later. I already told Mom you were here.”

“You gals run along.” Iolaus mustered a sort of skewed cheerfulness. “We’ll catch up after you get back from shopping.”

They waved, and left him sitting on the bed, waiting until they got all the way down the hall and out the back door before speaking.

“Xena.”

“I know.” Xena pulled her cloak around her and put her hand on Gabrielle’s back. “Let’s go down there and get what we need to get done. Then we can figure out what to do.”

“And get him a razor.” The bard exhaled, her breath a long stream of fog in the air. “What happened, do you think? Was it Poseidon?”

“Have no idea.” Xena motioned over one of her soldiers as they reached the town gates and waited for him to jog closer. “Andos, there’s a man staying in the back room at the inn.”

“One as came in with the white horse, genr’l?” Andos said. “Had some terrible tangles that mare did. Ges is working her out in the stables down slope.”

“That’s him. Get a kit and bring it to him. Soap, belt knife, the usual, what we give the recruits.” Xena ordered. “That’ll hold him until we get back.” She said as an aside to Gabrielle. “And bring him a set of camp furs.”

“Genr’l.” Andos put his fist to his chest. “He’s a friend then?”

Xena looked at him and nodded. “He’s family to us.”

“I’ll take care of him, no worries.” The soldier hustled off, heading towards the barracks.

Xena and Gabrielle stood there in silence for a bit, then shook their heads and started off down to the market.

**

The merchant train was vast, surprising even Gabrielle with it’s long line of wagons and range of merchants with them.

They had come a long way, from the port cities far off and even past Athens, and the first merchant they talked to told them why.

“Ah, ladies.” The man leaned against his wagon. “Athens is soured. Got their purses clenched for now, and said they didn’t want extra around so we took off this way, and will go on through Thrace to see what new markets are to be had.”

“All through the winter?” Gabrielle asked. “That’s tough on you isn’t it?”

“Sure, but we expect we’ll find a spot we can settle in for a few months, over Solstice.” The man said. “Heard there are a few new upstarts through the mountains out there, looking for some action.”

Upstarts. “Mm.. be careful of upstarts.” Xena warned. “They might like your wares, and not want to give up coin for them.”

The merchant shrugged. “Always can happen. In fact, we were told before the pass to watch out for you lot here.” He winked. “Dangerous, thatXena.”

“Yes, she is.” Gabrielle agreed with a mild grin. “That’s exactly what we want people to think matter of fact. Let them stay on their side of the pass.”

One of the townsman came up, and, giving Gabrielle a respectful nod, drew the merchant aside and pointed out a slot in the large and well built square for his wagon.

The wagons would all go against the stockade wall, where there was a overhang that would protect them from the weather. The merchants could choose to sell out of their wagons, or use the booths that were in the center, and off to one side of the square were paddocks for the animals and troughs.

The area had the atmosphere of a carnival, with men and oxen and women and horses crossing every which way, as they showed relief at getting off the road and into a comfortable spot for a while.

"Lot of stuff." Gabrielle mused.

One side of the market was reserved for merchants from the town, and some were already there setting up their stands, and of course there was a section set aside near the stage for Gabrielle's Amazons.

There were about a half dozen of them there, in fact, unloading packs and looking around curiously. They spotted Gabrielle and waved, and their queen waved back. She folded her arms and watched a beautiful pair of draft horses move by, sensing the silence at her side after a while and looking up.

Xena was looking off into the distance, her own arms folded. Her profile was quiet and stern, and she was moving her jaw around a little, as though she was nibbling the inside of her lip.

Easy to guess what she was thinking about. Gabrielle shifted closer and put her hand on her partner's back, then she stiffened as the wagon train meandered to an end and she saw a group of riders behind the last of the transports. "Uh oh."

"Uh oh?" Xena jerked, then quickly looked around, spotting what her partner had seen after a moment. "Ah. Amazons."

A dozen women were riding on nondescript horses, wrapped in leathers and bristling with weapons. Xena moved out into the open to get a better look at them, and after a short pause, they all angled towards her, one pointing. "Do we know them?"

"You're asking me?" Gabrielle studied them. "Looks like trouble, Xe."

Xena shifted her shoulders and pulled her gloves off. "We should have stayed in bed."

"If I had a dinar for every time that was true that bed would be made of gold with spun silver sheets."

**

Xena leaned against the back wall of the Amazons booth space, watching the group seated at the table inside with an air of mild skepticism, her arms folded and the light from the oil lamp reflecting off the hilt of her sword.

Gabrielle was seated on one side of a makeshift bench pulled up to one of the wares tables with Ephiny and Eponin bracketing her, three of the stranger Amazons were sitting across from them and warriors from both sides filled the rest of the space facing off over their leader's heads.

"Alana, I understand what you are saying." Gabrielle hand her hands folded on the table. "I just don't accept it. You have no claim on us. I'm sorry you lost so many people, but that wasn't our fault."

The woman facing her was young, relatively the same age as Gabrielle was. She had short cut black hair and dark eyes and was wearing a queen's rank tokens, which had a freshly cut look to them. "It doesn't appear that way to us." She said, in an even, serious tone. "The witnesses who did return said she saw our queen gutted. She identified the killer as this person." She indicated Ephiny. "Are you saying she lied?"

Gabrielle looked over at Ephiny, and one eyebrow lifted.

“She didn’t’ lie.” Ephiny said, mildly. “I absolutely killed her.” She said. “Your queen had me tied up and put in stocks and was going to turn me into the Athenian army. For no reason. I was glad to kill her.”

“And if she hadn’t killed her, I would have.” Eponin said, once she was sure Ephiny was done. “We found out what the scam was, from two of your own who ended up coming back with us and joinng our tribe. “

“There wasn’t any scam.” Alana said. “It was a straightforward offer from Athens. We bring them Amazon recruits, they reward us with land, and honors. That’s what our queen was doing and she did it to the best of her ability.”

“Yes.” A second woman sitting next to her said. “We kept our word to our allies in Athens. That includes capturing someone who was going to act against them.”

“Except I wasn’t.” Ephiny said. “I was just, very stupidly, trying to warn you morons you were being played.” She added. “We had Spartans visitAmphipolis right after they left, and they got drunk and spilled that they knew about the Amazons and how Athens were going to use them.”

Gabrielle waited, then nodded. “And that was true. We had information you didn’t, and Ephiny and Eponin risked their lives to follow your queen and let her know it.”

“Spartans! Who says they were telling the truth?” Alana burst out. “How could you believe them?”

“Because they had no reason to lie to us.” Xena said. “They were trying to hire me.”

The stranger Amazons stared at her. “So then you were a traitor.” Alana said.

“I said, they tried.” Xena said. “I turned them down. Just like I turned Athens down. I wanted no part of that fight. I told your queen that.”

“Are you such a treasure then?” Alana said, with more than a touch of skepticism.

“No.”

“Yes.”

Xena and Gabrielle answered at the same time.

“Both Athens and Sparta were told, by the oracles of the gods, that they needed a woman warrior to lead them.” Gabrielle said. “So of course they both wanted Xena, since her leadership of armies is pretty well known in these parts.”

“Thanks to you.” Xena remarked.

“So when they revealed what they knew, Ephiny decided in sisterhood that your queen and the rest of the Amazons gathering for Athen’s war effort, should know.” Gabrielle concluded. “If we truly meant you ill, it would have been a lot easier to just stay here.”

“Last time I do something like that, let me tell ya.” Ephiny said. “So no, Alana, we don’t owe you anything, and even if I had killed her for no reason and in cold blood, you’d only have a claim against me, not against our tribe. I know the law.”

“In fact.” Gabrielle said. “We probably have more of a claim against you, than you do against Ephiny. Your queen was responsible for having her and Eponin locked up. I have a problem with that.”

“We lost over half our tribe, and you have a problem with two people being inconvenienced?” Alana said. “We’re destitute. They took all our resources with them and most of the seasoned warriors. We’re all that’s left.” She indicated the women with her. “I only had the right because I was the only one of the queen’s council left and I only stayed behind because I had a broken leg when they left.”

‘That was their decision.” Gabrielle said, calmly. “Your queen decided to take all those people to war. There was always a chance they all would have died anyway.”

“If they’d gone to war, they likely would have.” Xena stated from her corner. “The Athenians were banking on large field scale war. Army to army, with siege engines. There was no place for Amazons there.”

“We were supposed to be scouts.” The woman looked over at her. “Not infantry or cavalry. You think we’re stupid?”

“No.” Xena shook her head. “I think they lied to you.” She straightened up and walked over to take a spot behind Gabrielle. “There was more behind it than you knew.”

“You could be lying.” Alana said. “It’s all just hearsay. But the fact is, we lost half our tribe. You killed our queen.” She looked at Ephiny. “And I think we have a valid blood claim. We brought our case to the senior council of all the lowland tribes, and they thought so too.”

“Sure, since they were the ones who were going to war.” Gabrielle leaned back a little, feeling the expected warmth as Xena’s hands dropped on her shoulders. “They have no jurisdiction here, in Thrace. Of the tribes here, we’re the largest, and we also have allies.”

The woman looked frustrated. “So you’re saying Amazon law has no hold here?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “I’m saying Amazon law has limited reach.” She stood up. “You can send your council here if you want to, but we, and by that I mean me, and my tribe, do not consider your claim a valid one.” She let her hand rest on Ephiny’s shoulder. “I back what my regent did. I might have done the same thing.”

All of Gabrielle’s Amazons shifted their eyes to her, and Xena’s fingers tightened on her slightly.

Alana studied her. “So you have no sympathy for us?”

Gabrielle regarded her in turn for a moment. “If you’d come here asking for sympathy, rather than blood price, you might have gotten it.”

“That’s what got your queen in trouble. “ Ephiny said. “She felt she was owed everything and what we found out was, she really wanted me and Pony out of the way because she thought we’d horn in on her deal with Athens.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is.” Pony said. “Some of the people with her told us, after it was all over. “

Alana got up and moved around the back of the table. As she did Pony stood up and took a step backwards, bracing her legs and letting a hand rest on her knife hilt.

Cait and Solari took a step forward. Xena merely turned her head and regarded the woman with a faint smile.

“Please don’t do anything stupid.” Gabrielle spoke up. “No one here needs my permission to start kicking ass and they can and will, if for no other reason than to get a few licks in before Xena does.”

Xena chuckled softly under her breath.

‘I wasn’t going to try anything.” Alana said. “As I said before, I am no fool, and your consort’s reputation precedes her. I just wanted to show you this.” She extended her hand, with a scroll in it. “I assume you can read?”

Gabrielle felt the stiffening around her and she accepted the scroll with a brief smile. “Nah, never learned that stuff.” She handed it over her head. “Hon, can you read this for me?”

Xena took it. “Sure. Hope it’s not in Greek though.” She unrolled the scroll and read it silently, while Ephiny half stood to look at it over her shoulder. Gabrielle remained seated, then after a minute she leaned back against Xena’s body, folding her hands over her stomach.

“Anyone got a quill and ink?” Xena asked after a period of silence.

“Sure.” Gabrielle dug in her carrysack and handed up the quill case she carried in it. “Careful, the ink’s new.”

“Its from Athens.” Xena put the scroll down on the table and dipped the quill’s tip in it. She scribbled on the surface for a few minutes, then signed it with a flourish. “They want you to know they ruled that since all their allies got gutted we should pay them off.”

“Oh really?” Gabrielle said. “Did they say they were going to pay us off for going and rescuing Therma, and defeating a Spartan army for them?”

“Didn’t mention it, no.”

“Well then, sweetheart, I think we should remind them.”

“Mmm.. me too.” Her consort agreed. “I told them they should count all that up, and hand it over then we’ll split it with these folks.” Xena handed the scroll back to Alana. “So you go on and take that back. If they’ll make that deal, you’ll get half of what they give us.” She handed the quill back to Gabrielle. ‘Here. Don’t get your fingers dirty.”

Alana read the scroll, then rolled it up and closed her fingers around it. “And if they decide to send soldiers rather than dinars?”

Xena smiled at her. “Then we’ll have a more exciting winter than I figured we would. But chances are they won’t. They know who I am. It’s going to be less expensive for them to pay me off than to come and fight me.”

“And if they do neither?” Alana said. “A council could be called.”

Gabrielle got up and slid her arm around Xena. “If they do neither, you’re back to square one. I don’t mind Xena using her influence to try and shake Athens loose of some coin for you. And they should, since you were going to war for them. But if they don’t, then they don’t. You’re not getting a dinar from us.”

“Then I suppose I will take council with my sisters and the other tribes at home, and we will decide what we will.” Alana said, doing her best to look both strong and dignified. “I didn’t expect to be well received. Our sisters who returned told us of your arrogance.”

“And those who came back here told us of your stupidity, and the selfishness of your tribes, and how horribly you treated our regent and her partner.” Aalene spoke up for the first time, the young Amazon having stayed in her corner next to Cait. “So two can play that game. Take our royal consort’s offer and leave with it. It’s more than you deserve.”

The lowered flap to the tented area they were meeting in was suddenly thrust open, and a tall, grizzled red haired man entered, dressed in leather and metal armor with Xena’s crest on the chest of it. “Genr’l? Weather’s coming in again. We’re putting the shelter up round the area.”

“Thanks Bennu.” Xena said “Make sure all the horses are under cover.”

“Aye.” Bennu touched his chest and then ducked back out.

They could see through the opening that snow was falling again, and Gabrielle could also read the visiting Amazons, seeing the slump in their shoulders and looks of masked discouragement. “You know we’re not total jerks.” She said. “We’d be glad to shelter you here until the weather improves.”

Alana looked like she wanted to turn down the offer just on general principals and Gabrielle waited, to see if sense was going to overcome ego. With warriors, you never knew, but she sensed that Alana had some level of smarts.

Much to her surprise, sense won out. “Thank you.” Alana said. “We’ll stay until it clears. We’re not used to this cold of a season. It very seldom snows where we are from.”

“Your majesty.” Cait came up next to Gabrielle. “There’s the younger’s quarters just emptied. Shall I take them there?”

“Yes, thanks Cait.” Gabrielle smiled at her. “Could you and Paladia please get them settled? We may have a disagreement, but in the end, they’re still our sisters.”

“Right you are.” Cait winked the eye away from where the strangers were. “C’mon Pally.” She eased around Gabrielle. “Could you come with us, please?” She addressed the Amazons. “It’s a bit of a walk.”

The stranger Amazons filed out, not without over the shoulder stares at their putative hosts. Gabrielle kept them mild look on her face until the flap closed behind them, then she turned around to face Xena, banging her pale head against her partner’s chest with a low, growling mutter.

Xena patted her on the back, then circled her with both arms and hugged her both to sooth her aggravation and to stop her from bruising her breastbone. “Easy, slugger.”

Ephiny sighed. “I should have killed them all. Not left any witnesses.” She said, mournfully. “But hey, Aalene – nice little speech there. Good job.”

Aalene smiled. She had always been a very shy girl, but lately her personality had started to develop. Her young daughter was flourishing in the kids group in the village, and was a frequent playmate of Dori’s. “I can’t believe they came here and tried to say we owed them anything. That’s terrible.”

“Jerks.” Pony shook her head. “They live too close to Athens. All that hot air gets into them.” She walked over and peeked out the flap. “Think it was a good idea to take them up to the village?” She asked. “Specially with them talking crap about bringing people here to kick our asses.”

Ephiny exhaled. “I thought about that.” She admitted. “But I think Gabrielle is hoping maybe we can turn them around a little. Wouldn’t have a chance if we refused them hospitality and made them bunk in here.” She looked around at the little booth. “Not that I don’t think they deserve to sleep on straw.”

Gabrielle turned around and leaned back against Xena’s tall form. ‘Yeah. I wanted them to walk through fortified Amphipolis, through the back gates, and up that long path through our entryway. If that doesn’t put them off the stupidity of a bunch of tree fighters trying to attack us nothing will.”

Pony shrugged, glancing at Xena, who was standing there in all her tall and black leather covered glory with her long arms draped over Gabrielle’s shoulders. “I’m guessing it won’t take that much.” She said. “They seem like puppies.”

“We were all puppies once.” Xena kept her eyes straight ahead and resisted the urge to look down. “Typical of that bunch though, to go to Athens to solve their problems.”

“What if they do send troops?” Aalene asked, after a brief silence.

“They won’t.” Xena smiled lazily. “Not for this. There’s no percentage in it for them, and there are enough people in that army that know they might end up losing more troops to defection than arrows.”

Gabrielle was also smiling, and now she tilted her head back to look up at her partner. “Not to mention, they’d have to march in the middle of winter.” She concluded. “But who knows? Maybe everyone will act like a grownup this time and they’ll just hand over some dinars.”

“Maybe.” Xena agreed. “So let’s get out of here and let the merchants set up.” She rested her chin on Gabrielle’s head. “I want to see if any of these travelers saw the slavers that hit that old soldier of mine’s village.”

They moved out of the sheltered area, Pony and Aalene pulling back the hide flaps that had given them a bit of privacy and tying them in place, clearing the entrance for the waiting group of Amazons with bundles and crates in their arms. “All yours.” Pony said, stepping out of the way.

“Thanks.” Nala was the first to enter, putting her box down on the table inside. “All okay? I saw Cait heading up with a bunch of strange Amazons.”

“They were strange Amazons all right.” Aalene said. “Fill you in later.”

“Always something.” Nala shook her head. “Hope all those people the watch reported on the way here get to cover.”

Xena turned. “More than just the merchant train?”

Nala nodded. “Just heard it coming down to the bridge. Guards said they saw three, maybe four groups on foot heading down the road.”

“Huh.” Xena grunted. “Maybe they heard about the market.”

“Could be.” Nala agreed. “We sent word out last sevenday.” She turned and went to her boxes, starting to remove the various things they’d made to sell. Six or seven others had crowded in with her, smiling despite the weather as they started to set up the tables.

Das and Renas were there, Das showing off a pair of ear cuffs to Nala who whistled in response. Xena edged closer and peered at them, then returned her attention outside as Gabrielle tugged on her cloak. “Yes?”

“Let’s go see what there is to be seen.” The bard said. “I see there’s a tanner setting up over there.”

“Uh huh.”

The light snow was dusting their cloaks with silver as they moved away from the shelter and paused as a group to study the square.

Soldiers were thick on the ground, moving to put wood and hide panels in place to provide shelter for the wagons and stalls, though many of the merchants were heading up to the performance building, a thick stone and wood structure build on top of a low platform.

“Lookit that.” One of the merchants said, rubbing his hands briskly as he walked. “Putting up roofs for us. I like it. Them folks has it together here.”

“They do.” His companion agreed. “Value the market, even if it’s all women in charge.”

Both of them laughed, passing by the group of cloaked Amazons who watched them go by, then laughed themselves.

“Shows how much they know.” Gabrielle said. “Women value markets way more than men do.”

“Until they’re out of something.” Ephiny said. “C’mon, Pon. We’ll go see what gossip we can dig up.” She and Eponin strolled off, as Gabrielle andXena along with Solari and Aalene headed off towards the shelter.

“Let’s see if anyone’s heard anything on the road about slavers.” Xena said, as they mounted the steps to the performance stage. “See if I can help out that old soldier of mine.”

“Then the tanner.” Gabrielle said. “Those boots are falling apart on you.”

“You run me ragged in them.” Xena said, with a mock sigh. “I’m kept so busy doing the queen’s bidding.”

“Oh please.’

They all chuckled, entering the shelter and leaving the snow behind.

**

Cait kept a decorous pace as she led the visitors through Amphipolis. She waved at the soldiers who were moving in the opposite direction from her, heading through the town towards the military barracks.

The soldiers all knew her, and she knew them, and despite the weather they seemed quite cheerful as they moved towards the front of the town.

“Lot of soldiers.” Alana commented.

“Oh yes.” Cait agreed. “They’ve got a whole area of new housing they’re building down slope to hold all the new recruits. Quite nice fellows.”

“Is Xena building an army?” The Amazon asked.

“Of course.” Cait indicated the lane that lead to the big gates. “She has been for quite some time, but now she’s got things properly rolling.”

“Hello Cait!” Eustance was coming up the path, from the side lane she lived on in her small, but snug hut. “Are you and the rest coming down for dinner?”

“Yes.” Cait said. “I’m just going to get this lot settled, then Pally and I are going to bring down some of her pictures.”

Paladia, who had been lounging along in the rear of the group, snorted slightly.

Eustace waved and they went on towards the gate. The soldiers spotted them and swung the portal open, giving Cait and Paladia respectful waves as they went through.

Alana glanced behind them as the gates swung shut. “So you don’t live in the village?”

“Gosh no.” Cait pointed at the steep path that started where the path ended. “Much too noisy there, right Pally?”

“Yup.” Paladia agreed. “Living down here’d be too easy. We gotta hike up half a damn mountain to where we bunk.”

“It’s good exercise.” Cait said.

“That what Xena says?” Her partner asked. “Saw her bouncing up there yesterday like a rubber ball. ‘S’where that freaknig kid gets it from.”

They started up the path. Over the last couple of moons they’d driven posts and ropes to guide a way up, and in the really steep places they’d dug out steps so the way was easier than it had been.

Everyone gave a different excuse for that. Paladia was glad enough to bring up the rear end, watching the stranger Amazons struggle their way up. She’d heard someone say it was for the elders, and then others for the kids, and then someone said it was for Ephiny since she was pregnant.

Paladia wasn’t sure why they had to be such idiots sometimes. Lining a steep path was a freaking sensible idea and it made her crazy that everyone pretended they’d rather it hadn’t been done.

“Amphipolis is Xena’s home town.” Cait was explaining upt there at the front. “That big inn we passed is her mother’s and her brother lives here too.”

Paladia rolled her eyes.

The Amazons were looking around at the mountainside as they climbed steadily upward, passing the now frozen over spring that usually ran down the side of the path, steps crunching slightly on the snow coated stones.

The trees still had leaves on their branches, and as they got up into them the wind cut down and it became more comfortable to walk. Paladiaspotted a fox scooting out of the way, and squirrels were scrambling around the trunks storing nuts away industriously.

They met a line of their own Amazons coming down the path most carrying boxes or bundles. Each greeted them with amiable waves, and they also gave the strangers a wary stare.

Cait got up the last steps to the mid level plateau in the path, already raising a reassuring hand to the watch that were already coming out to meet them. “It’s all right, you lot. Just some visitors.”

The watch, ginger haired Dosi and her sister Amalia studied the newcomers, then stepped back and cleared the way into the village. The newly built gates were swung open, and Cait passed inside and then up the slight rise with a faint smile on her face.

“Home sweet home.” Paladia commented.

“Yes, coming along nicely.” Cait indicated a side path. “We just had a graduation so there are empty beds in that hut.”

“Were you one of the graduates?” Alana asked.

“Nah.” Paladia answered for her. “She was born a crone.”

“Pally.” Cait gave her a severe look. “Stop that.” She turned to Alana. “I graduated years ago from juniors. I got my senior’s rank last season.” She opened the door to the younger’s quarters, a hut intended for six to eight people that was now empty. “Here you go.”

The Amazons filed inside, setting down their carrysacks and picking out bunks. “Thanks.” Alana said. “We appreciate it. Is there a… ah, that’s the bathing hut?” She pointed across the square.

“Yes.” Cait replied. “And the dining hall is next to it. As Queen Gabrielle said you were guests, please do make yourselves comfortable.” She said. “Most of the tribe will be down at the market, but they’ll have supper on at sundown.”

The Amazons were nodding a little and looking around, seeming surprised but pleased. “Thank you.” One of the others said to Cait. “This is nice.”

“Right. We’re off.” Cait replied. “That hut right there, that’s the guard shelter. If you need anything ask in there. I’ll let them know you’re in here.” She lifted her hand and waved, then started off towards the shelter, pulling her hood up against the snow.

“Seem like a box of pricks.” Paladia commented, as they trudged over the frosty ground. “Snoots in the air, because they’re from the big city.”

“Did you hear them ask Queen Gabrielle if she knew how to read?” Cait said. “Too right! Snoots!’

“Yeah, thought it was funny her nibs pretended she didn’t. “ Paladia sniggered. “She’s all like, hey Xena read this for me willya?”

They ducked inside the guard hut and let the thick hide flap fall down behind them. Inside there were oil lamps and in the back a snug fireplace that was crackling merrily. “Hello.”

“Hey, Cait.” A ginger headed scout was seated near the fire, warming her hands. “Just came in from the ridge, all’s quiet.”

“Great.” Cait said. “So listen up? The Queen and regent sent up a pack of visitors from one of those awful tribes near Athens.”

“She did? What for?” The other Amazon in the room was cleaning a crossbow, and she looked over her shoulder at them. “Those guys? The ones that dissed Ephiny and Eponin?”

“Yes” Cait said. “They came to accuse us of some quite silly things, and really, I think the queen wanted to boot them down the road but it started to snow again.”

“And she took pity on em.” Bella, the Amazon near the fire said. “Figures.”

Paladia was leaning against the wall, content to wait for Cait to finish her political wrangling. “Nah.” She spoke up. “Nibs probably wants to give that bunch an eyeful so they don’t go back to the big city thinking we’re helpless gitwads.”

Cait turned and gave her a very pleased look. “Well done, Pally.”

“Probably have Xena beat up a couple dozen of those soldiers to nail the idea.” Paladia added placidly. “The nutcase made sure they saw every battling butt in the town on the way up here.”

“Nice.”

“Pally.” Cait gave her partner an exasperated look.

“We’ll keep an eye on them.” Bella said. “You put them in the crib?”

Cait nodded. "Told them where the baths and food are. So likely they'll be wandering."

"Right." Cait lifted her hand. "We're off back to the market."

The two of them left the shelter and headed across the big central square, crossing to the slightly sloping path behind the gathering hall to a clearing surrounding by trees and brush that held the small hut that was theirs.

Newly built, it still smelled of curing wood and stone, and the wood floors were raw and creaked under their weight. It had a bed big enough for the two of them against one wall, a small fireplace, a worktable against the other wall with a stool next to it, and another longer worktable with weapons piled on every square inch.

It didn't have much personality yet, but on the bed was a thick quilt with rich colors and in the corner of the long table, where the two walls met there was a carved wooden wolf.

Paladia went over to the shorter worktable. "Sure we want to go back down there?" She asked. "Weather sucks."

Cait went over to the window and opened the shutters, peering out. The clouds were darkening overhead, and she pondered the question. She was not on duty as Gabrielle's personal guard today – when Xena was around there wasn't any need.

So she was free to stay in the village, or go back down to town. Either would be an acceptable choice but she could feel a pricking of her nape hairs, and nodded quietly to herself. "We'll stay here a bit." She said. "Want to go have a bit to eat in the hall?"

"You just see those nitwads going there?"

Cait chuckled under her breath.

"Nutcase."

**

The large wooden structure was already busy, full of traders and townsfolk, mingling in good humor as they traded news and kept out of the weather.

Xena was seated on a bench, one boot propped up onto it as she leaned back against the wooden wall behind her. "Sounds like the roads are busy."

The tall, bearded merchant seated across from her nodded. "Say that, Xena." He agreed. "I was surprised, you know? I expected most of the usual lot to be holed up for winter already."

On one side of the big room some of Cyrene's staff had set up a cook stove, using the fireplace built into the back corner, and they'd put three or four barrels in place with a plank or two atop them, forming a makeshift bar.

"I expected the same." Xena said. "Did you see anything unusual? We've seen some refugees coming in, and one of them mentioned he was trailing a bunch of slavers."

The trader's head was already nodding as she spoke. "We heard it. Stopped just short of the pass, at a small town there. Knew you." He picked up a mug and took a sip from it.

"Binns?" Xena hazarded a guess.

"The very one. He said there were two women who'd just come through said they'd just gotten loose of a bunch who'd been picking up people, said they were on the way through Thrace to sell em."

"What happened to them?" Xena asked. "The women, I mean?"

"Don't know. Binns said they were headed down Therma way, and we were going on. Said to send his regards. But we also heard, from a wanderer just outside Potadeia that a couple youngsters were missing from there, and he said he'd seen a wagon going past down river."

"Towards here?" Xena's brows lifted.

“Past here more likely. Them’s that want to start trouble steer clear of this town.” He winked at Xena. “That’s why we were glad to stop. It’s safe here.”

Xena lifted her mug and accepted the compliment gracefully. “I’m pretty sure no slaver wagon stopped anywhere near here, but I don’t think any wagon went past either. Watch would have seen it.”

“Probably not, but I don’t think they’d risk lingering around here either not between here and Potadeia. I saw your outpost there.” The trader said. “We stopped a few days. Nice bunch there, glad they rebuilt that town.”

“Me too, Malus. I have extended family there.” Xena caught sight of Gabrielle entering, the bards distinctive figure easing through the crowd and heading for the bar. “Gabrielle’s family lives there. It’s her birth town.”

“They said.” Malus smiled briefly. “Seemed proud of her, matter of fact. Wanted us to know that famous bard came from there.”

Xena smiled back, the somewhat mixed history they had with her partner’s birthplace flashing through her mind’s eye. “They give you good business?”

“Middling.” Malus said. “It’s still a small spot, you know? So far we’ve unloaded more here since we rolled up than two days there.” He stretched back, and looked approving as his wife brought over a bowl of steaming stew and a platter of bread. “Ah, that smells great.”

“It does.” His wife, a brown haired woman with unusual purplish eyes sat down next to them. “It’s your mother’s cooking, isn’t it, Xena? She’s got the inn up there still?”

“She does, and yes, it’s her stew. I can recognize the spices from here.” Xena’s eyes twinkled a little. “But to be completely honest with you, I think my partner can do better.” She looked up and past them as Gabrielle arrived at the table, putting down a square of wood with a big bowl and a split loaf between them. “Speaking of.”

“Speaking of what?” Gabrielle got the bread buttered and handed her half. “Hi there, Malus, and.. Irene?”

The woman smiled. “That’s myself.”

“Welcome to Amphipolis.” She took a bite “Glad you got here before the weather totally went downhill.”

“They just came through Potadeia.” Xena told her, nibbling on her bread. “You’re famous there, y’know.”

Gabrielle gave her a droll look.

“And Binns, at Hillsgate said they heard word of those slavers. Seems they lost a few of them who were headed back the other direction.”

“Weird thing was.. “ Irene said. “From what we heard, they were taking or said they were taking what they caught through Thrace for sale. Couldn’t figure out why? What market is there for that in the outlands?”

“Maybe they’re not.” Xena said. “Could be heading for the same port city the Spartans invaded through. Send them overseas.”

“Why not just go through Therma, then?” Malus said. “Seems like a long route to take to get a ship, though we also heard there been storms off the coast there, and some wrecks.”

“We heard that too.” Gabrielle said. “Recently. A friend of ours is here, said he was in an awful wreck, and rumors were that Poseidon was mad at someone.”

Irene was nodding as she talked. “More than that, one of the sailors off that ship was in Hillsgate inn, and he was telling everyone that Hercules – you know him?”

“We know him.” Gabrielle and Xena spoke at once.

“That he steered the ship into the wreck, and then abandoned everyone.” Irene said. “Shocked I was!”

Gabrielle finished chewing a mouthful of stew and swallowed it, sensing the narrowing of her soulmate’s eyes without effort. “That doesn’t sound right. I know Hercules. He wouldn’t have done that if people were in danger if he’d had a choice.”

Irene eyed her doubtfully. “Since when do the gods care about the likes of us? Or ratty sailors?”

“Herc does.” Xena spoke up. “If he vanished, he vanished for a reason.”

Malus looked skeptical. “Be as may.” He inclined his head towards them. “You likely know better than I , but he left that mortal friend of his holding the bag, and the ship captain’s got the law looking for him to pay off the passage.”

Gabrielle sighed.

“Offering a reward.” Irene said. “So if you seen him, might want to make yourself a dinar or so.”

“We’ll keep it in mind.” Xena got up, wiping her bread in the remains of her partner’s stew and popping it into her mouth. “Enjoy the chow. I’m guessing we’ll see better weather tomorrow morning.”

She ruffled Gabrielle’s hair. “I’ll be at the tanners.” She said. “Remember to pick up some shirts.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Meet you there.”

Irene and Malus waited until Xena had cleared the door, then leaned closer. “So, Gabrielle, tell us what we have to look forward to tonight? One of your tales? Heard some of the players in town talking about it.”

Gabrielle grinned briefly. “A new one, yeah.” She said. “About the last tussle we had. It’s got a lot of action, I think people will like it.”

“Surely… “ Irene said. “And now we’ll tell you the real gossip of the road.” She said. “Therma was full of the news, that mighty Zeus has abandoned some of his children, and sent them down here to live amongst us.”

Gabrielle paused in mid spoonful, then put the instrument down. “Oh really?”

“And we heard the oracles say, the first to find them, will be rewarded by the ruling council in Athens.” Malus said, his eyes glittering. “So I’m keeping my eyes open. You seen two women wanderers, looking to hide?”

“No.: The bard shook her head. “All news to me.”

“Thousand dinars, Gabrielle.” Irene nudged her arm. “Pay for a lot of hides, right?”

“Right.” Gabrielle handed her bowl off to one of Cyrene’s servers. “Speaking of, let me go make sure she’s not picking purpled dyed ones.” She got up. “Thanks for the news.”

“Peace to you.” Malus waved genially, watching as the bard headed purposefully off through the crowd, heading for the door. “Nice gal.”

“No airs.” His wife agreed. “I can see where she’d not like purple, right? Royal color. Like what those women were wrapped in.”

“Back in Hillsgate? Bit arrogant those were, for being escaped slaves.”

“Not nice at all.”

**

The tanner was doing a very brisk business, despite the weather. His wagon, which had a sturdy top that extended out for shelter had at least a dozen people gathered around it, all peering at well cured skins, some from far off and strange to their eyes.

Amphipolis had goats and sheep, pigs and horses. The cows they raised in the area though were mostly milk cows, and the town wasn't known for quality leather.

A bit irritating, now that they had a fairly decent size army in their midst, most of whom wore a combination of metal and leather armor.

But Xena knew better than most that the hilly, and then mountainous terrain that made up her homeland wasn't really suited for cattle in great numbers so she'd reconciled herself to finding the raw material for her protective wear elsewhere.

This traveling tanner seemed a likely source. She edged around the back of the crowd, her height allowing her to inspect the skins without pushing herself forward. Aside from the boots she was contemplating, she had an idea for a new set of body armor she wanted to try.

"That's right fellas.. "The tanner's eyes lifted. "And er.. ma'am." He grinned briefly, as the crowd turned to see who he was talking to and rapidly got out of the way. "Some of these I picked up on the borderlands. Wont see them often."'

Xena strolled forward through the now open gap and ducked her head to get under the shelter next to the wagon. She lowered her cloak's hood as she entered, and shook the covering of snow off her shoulders. "Which border?"

"Epirus, over the mountains." The tanner smiled at her hiked eyebrows. "Ah, don't think me so bold. I bought them off a trader on this side before I headed east."

Xena stepped to one side and examined the hides. There were the usual, but also a thicker skin she ran her hands over. "These from there?"

The tanner nodded. "Said they were mountain cattle. Used to cold weather."

His customer nodded. "I'll take this one." She draped the hide over one of the iron bars extending from the wagon. "And these two." She selected a dark brown natural skin and a pelt of thick russet red fur. "

"Nothing in purple." A lighter voice intruded, and a moment later Gabrielle was at her side, a bundle wrapped in her arms. "Ah. Just in time to bargain for you." She bumped Xena's hip with her elbow, and smiled when she saw the swiftly hidden look of dismay on the tanner's face. "C'mon, I'm not that bad am I?"

The crowd chuckled a little, then gingerly edged forward to resume examining the skins now that Xena had made her selection.

'What's this for?" Gabrielle touched the thicker hide. "It's knobbly a little."

"Underlay for my new armor." Her partner said. "It'll stand up to the shaping better I think. I put holes in the regular hide."

"Then I don't' care what it costs." Gabrielle said. "It's worth anything to keep your skin in one piece, my love."

Xena blushed a tad, and wrinkled her nose. But she smiled anyway and turned her head to regard a beautifully stitched carrybag hanging about head high on the wagon. "Hm." She pondered, half listening to Gabrielle's bargaining while she imagined the bag hanging on her partner's shoulder.

Catching the tanner's eye, she held up a coin, and pointed to the bag, raising her eyebrows in question. He quickly nodded, and she stuck the coin in a crack in the wagon's side, taking the bag down and looping it over Gabrielle's head.

"Wait." Gabrielle looked around in confusion. "What's this?"

“A present.” Her partner told her. “I’m going to the next wagon. Need some new saddle blankets.” She winked at the tanner and ducked past under the shelter, putting her hood up as she emerged again into the snowfall.

The mood around her was relaxed and jovial, she noted. Most or all of the wagons had attentive shoppers around them, most of the town and her own troops were browsing and eager to pick up necessities and the small luxuries the merchant train offered.

“Hello, Xena.” One of the town councilmen matched his steps to hers. “Nice market.”

“It is.” She agreed, as they neared the cloth merchant, who was doing a brisk business. “People here have dinars, and are willing to spend. Makes everyone happy.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Things are turning around again. I was just speaking to Wilfan about extending the borders again, down to the river up to the forest line. What do you think?”

“In springtime?”

“Exactly. They can put some living space up near the trees at the top of the slope, then put crops in below. That way if she floods, it brings the land back.”

Xena nodded. “That’s the right idea.”

“We’ll do this right this time, Xena.” He said. “I think about how we were thinking before, and I can’t believe it.” He shook his head. “It was almost like we were blinded. I remember that meeting we had, when they were going to go to Athens? It was an insanity.”

“Yeah.” Xena thought about that. “Everyone’s in a better frame of mind now.” She mused. “Maybe it’s just the hard times we’ve been through.”

“Was a bunch that was angry about the valley.” The councilman admitted. “But truth is, been there a long while and not a one of us touched it. No one cared when it was ceded - those women worked hard to get it open.”

“They did.” Xena said, nodding slowly. “And they’ve been spreading it out to the town, for getting things done up there. Everyone benefits.”

“Exactly.” He said, nodding emphatically. “Stone work, and timber, and all those provisions now, and they’ve started trading what they hunt with us. Looks like they’ll be good neighbors after all.” He lifted a hand. “Good speaking with you, Xena.. I’m off to get a pretty for my wife. Enjoy the market.”

Xena slowly came to a halt, standing in the path with her arms folded as she considered what she’d just heard.

She looked around, watching the groups of people fill the market square, with smiles on faces, and laughter on the air and tried to gauge what it was that was so different. No one was dressed fancy, or were flashing jewelry, her soldiers were there in their sturdy leather armor and plain waxed cloaks.

The Amazons were scattered around, enjoying a skin of wine, or talking to the townsfolk.

“You bucking for a statue?”

Xena turned to find Toris there, watching her with a wry smile. “First thing I hear of that I’ll have my horse down here pulling it down into the river. “ She warned. “No, I was just… “ She looked around. “Everyone just seems sort of contented for a change.”

“Ah, you noticed that too.” Her brother stood next to her, and adopted her folded arm pose. “Gran was saying that over breakfast. Said it was so damn nice to have people not be grumpy as a default anymore.”

“No kidding.” A memory suddenly came into Xena’s mind and she paused to savor it.

Long day, long dark night. They were sheltered in a forest grove, protected from the strong winds and light rain, with a small fire but there was a pot on it with stew almost ready, and fresh trail bread cooking on a hot stone nearby.

It smelled good.

Xena was sprawled on her furs head resting on Argo's saddle, sewing on a piece of fabric. Gabrielle was laying next to her, quill in one hand, the other propping her head up as she studied a piece of parchment in front of her.

Aside from the wind it was quiet. In the next glade, the sound of Argo pulling up mouthfuls of grass could be heard, and just past that the musical sound of a fast running creek. Xena looked up into the sky, and then returned her attention to her task, a smile on her face.

It was good to be dry, and comfortable, with a good dinner to be had. Her eyes had drifted to Gabrielle's firelit profile. And a good friend at her side.

A good friend, and a friendship that had suddenly become comfortable, as though they'd traveled through a crossroads neither had been aware of until times like this when it was just them, and the night, and a pair of furs side by side.

"Ready for dinner?" Gabrielle asked, setting her quill down.

"Whenever you are." Xena replied, eyes on her work, stretching out her legs and crossing them at the ankles. "Thank the gods for both of us that you're the cook."

Gabrielle laughed easily, rolling over and sitting up. "Thank the gods for both of us that you can sew." She retorted. "Otherwise I'd have to go around looking like a ragpicker."

'Nah, I'd just steal some new ones for ya." Xena chuckled. Then she glanced up to see Gabrielle just sitting there quietly, a gentle smile on her face, her eyes shifted off and unfocused. She waited a moment, then cleared her throat. "Whatcha thinking about?"

Gabrielle looked up and their eyes met. "It just feels so good to feel good, you know?" She said. "We're just here, and we're happy and I'm not worriedabou.. " She paused "About anything."

For a moment they merely studied each other in unhurried contentment. Then Xena smiled and nodded. "Yeah, you're right. It does feel good."

Looking back Xena remembered that bodily feeling of ease, the lack of tension across her shoulders and she nodded a bit to herself. 'Yeah, it feels nice. Everyone getting what they need, what they want a little."

'Hey, speaking of." Toris turned to her. "One of the merchants who came in this morning knows that bunch of goats your Amazons brought in."

"Knows, or thinks they want?" Xena gave him a wry look.

"Didn't want them, but said they'd seen them heading towards Therma a few weeks back, with four or five herders with them taking them to market."

Xena frowned. "How could they tell it's the same goats?"

"Long hair, and markings. The trader's from a herding family." Her brother said, briefly. "Wonder how they got all the way back here?"

"Or what happened to their herders." Xena said. "C'mon, let's get out of the snow." She pointed at a small wagon where a woman was stirring a pot of hot cider, the scent wafting out into the central area. "Well for now, finder's keepers. Gab's going to have the Amazons try to get them up to the village."

"Oh boy. That should be hilarious. Let me tell Gran so she can go watch."

**

The bathing room was quiet, with most of the tribe down in the market. Cait briskly toweled herself off, keeping the visitors in her peripheral vision as they finished up their bathing.

They were keeping her in their view as well, and she caught their slightly widened eyes at what she thought surely was her delightful collection of scars. She was proud of them, those marks, especially the arrow wound whose cauterized surface stood out against her skin.

They showed she had done things, without her having to talk about them. She wiped out her ears carefully then slung the piece of fabric around her neck and went to let the water out of the tub she'd used.

The warmed water had felt very good. In the old bathing hut, there were buckets that would have to be brought in after being dipped in the cold stream and you would have to wait for them to warm, before dumping them into the tubs.

Tedious, actually. For the new setup, Xena had shown them how she got water into her cabin, and between them all they'd managed to sort that out. Once that was done, they'd built a basin right up against the fireplace and Dosi had figured out a clever spigot thing that kept water coming into the basin and being warmed.

Lovely. Cait couldn't imagine why they hadn't thought of it before. Really once Xena had explained it it the whole thing had seemed quite obvious. She toweled her hair dry and then ran a comb through it, all the while keeping an eye on the other women.

"This is pretty nice, for the sticks." Alana said, loud enough for her to hear it.

"Much nicer than Athens actually." Cait responded blandly. "I didn't much care for that place at all." She walked over to where her leathers were hanging.

"You've been to Athens?" One of the other woman asked, in a skeptical tone.

"Certainly." Cait got her wraps in place and turned to face them, putting her hands on her hips. "I was there guarding Queen Gabrielle when she won that big bard competition last season. It was terribly grubby in spots."

"She won a bard competition?" Alana asked. "In Athens?"

"Of course." Cait took her leggings off the peg and slipped into them, tying off the belt that held them on. "It was lovely, really. The contest, I mean. Her majesty was the last one to go, and everyone simply loved her story."

She pulled her leather vest over her head and started lacing it up, aware of the doubtful stares directed towards her. She adjusted the fit and smoothed the edges down over her hips, pleased with the new garment.

"I've never heard of an Amazon winning a bard competition in Athens." Alana said. "Sounds like a cock and bull story to me."

The rest of them laughed.

"Well." Cait started seating her daggers. "She didn't enter the contest as an Amazon, of course. She used her birthplace name. Gabrielle ofPotadeia." She finished arming and picked up the sword belt hanging on the wall. "They certainly knew who she was in Athens. When she got up on stage, everyone quite gasped."

"Ah." Alana said. "So that's who she is, really. " She sniffed a little. "Figures. Yeah, I heard of her, but we spent most of our time hunting – we didn't have time to listen to children's tales."

"They aren't." Cait said. "But I'm sure you'll hear one or two tonight and you can decide for yourself." She swung the sword harness over her head and settled it into place. "Careful though, or you might end up in one."

It felt wonderful to buckle on that sword. Cait felt herself straighten under the weight on it, only just preventing herself from drawing it and admiring it's long and well hammered length.

Gabrielle had given it to her. It was the sword Xena had made for her during the war, and that she'd never used save to face off against her last challenge. It was beautifully made, and looked quite like Xena's and she'd been overwhelmed when she'd been given it.

Just really overwhelmed. It was just the best thing ever.

"Yeah, thanks for the warning." Alana said. "I guess that's why she thinks Athens is going to give two craps about her. Or that big ape she's with."

Cait stopped moving. She turned her head to regard Alana with her pale, gray eyes that had suddenly gone to ice. "Excuse me. You didn't actually just mean Xena there, did you?"

"Yeah." Alana said. "How in the Hades does she get out of her own way?"

For a moment, she rode the blade. Cait could feel the fury erupt inside her, sending a flush of blood to her skin and almost making her a bit lightheaded. Her body tensed and she felt the hair on the back of her neck lift a little, as she scented blood just on the edge of her perceptions.

They're guests. A voice sounded firmly in her head. You can't just kill them.

She let out her breath and felt her fingers relax. "Well, I suppose you'll have to form your own opinion there as well." She said. "Excuse me."

Several more members of the tribe chose that moment to enter, giving Cait a casual wave, and giving the visitors a stony once over. "Hey Cait." Pasisaid. "You up for some sparring later? In the big hall?"

"Absolutely." Cait put her cloak on, and set the hood up to cover her still wet hair. "Maybe if we're lucky Xena will come up before supper and join us."

"Lucky." Pasi grimaced. "Yeah, maybe you're lucky. My kneecap's still bent from that last kick she gave me." The young Amazon stripped out of her cloak and hung it up. "Gonna soak it right now in fact."

Cait and Pasi exchanged brief glances, then Cait lifted her hand in farewell and went outside.

She walked several paces into the snowy central ground, then she stopped and exhaled, her breath forming a fog. "Absolute git wads. " She pronounced firmly, shaking herself to release the last of her battle tension.

"Ok, right. " She headed off again in he direction of the gathering hall, then paused when she saw a pack of children racing across the central area, all of them giggling.

"Hm." Cait changed direction. "Hello? Hello, you there!"

The leader of the tiny rabble paused and looked around. "Cat!" Dori pointed at her. "S'go! Get Cat!" She headed towards Cait and the rest of them followed, some pausing to stamp on the snow and laugh.

"What are you lot up to?" Cait asked, as Dori skidded to a halt next to her.

"Cat! Look!" Dori opened her hands, revealing a snowball. "We're gonna make dem cold." She pointed at the bathing hall. "Wanna come?"

"Dori, that's very mean." Cait managed to wrestle a smile off her face. "Who told you that you could do that?"

"Boo."

Of course. "Xena told you to throw ice at those people?"

"Yes." Dori said, with utmost confidence. "Boo said."

Cait put her hood down. "Well then absolutely. Let's go." She scooped up a handful of snow and motioned the kids forward. "Ho ho ho."

**

“Okay.” Gabrielle entered the gathering hall, letting the door swing shut behind her. She crossed over to the raised platform at the head of the room and stepped up onto it, going over and putting down several packages before she turned, placed her hands on the worktable, and looked at the small group of people standing there. “What happened?”

Everyone looked at Cait, who bravely stepped forward until she was at the edge of the platform. “We had a bit of a tiff, your majesty.”

Gabrielle sat down, and rested her elbows on the table. “A bit of a tiff.” She repeated. “Over what?”

Cait crossed her arms and cleared her throat a little. “It was my fault.” She began. “I thought it would be funny to throw a bit of snow at our guests.”

Gabrielle waited, but there was nothing more forthcoming. “Okay. So, how bad could a little snow have been?” She said. “There were a lot more of them then there are of you.”

Cait cleared her throat again, but remained silent.

“We helped.” Aalene said, unprompted. “Once those nitwads started going after t.. I mean, once we saw what was going on we all piled on.” She said. “Ma’am.”

Gabrielle’s pale eyebrows shot up almost to her hairline. “Okay, so – these guests of ours, and you all knew they were guests, got clobbered by you all for a lark. That what you’re telling me?”

“Yes.” Cait said, briefly.

Gabrielle scratched her nose. “All of you out except Cait.” She said. “I’ll get back to you on what the penalty is for embarrassing the entire tribe.”

The rest of the group marched out, heads high, in silence.

Gabrielle waited for the door to close and then she focused on Cait. The young Amazon was standing quietly in place, just waiting. There was no fear in her eyes and she didn’t fidget, or look down – her attention was fixed on Gabrielle. “So.”

“I am sorry.” Cait said, after a moment. “They were just beastly and I simply couldn’t resist.”

The queen’s face twitched a little. “Did you think maybe they were doing that deliberately to make you react?”

“Yes.” Cait replied. “I was sure they were, they were insulting the village, you know, and yourself.”

“And?” A faint smile appeared on Gabrielle’s face.

“And Xena.” Cait admitted, seeing the change of expression.

“So they got you so wound up you went outside and got an armful of snow to throw at them?” The queen said, in a quizzical tone. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, Cait, but that’s not really your style is it?”

Cait now glanced down, and let her arms unfold, placing them behind her back and clasping her hands. “Well, you see I didn’t want to do something permanent.” She explained. “So I thought a bit of snow would be safer.”

Gabrielle got up and came around the table, stepping down off the platform so she and Cait were at eye level with each other. Then she sat down on the platform and patted the surface next to her, waiting for Cait to sit down as well.

“So now it’s not me being the queen, okay?” Gabrielle said. “I’m just being Gabrielle, talking to you because Dori told me what really happened.”

“Oh.”

“So , I do appreciate the fact that you’re sitting here pretending it was all your idea for this, you know?”

“Well.” Cait said. “She’s just a child, after all. I could have stopped it all. I didn’t have to go along with her and then.. well, they started after the children and I absolutely couldn’t let them get hurt.”

“I know.” Gabrielle said. “A lot of people would have found excuses, Cait, and given me all kinds of justifications for what they did but you didn’t. You just were all about taking responsibility.”

“Gabrielle.” Cait looked at her. “It was my responsibility. I don’t mind getting punished for it. I decided to go along after all.”

The queen smiled wryly. “Now my issue is this – because I really can’t punish you without also punishing my kid, and without punishing my partner who told my kid to go throw snowballs at the git.. at our guests.”

“I see.”

“If you’d stayed out of it.” Gabrielle continued. “I could have just told Alana I was shocked that she’d react so badly to a simple kids prank.”

“I see.”

“But then I really couldn’t punish Dori for that because the first thing out of her mouth would be that Xena told her to do it and so… either way, I’m kinda screwed. Know what I mean? Because I really can’t discipline Xena in front of them.”

“Yes, I do see.” Cait murmured.

“And anyway, as soon as they started hitting kids… “ Gabrielle stopped speaking, looking off into the distance for a long moment. “You shouldn’t do that. No matter how much snow they’re dumping on you.” She concluded quietly.

“No, that’s true.” Cait said, in a small voice. “I am sorry. I really mucked things up for you.”

Gabrielle sighed. “Well, fortunately no one really got hurt.” She said. “Just a few bumps and bruises, and everyone was lucky it was all over before I got up here.” She leaned forward a little. “But Cait, please do me a favor and think about what you’re doing next time? You have a responsible position here now.”

“I will.” Cait said. “I feel quite silly, and horrible now.”

“Yeah, I remember what that feels like.” The queen mused. “Go on and get cleaned up for supper, Cait. I’ll figure out some way to sort through this.”

Cait stood up and left quietly, closing the door behind her and leaving Gabrielle in solitary silence in the hall, just the sound of the fireplace gently popping nearby.

She lay down flat on her back after a moment, folding her hands on her stomach and regarding the ceiling as she thought.

Moments later, the door swung open, and then closed, and familiar boot steps approached her. She waited until the soft rasp and scrape was at her side, then looked over as Xena took a seat next to her, extending her long legs out and crossing them at the ankles. “You put me in a ratty place, hon.”

“Yeah.” Xena agreed mournfully. “Wasn’t really intentional.”

Gabrielle studied the angular profile. “You mean you didn’t tell Dori to plaster the bathing hut with ice?”

“No, I did.” The warrior said. “I just didn’t mean for her to do it right then.”

“Ah. Really?”

“Really.” Xena said. “I’m not really an idiot.”

“I never said you were.” Gabrielle retorted. “But those women were kinda jerky so I could see you telling little miss thing to go chuck ice at them.”

“Too political.” Her partner disagreed. “Wouldn’t have been too bad if..”

“If Cait had stayed out of it.”

“Mm.”

Gabrielle exhaled. “I guess I could tell them it was just a joke gone wrong.” She heard the platform surface creak slightly as Xena shifted next to her. “Honey, please don’t egg Dori on like that. She’s enough of a handful as it is.”

“She likes playing pranks.”

Gabrielle poked her partner in the leg. “I know she does. But I think people think they have to put up with her doing them because she’s our kid. I don’t think that’s great for her or us in the long term.”

“Mm.”

“I don’t want her growing up to be such a brat.”

“Are you inferring that I am?” Xena asked.

Gabrielle could hear the faint edge in her partner’s tone and she studied her in silence for a moment. “Well, you can be.” She finally said, in a mild tone. “Dori does take after you, my love. You’re her role model.”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh, Xe, c’mon.” Gabrielle sat up and half turned, putting her hand on her partner’s knee. “You know she hangs on your every word.” She paused, seeing the shift in Xena’s jawline. “On second thought, though, maybe she got that from me.”

“Hah.” Xena exhaled, but relaxed, leaning back on her hands. “I’ll talk to her.” She said. “Maybe she’s old enough for that ‘time and place’ discussion.” She eyed her partner. “Though now I think about it…”

“Shut up.” Gabrielle advised. “So where is our little girl?”

“In the hut.” Xena’s jaw motion indicated the slight rise that held their quarters here in the Amazon village. “Playing with one of the mutts.” She got up and extended a hand, pulling Gabrielle up standing when she took it.

They kept their hands clasped as they walked across the hall and out the door, both of them tugging their hoods up as the snow drifted down over them. Dark was already falling around them and there were torches lit on the outside of the dining hall, protected from the snow by the stout overhang.

Their boots crunched lightly on the snow-covered ground and the scent of the firepits wafted into the air. “They’re getting better.” Xena commented. “Glad those lessons are taking hold.”

“Me too.” Gabrielle said. “Since we’re spending time down here at least things are edible. I think that one junior Evalee is going to be a good cook.”

They turned up the path and climbed the slight rise up to where the queen and regent’s quarters were, and as they cleared the trees they heard angry voices. “Now what?” Gabrielle let out a slight grunt. “Here I thought things were chilling out.”

The voices were coming from Ephiny’s quarters and without further discussion they hastened up to the doorway, Gabrielle reaching out to lightly knock on it. “Eph?”

The door yanked inwards and the next thing Gabrielle knew a blade was headed right at her face and she sucked in a shocked breath as she started to react to it, ducking to one side to let the sword come past her and clearing the way for Xena’s blur of reaction.

Ephiny let out a yell from inside, then a solid crack sounded, and the clatter of metal hitting the stone verge of the regent’s quarters and then a body was being yanked backwards out of the hut to be tossed onto the snow covered path.

Gabrielle ducked inside the hut, to find her friend and regent heading for the door with a sword in her hand. “Whoa whoa.. Xe’s got it.” She held up her hands. “Whoa.. what the Hades is going on?”

“Stupid bitch.” Ephiny snarled. “Xena!” She let out a bellow. “Pull her tits off!”

Outside, Xena heard the request, but she had one hand on her own sword, watching the shadowy figure on the ground. “Do yourself a favor, and don’t do anything else stupid.”

The leather swathed woman paused, then lunged for her sword, and grabbed it, coming up onto her feet and going for the tall form watching her. “Favor me this.”

Xena drew her sword and met the charge, deflecting the woman’s jab and releasing the catch at her throat of her cloak, which then floated free behind her. She moved her blade from her right hand to her left, and caught a down stroke coming at her, moving to one side and letting the force of the attack come past. “Everything okay in there, Gabrielle?”

“Yeah, fine!” Gabrielle called back. “There?”

“Just getting some exercise.” Xena sidestepped again and let the Amazon come past her. “Keep your head inside, mkay?”

“Got it.”

Boot steps rang out heading in their direction. “Stand clear!” Xena let out a louder yell. She worked the Amazon in a circle, keeping her blade in a defensive posture as the woman worked hard to get through her guard.

She was pissed. Xena could clearly see her face in the gloom, lips writhed into a snarl as she swung again and again. It was Alana’s second, she noted, the tightly curled blonde with a powerfully muscular build and fierce temperament.

She was also a decent swordswoman, but Xena reckoned it was time to end the fun before half the tribe came barreling up the path and someone got hurt. She took a step in and went on the offensive, disarming the woman in two fast moves and sending the weapon to clatter against the door to the hut. “Grab that, hon.”

The door swung open at once and Gabrielle grabbed for the sword just before it’s owner lunged for it, her hand smashing against the door as it slammed shut again.

Xena sheathed her own sword and opened her hands to grab the woman’s wrists as she came at her with a knife in either mitt, clamping down hard and feeling the bones under her fingers twist as the Amazon came to an involuntary halt.

The knives dropped to the ground and Xena pushed back as the woman tried to kick her, nape hairs prickling as her senses picked up danger coming up behind her. She dropped to one knee out of pure instinct and felt the brief sting of an arrow coming past, releasing one hand off her opponent just in time to grab it.

Its tip quivered just in front of her opponent’s face, the light from the torch outside Ephiny’s quarters casting enough light over her shoulder for her to clearly see it.

Xena released her other hand, then curled her fist around the bolt and slugged the Amazon full in the face, before she turned and came out of her crouch in an explosive motion that carried her up and over Alana’s head as she shot past her, just in time for the door to open yet again and reveal two pissed off looking women with a sword and a stick coming at her.

Tumbling in mid air, Xena got herself back on the ground and headed toward them, grabbing Alana by the back of her cloak and yanking her backwards out of the reach of Gabrielle’s staff. “Do yourself a favor.” She picked up Alana and tossed her against the nearest tree, stunning her. “Just stop before someone really gets hurt.”

Figures came out of the gloom into the torchlight, warriors of Gabrielle's tribe with swords drawn and crossbows cocked. Pony knelt by the side of the Xena's original opponent, already pulling out long gut lines from her belt. "Thanks, Champ." She looked briefly up at Xena.

Cait had appeared at Alana's side, and was standing there with her dagger out, just watching the woman in silence.

"So much for your hospitality that's twice in one night we were attacked. "Alana said.

"Sorry no." Ephiny spoke up. "I can't speak for the snowball fight but your wench there came in to my quarters and picked a fight with me. Not the other way around." She sheathed her sword and put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "My queen heard her yelling in here and came to find out what the problem was."

Xena was twirling the arrow in her fingers. "Not to mention you almost spitted her. You should be more careful where you point that thing" She indicated the bow on the ground that Alana had dropped when she'd hit her.

"I shot it at you." Alana said. "And would have been glad if it hit its mark. You were attacking my sister." She was breathing hard, still. "Tell me you would have done any different." She addressed Gabrielle. "Or do you rely on others to protect you?"

Gabrielle curled her hand around the practice staff she'd taken from the corner of Ephiny's quarters and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Cait, would you and Pony please take these mor…people back to their assigned quarters and escort them inside."

Both women eyed her.

"And then post a guard around the building. Tomorrow morning, please take them to the gates of Amphipolis and give them their horses." She looked at Alana. "Get out of my sight, and thank the gods that arrow didn't touch her."

Gabrielle's voice dropped almost to a rasp on the last sentence, and the torchlight showed a grip so tight on her staff the tendons on the back of her hand were standing out in stark relief.

"We'll see what the gods have to say about it." Alana said, after a long moment. She stalked off, ignoring Cait and the other two Amazons who ringed her, while Eponin and three more hoisted her second in command to her feet and dragged her off behind them.

Xena idly threw the arrow into the ground, watching it quiver as it stuck there. She then went over and picked her cloak up, swinging it back around her shoulders. "Gonna be one of those nights I think."

"Ugh." Gabrielle straightened up and flexed her fingers. "Want to fill us in on what that was all about?"

"Sure." Ephiny agreed. "How about we have dinner over it at your place. It's a little bigger, and I'll need to call two witnesses."

"Fine by me." Gabrielle half turned. "Aalene.."

"We'll get a tableful set up there, your majesty." The young Amazon said immediately, motioning to Dosi who followed her back off towards the dining hall.

"Let's go." Xena said, motioning up the side path to their quarters. "Before our kid shows up with more ice."

"Ugh."

**

Xena poured them all hot tea, then went back to her seat near the fireplace and dropped back into it, swirling the herbs around in her own cup before sipping from it. They were gathered around the low table in the queen's quarters, where the remains of a platter were resting.

Eponin and Ephiny were seated on the long couch facing the fire, and Gabrielle was slouched in the chair that matched the one Xena was in on the other side of the hearth. Past them back in the sleeping room Dori was tucked in her little bed, one of the half dog half wolf dogs curled up on the bear rug next to her.

"So, here's the deal. ." Ephiny said. "Dosi and Elanna brought the woman over here, and I told them to stick around because I wasn't sure what this chick's problem was."

"She was pretty good with a blade. Right choice." Xena said. "What was her story?"

"That gets a little complicated." Ephiny took a sip of tea and swallowed before she went on. "Seems that she and Alana were rivals for the right."

"Hah. I figured something like that." Pony said. "They had that look."

Gabrielle briefly wondered what look that might be but refrained from asking. "So no one had been named outright?"

Ephiny shook her head. "No, there was a right holder, but she went down with the ship – matter of fact, I remember her. Weedy little thing – queen's eldest daughter. Had the same pissass attitude." She leaned back on the couch. "So Darela – that's this one's name – said she was the queen's nearest blood relative, but after the word came back of the shipwreck that Alana claimed the right because she was the right holder's partner."

Gabrielle shifted, and hiked one knee up, resting her hand on it. "Correct me if I'm wrong here, but neither claim is really a legit one, is it? The right doesn't pass automatically to either blood or.. ah… "

"Or bed. No that's right as you have reason to know better than most." Ephiny said dryly. "Which is what I told her. In that situation, it should have been an all hands vote."

"If either of them had enough backing to have a vote." Xena interjected. "Or any of them weren't good enough to stand against all comers."

"Right." Ephiny nodded. "Anyway she said there weren't enough of them – or – they said there weren't enough of them to throw the right open, and I guess Alana got enough crones to agree that she should have it."

"So what does that have anything to do with you?" Pony asked, after a moment of silence.

Ephiny lifted her mug and then lowered it. "Darela is apparently something of the brains of that group. She knows the law." She said. "She knows they actually do have a blood claim on me – though we rejected it. I did gut the woman, and not in battle."

"You had the right to." Xena said.

"That's what I said." Pony added, firmly.

"She said she'd be willing to cut a deal with me if I helped her get the right. She'd release the blood claim." Ephiny concluded. "I had sent Dosi and Eleanna out to get some chow, since she seemed quiet enough and she wanted to talk in private. "

"Eph."

"Yeah, I know. I'm preggers crazy." The regent gave her partner an amused look. "I told her she was wasting her time and since I'm an Amazon I also told her if she had to come crawling to me to help her out she didn't deserve the right anyhow."

"Hence the raised voices." Gabrielle guessed.

"Exactly. She started yelling, and the next thing I know you were knocking at the door." Ephiny said. "I guess she recognized your voice because before I could do anything she was heading for the door with her sword out - I guess she wanted to try earning her right the old fashioned way."

Gabrielle frowned. "What?"

“Killing another tribe’s queen.” Eponin provided. “That doesn’t get you’re the other tribe’s right – but it gets you bumped in yours.”

Gabrielle covered her eyes. “So she was going to try and kill me to help her convince them she should take Alana’s right? Why not just challenge her?”

“Ah, now we get back into that law about challenging while the tribe is in mortal danger.” Ephiny tilted her mug in Gabrielle’s direction. “Given their losses, it qualifies.”

Xena snorted and shook her head.

“Hey it makes sense, you know?” Pony said. “Like, okay, the whole thing is a mess but what she did, I get that.”

Gabrielle nodded. “But what did she want you to do to help her, Eph?”

“Ah. Now it gets a little interesting. Apparently there were two factions in that tribe, the one that loves Athens, and the one that doesn’t.”

“Ah.” Xena leaned forward and picked up a lonely looking apple on the platter, it’s skin a bit wrinkled from storage. She bit into it and chewed thoughtfully. ‘So this one’s in the other camp, and doesn’t want to go begging to Athens for coin.”

“Something like that, yah.” The regent agreed. “I didn’t get specifics on her plan because that’s when she started yelling and anyway, I told her there was no way in Hades I’d help her do anything.”

‘”This sounds all nice and logical except surely she didn’t think if she actually did kill me that she was just going to go off with them to settle that whole right question?” Gabrielle asked. “I got the sense from the look on her face when she came out that door that she didn’t have any idea that I wasn’t alone out there.”

“I don’t think she was thinking that far ahead.” Ephiny mused.

“I don’t think she’s clued into us too much.” Pony said, after a pause. “I think for sure we should kick them off down the road tomorrow. Aint’ nothing but trouble there.”

Xena gave her a thumbs up, as she nibbled the core of her apple.

“Well, I think we’re all in agreement there.” Gabrielle said. “So lets go over to the hall, and I’ll say something vague about pranks then tell a few stories. We can get back on track tomorrow.”

“Mama.” Dori came out of the sleeping room, holding Bittyboo in one arm, and rubbing her eyes. “I’m thirsty.”

“Well, aren’t you lucky we’ve got some apple cider here.” Gabrielle held her arms out. “C’mere and you can have some.”

Dori obligingly climbed up into her lap and kicked her feet out a little, looking at the rest of them. “Eff!”

“Hey there, cutie.” Ephiny smiled and wiggled her fingers at her. “Did you have a fun day?”

Xena had poured a cupful of cider into one of Dori’s smaller cups and handed it to her. “She had a great day. You caused all sorts of trouble, dincha?”

“Pipple got mad, Boo.” Dori said. “Cat got mad.”

“Yeah.” Xena perched on the arm of Gabrielle’s chair and ruffled her daughter’s hair. “You and I got into trouble, huh? Maybe next time ask me twice if it’s okay to do fun pranks.”

“Boo, it was funny.”

“I know, but we really should only do that kind of stuff to our friends, to people we really like and know. “ Xena said, in a serious tone, as Dori looked up at her. “People we love. Not strangers.”

Dori drank her cider and then put the cup down. “Okay, Boo.” She agreed . “I can do sooballs to you and mama?”

Gabrielle winced out of the child’s view and covered her eyes.

“Sure.” Xena said. “I’ll tell you some stories about your mama putting ice in my furs sometimes okay?”

“Xe..”

“Well, you did.” The warrior chuckled. She got up. “C’mon kiddo. Back to bed.” She picked Dori up off Gabrielle’s lap and carried her back into the sleeping room.

“Ahh.” The queen leaned back in her chair. “My troublemaking little family.”

Ephiny chuckled. “You love every minute of it.”

“I do.” Gabrielle freely admitted. “I wish I’d gotten to see the snowballs fly in fact.” She pushed herself to her feet and went over to the wall pegs to remove and don her cloak. “Anyway.”

Ephiny and Pony got up and joined her, getting themselves all settled into their outerwear as Xena emerged from the sleeping room, pulling down the sleeves of her woolen shirt as she also retrieved her cloak.

“She actually going back to bed? Should we take her to the hall with us, Xe?” Gabrielle asked, as her partner joined them. “I don’t really want her wandering out tonight.”

Xena reached over and straightened out her cloak hood. “Only if you promise me no damn cow story.” She said. “You go ahead, and I’ll see if she gets up and bring her over if she does.”

Gabrielle gave her a quick hug, then she and the other two Amazons left as Xena put her cloak back on it’s peg. She retrieved a mug and poured herself some more tea, then settled back in the chair next to the fire with a sigh of contentment.

Outside she could hear the tribe gathering, the soft hum of voices penetrating the well caulked wood and stone walls. She took a sip of her tea and swirled the liquid in her cup a little, enjoying the warmth of the fire at her side.

Still pleasant, even though the cold weather no longer made her joints ache. Even after the long, active day she felt rested and almost bouncy, though she really had no idea how long that would last. A year or a day though, she fully intended to enjoy it and now her ears cocked, hearing faint stirrings from her daughter’s room. “Dooooriiii?” She rumbled softly.

After a moment, she heard a tiny giggle, and when she peeked over her shoulder, Dori was tucked behind the doorframe, peeking back at her. ‘Why aren’t you sleeping?” Xena asked, in a mock stern voice.

“Booooo!” Dori came pattering out, this time with a stuffed cow under her arm. It had button eyes and a red felt tongue, newly y made for her after her old cow Oogy mysteriously disappeared one day. “Don’t wanna sleep.”

“No? How come?” Xena put her cup down as Dori climbed into her lap. ‘You have to sleep, Dor. If you want to play all day you need your rest.”

Dori looked at her like she was nuts. “Go go go.” She pounded Xena in the chest with her toy. “Let’s go fly Boo!”

Xena put her arms around her. “Not tonight, kiddo. It’s all icy out there. I ain’t gonna take a header with you on my shoulders and get us both owie. We can fly in the morning.”

Dori poked her lower lip out, and after a moment, Xena did the same thing back to her. Then they both laughed as Xena bounced her on her knee. “Dori Dori.”

“Boo boo!”

“You want to go listen to your mama tell a story?” Xena asked. “You have to be a good girl, and not distract her, okay?”

“Yes!” Dori’s eyes lit up. “Go see mama!”

“Okay.” Xena got up, cradling Dori in one arm as she went to the wall and got her cloak down again, swinging it one handed over her shoulders and around her daughter at the same time. “Hold on to me, Dor.”

Dori obediently put her head down on her shoulder and put one arm around her neck. “Love you, Boo.”

Aww. Xena smiled. “Love you too, little one.” She told her. “Here, put your head under here.” She got her cloak tucked around Dori’s head, and then she tucked the stuffed cow next to her. “Hold onto that, we don’t want him to get lost.”

“Bad cow.” Dori agreed. “Buppit! Buppit! C’mere!”

The half dog half wolf came trotting out of the sleeping area, tongue lolling. “Arf.” He sat down at Xena’s boots and looked up at her, one ear flopping down, the other standing up.

“C’mon, mutt.” She opened the door and the little expedition went out into the cold night air.

**

Gabrielle was seated on the raised platform, with Cait and Pony bracketing her. A small group of her Amazons were loitering nearby, chatting casually with her, while the majority of the tribe were slowly filing in from the dining hall.

In the back corner, Alana and her gang were seated, notably free of weapons. Nala was seated nearby to them, notably not free of same.

Ephiny had gone off to bed, but in an excess of caution there were four sturdy Amazons standing guard around her quarters, and in the thick fringe of trees around the small rise that and Gabrielle’s hut sat on there were six more tucked back into the shadows.

Cat’s partner Paladia was across the room from them, just sitting at one of the tables, idly looking around. But every few minutes or so she’d let her eyes drift over to the visiting group.

“So anyway.” Renas was seated near the raised platform. “Looks like trading’s been good so far. Everyone’s looking for Solstice gifts, so our stuffs half gone.”

Her partner Das nodded. “Stacked up at the inn – heard some talking about them having a show down over the river.” She commented. “One of yours your majesty?”

“Just a dress rehearsal, but yeah. They’re doing a full blown one tomorrow night which I guess I’ll head down for.” Gabrielle smiled easily. “Xe says the weather’ll be better anyway by morning.”

“How does she know?” Das asked.

“Have no idea. She just always knows about the weather. Used to drive me nuts – we’d be walking along middle of the day when all of a sudden she’d just head for the nearest town, said we had to get out of the rain.” Gabrielle related. “I’d look up, perfectly blue skies and say, what the heck? But a candlemark later, sure enough, it’d be raining hard enough to drown a sheep.”

“Weather sense.” Renas said. “Some have it. My mother did.”

“Mine sure didn’t.” Das chuckled. “Rained every damned time she hung the laundry out .”

Gabrielle thought her own mother might have had a touch of that. At least, she always seemed to know when to come and get them when she and Lila were playing. “Yeah, Xena will tell you what the weather is going to be for days – glad it’s going to be nicer tomorrow for the market.”

The door opened at that moment and Xena entered, uncovering her and Dori's head. She brushed the snow off her shoulders and threaded her way through the crowd down the aisle to where Gabrielle was sitting. "See who's here, Dor?"

"Mama." Dori's dark hair was in wild disarray, much like Xena's was from the cloak. "Cow wanted to come here a story."

"Aw, did he?" The bard stood up and combed her fingers through first her daughters locks and then, with a grin and a stretch, her partners. "We ready for a story, kids?"

"Go mama!"

"Go mama." Gabrielle got up onto the platform and walked to the center of it, the table she usually presided at already pushed back against the windows. There was an oil lamp hanging overhead and two torches on the wall, and they made a reasonable puddle of light she quietly stepped into.

Now which story, she mused, would piss their visitors off more.

**

"Nice." Pony offered Gabrielle a cup of mulled wine as the bard waved off the round of applause and left the platform at last, thumping down in a seat and taking the cup. "Did you add another bit to that battle at the end?"

Gabrielle took a sip of the hot liquid, glad to feel it ease her throat as it went down. "No, I just usually don't leave that part in." She scanned the crowd casually. Pitchers of wine were being passed around, and most were sitting or standing in small groups, partaking of it.

Their guests were still in the back, looking dour. Gabrielle wasn't surprised at that since the story she'd just finished was about their triumph over Andreas, and it was full of both heroic bravery and cleverness on the part of not only herself an Xena, but many of the Amazons currently in the room.

The Amazons, her Amazons, loved that story. It had lots of fighting in it, and people they knew had been at part of the winning, with Ephiny and Eponin leading ambushes and all. Pony grinned every time she told it.

And of course, the hero of it all, seated quietly to her left with Dori curled up in her lap, still bright eyed even at the late hour. After a moment's rest, listening to the chatter around her, Gabrielle got up. "Be right back."

Xena caught her eye, one dark brow lifting. Gabrielle smiled back and made a hand signal, then she eased past her partner's chair and crossed the hall, heading for the table at the back. She waved off Cait as the young Amazon spotted her and came to a halt near the chair Nala was still parked in. "Hi there."

Nala got up and pulled a chair over for her. "Your majesty?"

"Thanks." Gabrielle took a seat and regarded the strangers. "Sorry you got caught in my kid's crossfire earlier." She stated, simply. "I've spoken to everyone involved."

Alana looked surprised, obviously not expecting that. "Your kid's?" She temporized.

Gabrielle turned and pointed at Dori. "My daughter Doriana. She was the ringleader."

The Amazons at the table looked at Dori, then at her, then back in Dori's direction. Then back at her. Gabrielle needed no real sharpness to figure out what they were thinking. "So hopefully we can just part ways without that hanging over us." She said. "Whatever our disagreements, we don't typically pummel guests with ice."

Darela was seated at the back of the table, as far away from Alana as she could get, and she kept her eyes down, refusing to meet Gabrielle's or anyone elses.

Alana visibly bit her tongue, then she shifted and put her hands on her knee. “Thank you.” She got out, from between gritted teeth. “I accept the apology. I am sorry my sisters reacted as they did, and struck out at the children that too, is not our way.”

Pleasantly surprised at the reaction, Gabrielle produced a smile. “Well then, good travel to you tomorrow. I hope your talks with Athens turn out to be fruitful.”

Alana managed a smile in response. “I’m sure they will be.”

Gabrielle raised her mug to them then got up and headed back towards her family, feeling a touch relieved that it all hadn’t ended up in a brawl. “Ready to head home?” She asked Xena, who had stood up at her approach.

They left the dining hall into a night grown clear and cold, the sky overhead no longer full of clouds. “Right as usual.” Gabrielle tucked her hand into the crook of Xena’s elbow. “How do you do that?”

“How do I do what?”

“Know about the weather?”

“Ah.” Xena drew in a long breath of cold air. “That I learned on the sea.” She led the way to their quarters and held the door open for Gabrielle to move past her. “It’s the change in the air, the clouds.. the smell sometimes.”

Gabrielle was glad to shut the door behind them and know it was to stay that way until the morning. She briefly wished they’d continued up the slope again, but at least it was quiet in here, with the shutters closed and the fire still gently popping.

She went over to the clothing press, detouring briefly to stack some wood into the fireplace. She could hear Xena putting Dori back to bed and the soft giggling made her smile. Nudging the hot water pot into position to warm she loosened the ties at her wrists and tugged her shirt loose from her leggings.

The heat from the fire felt good against her bare skin as she pulled the garment off, folding it and tucking it neatly into the clothing press behind her worktable. She loosened her upper wraps and set them down, then pulled a shift over her head before she sat down to get out of her leggings and boots.

Outside, she heard the soft crunch of footsteps, which stopped a few body lengths from the front door and settled, and she went curiously over to the window and opened the shutter a trifle to look out.

Just at the edge of the gentle rise her hut was on, she saw a slight, cloaked figure settling comfortably against the trunk of a tree, back to her.

“What’s up?” Xena’s hands settled on her shoulders, the touch warm through the fabric of her shirt. “Ah. Got ourselves a guard.”

“Cait.” The queen agreed. “Should I go tell her to stand down? She usually doesn’t make her presence known if you’re here.”

Xena leaned closer, peering over Gabrielle’s shoulder. “Penance, probably.” She said, after a long pause. “Leave her there.”

“Mm.”

“I’ve got a funny feeling about those plains Amazons.” Xena said. “Lets hope I’m just imagining things for a change.”

“That would be a first.” The queen dryly stated, closing the shutter. “Okay, but I hope she’s got warm enough stuff on. I don’t want you having to treat her for frostbite, hon.”

“She’ll be fine.” Xena reassured her, as they crossed back over to the fire. Now it was her turn to shed her leathers and she did, easing the hide overtunic off and draping it over one of the

chairs. Under it, she'd worn a simple shirt and she pulled it over her head and went to put it over near the press.

Gabrielle had set up their tea cups and now she peered over her shoulder, smiling as Xena wandered back over to the fire half clad. The ruddy light burnished her skin, and she could see the gentle motion of bone and muscle as she moved.

"See I was going to do this with the new armor." Xena spoke up, oblivious to the eyes on her. "Just shape the shoulder pieces up like this?" She glanced up and found her partner leaning against the mantle, arms crossed, watching her with a smile. "What?"

"Nothing." Gabrielle drizzled a bit of honey in the cup. "Is that to give you a little more protection near your neck when you have your arm up?"

"Uh huh." Xena settled a shift over her and unbuckled the belt that held on her leggings. "And I'm going to make a new set of knee protectors."

Gabrielle steered her over to the couch and handed her one of the cups. They sat down and put their feet up on the low table, leaning back and exhaling at the same time. "Y'know, Xe." Gabrielle wiggled her bare toes. "I don't think I much liked today."

"Can't always have good days." Her partner assented, stretching an arm out and laying it across Gabrielle's shoulders. "But I wasn't liking much of today either. I don't like that Hercules disappeared. Been thinking about that all day."

"What do you think really happened?"

"No doubt his family got involved again." Xena said. "That's what bugs me."

"Because they aren't really fair?"

Xena studied the fire for a while, sipping on her tea and blinking slowly. "Yeah, that." She mused. "Maybe something else. I'm not sure."

"Ugh."

"Hope we stay out of it this time." Xena said, after a moment. "Had enough of them to last me a good long while."

Gabrielle leaned against her. "You can say that again."

**

The next morning was, as promised, bright and sunny if bone chillingly cold. Xena tugged on her fur-lined gloves and clenched her fists lightly to settle them before she slipped out the door to their quarters and shut it hastily behind her.

Cait slipped from behind a tree and approached her at once. "Good morning."

"Morning." Xena shook herself to settle her armor. "Our guests gone?"

"Yes." Cait said. "Nala and Solari took them at first light to the gates. Bennu and Marc went with them."

"Nice." Xena said. "I'm going down the hill to talk to Iolaus. Gabrielle's going to come down later to the market."

"Right." Cait took up a stand near the front of the hut. "Pally's on her way down there now with all her new pictures. They're quite nice."

"She's got the talent." Xena smiled.

"She does. What a shock that was." Cait smiled back. " You never can tell, can you?"

“True.” Xena patted her on the shoulder and started down the path through the Amazon village. Though early, there was a good deal of activity and she had to dodge a few fur swathed figures carrying bundles heading in the same direction she was.

It was odd, really, to be moving around as a part of the village and actually be a part of it. Xena considered that as she rambled down the path among the group. No one looked twice at her, except to wave a greeting and the difference from years past was suddenly obvious to her.

Shocking a little. She remembered being guided into the mountain village at spearpoint and facing angry stares everywhere she went in the tribe and now?

“Morning, Xena.” Aalene fell into step next to her. “Nice gloves.”

Xena smiled. She held her hand out and turned it palm upmost. “Gabrielle made em.” She supplied. “See the little quill pattern?”

Aalene chuckled. “Must have taken her forever.” She commiserated. “I did some cuffs with stitch work like that when I was pregnant. Made me glad I gave birth and had to give it up.”

They reached the bottom of the trail and found the back gates already open. Xena lifted her hand to return the greetings from her soldiers, and paused when she saw Bennu loping her way obviously intent on intercepting her.

“G’enr’l” The soldier came to a halt then turned and walked at her side. “Got them lot out early.”

“I heard. Good job.”

“Yeah, bitches.” Bennu agreed. “Saw a mounted party coming in from Thrace, about two candlemarks out. Watch sent word.”

“How big?”

“Dozen maybe. Armed, w’a banner.” Bennu said. “One of them you sent to, mebbe?”

“Maybe.” Xena’s interest was pricked. “If they’re riding under a banner. “

“Aye.” Her captain agreed. “Sent a squad down to the market, just be around.” He shaded his eyes from the sun and looked out towards the front of the town. “Had a handful more recruits come off that merch train.”

“Really.” Xena shifted her path a little, heading now to the front gates and bypassing the inn. “Useful, or just looking for a winter home?”

“Three of em ex Athens conscripts.” Bennu said, briefly. “Been in a few skirmishes, youngers. T’other two old timers, but still got some life in em.”

“Old timers?” Xena gave him a sideways look. “Anyone I might know?”

“Mercs.” Bennu responded, oblivious of the irony in her voice. “Both of em knew your name for sure, but they were respectful.”

“Proves they’re not complete idiots.” His commander smiled briefly, as they passed the front gates and headed down to the river. The sun was now up and the banks were bathed in light, reflecting off the water and causing a faint mist to rise from it.

Already, she could hear music drifting up from the market, a sitar and a flute’s notes floating quietly to her ears along with the scent of cook fires and the earthy smell from the stables. Along with some Amazons, many townsfolk were also approaching the bridge, and groups of her soldiers idly joining them.

The town’s children were on the slope, where there was enough angle to get a good slide going and they were taking turns riding an old shield down, with yells of delight. Xena had a sudden memory surface. “Y’know I used to do that.” She pointed. “Pretty much right at that spot too.”

Bennu regarded the children then eyed her. “Aye?”

“Uh huh.” Xena felt the surface flex slightly as her boots touched the bridge and her boots echoed softly as she crossed it. “I bet Dori’ll be out there soon as she sees that.”

“No doubt.” Bennu grunted, as he followed her. “Spunky little thing.”

They crossed the river and headed into the big market square, which was bustling and alive with motion. Several of the stalls were set up near the cookfires and they were doing a brisk business with morning cider and rolls.

Xena detoured over to them, stretching herself to her full height to peer down river, seeing moving figures heading their way. “Busy.”

“Pass said got two score maybe coming.” Bennu said. “Two or three from Potadeia, mid watch said.”

Xena pulled a coin out for her cider and was handing it over as hoofbeats thrummed out and she looked upriver to see a man in her colors heading at a canter into the enclosure. “Ah.”

Bennu put his fingers between his teeth and let out a sharp whistle, and the man lifted up in his stirrups to look around. He spotted Bennu and turned his horses head that way, slowing his pace to a trot as he threaded the animal around the wagons.

One of the watch just outside the turnoff to valley that Jessan’s tribe now lived in. Xena pushed her hood back off her head as the man arrived and when he slid down off his horse he casually saluted her, one hand to his chest.

“Morning, genr’l.” The man said. “Sent word before me, but we’ve got some armored types coming in. A score of em, mounted, with a green flag, white circle w’a black sword cross it flying.”

Hm. “That one’s new to me.” Xena mused. “They look like trouble?”

The watchman lifted both hands a little and let them fall, then accepted the mug of morning ale from Bennu. “Thanks.” He took a long swallow. “No fancy types, but all solid looking. Maybe trouble, maybe just visitin, coming back from them scrolls you sent out.”

Xena was hoping that was the case. The fact that they’d sent back a score of soldiers meant either someone wanted to make a deal, or someone wanted to see if they could take her out as an upstart. Would be interesting to see which one it was.

The market was starting to fill up. Xena drew Bennu and the watch aside and out of the way, as visitors who’d been staying up in the town arrived to do some shopping. “Nice turnout.” The watch commented.

“And more coming in.” Bennu indicated the outer corral, which was filling with animals. The snow had been beaten off most of the market area, and the river stones that lined the paths glistened in the runoff from it.

A group of men were entering the square, with thick, fur cloaks on and heavy hide boots. They wore only belt knives and one had a bow slung over his back, but to Xena’s sharp eyes there was something not quite upfront about them.

She watched them from her peripheral vision, listening to the casual conversation about the weather Bennu and the watch were having. “When do you think they’ll get here?” She asked.

“Bout a candlemark if they don’t stop for nothing.” The watch promptly supplied. “M’gonna go stable my horse, genr’l, and get my replacement sent out there.”

“Thanks, Marius.” Xena said. “Get some rest.”

The watchman smiled in acknowledgement. “Going to spend a little coin first.” He winked at his leader. “Got Solstice coming.”

Xena grinned in response, then with apparent casualness drifted over to a traveling jeweler and began browsing his wares. Bennu ambled along beside her, looking with interest at the baubles himself. “Left hand side, over near the ironsmith.” Xena said, quietly.

“Four men, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Xena picked up a finely hammered wristlet, turning it over in her fingers. “Find out who they are.”

“Aye.” Bennu remained at her side for a few minutes more, then he wandered off as though losing interest, moving to the saddle maker who had set up shop next door.

“It’s good work, lady.” The jeweler said, after a moment. “Can make some special for you, if you want.” He picked up another piece and brought it over to her. “Lot of the folks from here want this, from the banner I guess.” He indicated the yellow and black standard floating over the military barracks.

Xena put the cuff down and took the cloak clasp, done in bronze and iron with the distinctively shape of a hawk’s head in the center. “Ah.”

“Didn’t mean it for here.” The man said, almost absently. “I just like birds, and I saw a bunch of these big ones in the mountains before I came out.”

“It’s nice.” Xena agreed. “I’m sure half the army’ll want them. But I don’t think wearing my own standard’s a good idea.”

The man paused and looked at her. “You’re Xena, then?”

“I am.” Xena watched from the corner of her eye as Bennu casually engaged the group she’d spotted in conversation, his body language relaxed and after a moment, theirs was too. “But Solstice is coming, as everyone is telling me so show me what ya got.”

The jeweler smiled. “Surely.”

**

“Hold still, Dori.” Gabrielle waited for her daughter to stop bouncing long enough to get her little boots on. “If you want to go play, you need to let mama get you dressed.”

“Too slow!” Dori complained. “Too much stuff mama!”

“I know, I know.” Gabrielle got the boots laced. “It’s a lot easier in the summer when we don’t wear much, huh?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, lets go.” Gabrielle swung her own cloak over her shoulders and got it fastened, glad of the warm clothing underneath as she opened the door to the cold morning air. “Brr!”

Dori bounded out, unconcerned about the chill. She hopped down the path as her mother followed more conventionally, one hand clasped around the staff she’d taken from the outside nook in front of their hut.

At her belt she wore Xena’s old dagger, half hidden in the folds of her woolen over shirt, but what she lacked in weapons was more than made up for by the escort that joined her near the meeting hall. “Good morning.” She greeted them.

“Morning, your maj.” Solari was just seating her sword, and then she fell into step next to her as they started off.

“Everyone else already down there?” Gabrielle asked, as they descended through the soft rattle of drying, dead leaves in the trees. “Dori, don’t go to fast, honey. It’s slippery.”

“Mama!” Dori pointed. “Dere’s a buppit!”

“That’s fine, you stay here near me and let the buppit come to you.” Gabrielle took a precautionary hold on the back of the child’s cloak. “I don’t want you falling down the mountain.”

The Amazons around her chuckled. “Everyone’s down.” Nala said. “And glad to see the last of that bunch from Athens. Wouldn’t even deign to drop a dinar in the market, just rode off in a cloud of farts and attitude. “

“They say anything?” Gabrielle lifted her hand to wave at the gate guards, who were swinging them open.

“No, I was kinda surprised. I was expecting trash talk.” Solari said. “Just took the horses and took off. They did fill their skins at the water trough, but that was it.”

“Figured they’d cut their losses.” Nala suggested. “Or maybe they just wanted to get out of town before Dori woke up.”

Even Gabrielle chuckled wryly at that one. “Hey Dor, there are your cousins.” She pointed to the porch of Toris’ cabin, where the twins were just emerging. “Hey guys!”

The boys immediately ran their way, with Granella in somewhat late pursuit. “Auntie Gabrielle!” Little Solon yodeled. “We’re going slide!”

They all paused at the crosssroads as Granella jogged over. “What?” Gabrielle asked her, over the clamoring of all three kids.

“They’re sliding down the slope to the river, on a board.” Her sister in law explained. “Can’t you hear the squeals?”

And in fact, now that they’d been pointed out, she could. “Okay, Dor, you go and have fun, but be careful.” She watched all three pelt off towards the front gates. “Okay, now that we can hear ourselves think…”

As they strolled by the inn, the back door of it opened and Iolaus slipped out, spotting them and hastening over to join the group. “Good morning, ladies.”

Now shaven and in new, warm clothes Iolaus looked more like his usual self. “Morning.” Gabrielle smiled at him. “Feel better today?”

He smiled back, and half shrugged. “Life is what it is. You all heading down to the party?” He deferred the question. “Sounds like a lot of fun down there and at least the weather’ s cleared a little.”

“Yes, we are. Come with us.” Gabrielle offered.

“It’d be an honor.” Iolaus half bowed and fell in at her side as they continued towards the river. “I heard people talking about Athens in the inn at breakfast. Seems like they’re not doing so well?”

“That’s what we’re hearing from the soldiers who are joining Xe’s army, and from the merchants in the train.” Gabrielle confirmed. “They’re heading here, and also into lower Thrace, because there’s not much extra coin to be had in the city.”

“Herc was pretty sure some of that was because of his sisters.” Iolaus lowered his voice. “With them being mortal, I mean.”

“Oh, huh.” Gabrielle mused. “Like what happened when Ares was?”

Iolaus nodded.

“That’s an interesting idea.” Gabrielle glanced across the long slope as they walked. “Oh!” She stopped. “What in the heck are they doing?”

“Sliding.” Solari said. “They start up at the top of the slope there, and end up near the river.” She pointed. “They put hay bales down there to keep the kids from zooming off into the water.”

The bard put her hands on her hips as she watched the action. Two of the older boys had just pulled their sled, which appeared to be an old, round shield, up to the top of the slope and they were holding it as two of the youngers climbed on it, holding on as they were given a good shove off down the hill.

The squeals reached her ears, and she could see how excited the kids were, including hers. Dori and her cousins were up at the front of the group, waiting for their turn to take a ride down.

“Looks like fun.” Aalene commented. “Maybe when the kids are all done we should take a turn.”

Reassured, Gabrielle chuckled and motioned them down the slope. She could hear snatches of music floating up and she increased her pace a little, pausing near the bridge and looking back over her shoulder as she heard Dori's distinctive squeal.

"Look at those kids." Iolaus chuckled softly. "I used to do that when I was a babe."

"Wasn't' any place flat enough in Potadeia." Gabrielle led them over the bridge and down into the market square. "And anyway, us kids were already milking the sheep and cleaning their bedding by that age."

"Goodness yes. I was hunting by then." Cait agreed. "It does look like fun though."

"It does." Gabrielle's eyes twinkled a little "Maybe I can talk Xe into taking a ride with me later."

Throats were cleared all around.

"Oh people, c'mon." The queen mock sighed.

It was crowded. They had to pause as they cleared the retaining wall as a crush of people moved past, in good spirits and chattering. Gabrielle turned her head and looked around, seeing shoppers three deep at most stalls, and a stream of strangers coming in by the lower gates. "Nice."

There were soldiers around, she also noticed, strolling casually between the rows of merchants, standing quietly in the corners sipping ale, or engaged in conversation. All of them bore weapons and were in their leather and chain mail armor, with their hide overtunics with Xena's hawk head on them.

Casual, but obvious. As was the fact that two of them just as casually attached themselves to her little party as they started to browse, striking up conversations with Solari and Cait as though it was the most normal thing in the world for her to be trailing along eight people armed to the teeth around.

Gabrielle almost started laughing. Eight people, or one Xena. She sensed the presence of her soulmate nearby and paused at one of the jewelers booths, studying some cloak catches as that feeling got stronger and stronger, until a stream of warm air blew in her ear and the tall figure was at her side. "Hey hon."

"Got some visitors I don't like the look over near the bar." Xena's voice uttered quietly. "And a group from your hometown just came in the gates."

Gabrielle lifted up the catch and turned, holding it up against Xena's collarbone. "Thanks." She looked up into her partner's eyes and almost poked her with the clasp pin as she lost track of her motion for a moment. "Oops. Sorry. This would look pretty on you."

It was a silver filigree, with a running horse chasing across it in gold with a silver mane that reminded her of Argo and Iolaus. "Don't you guys think so?" Gabrielle caught the impish grin on Xena's face and turned to see the jeweler also grinning. "What's so funny?"

"You were right, Xena." The man said. "She picked it out right off."

Bennu had drifted over, and was now looking over Gabrielle's shoulder at the pin. "Nice for ya Genr'l." He commented. "Them fellers near the side there, says they're just passin through, saw the market and came up."

"I see." Xena glanced down at her chest. "I like it."

"Got coin from Thrace though." Bennu concluded.

"Me too." Gabrielle put the piece back down on the hide covering the man's table, then pulled out her coin bag from it's place on her belt. "Let's get down to business." She said, taking the opportunity to glance at the gates at the group Xena had just spotted entering. "Ah, there are some folks I know."

"Keep an eye on the wanderers." Xena told Bennu. "Maybe they're just here to shop, but they make my shoulder blades itch."

“Aye.” Bennu moved off, just as the newcomers spotted Xena’s tall , distinctive form and started in their direction.

The Amazons around Gabrielle dispersed a little, going over to nearby merchants and in Solari’s case, over to the tea seller. Xena leaned casually against the jewelry stall, listening to Gabrielle bargain for her Solstice gift, lifting a hand in greeting to Tectdus as he neared.

The Potadeian smith returned the greeting. “Xena, it’s good to see you.”

Gabrielle turned at the voice and pushed her hood back. “Tectdus! What a surprise!”

“Ah! Gabrielle. Didn’t recognize you in that cloak.” The smith smiled and offered a hand. “It’s good to see you!”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle returned the greeting wholeheartedly. “You’re not used to seeing me with this much clothing on, right?” She chuckled as he blushed a little. “Hang on a minute and we’ll share a cup – I’m getting Xe’s birthday present.”

Xena sighed.

The jeweler eyed her. “Said it was Solstice.” He commented.

“Same day.” Gabrielle said. “Now, where were we?”

Tectdus chuckled. “Surely.” He indicated the group with him, who were watching in mild bemusement. “We followed the train in. Stopped by us a few days back. We’ve got a wagon and were hoping to get a stall to sell a bit ourselves. Just some basics.”

“Absolutely.” Xena said, looking around at the stalls. “I think we’ve got a place left. There.” She pointed towards a table that as yet had nothing on it. “That do ya?”

The smith grinned “Perfect.” He turned to the group with him. “See? I told you.” He said. “We have friends here.”

The other men looked relieved, not unrealistically unsure of their reception giving the mixed history both Xena and Gabrielle had with Potadeia. “Thanks Xena.” One of them said, a shepherd Xena remembered from times past. “Got some decent wool this year, thought we could make a few dinars for a change.”

“Gwan and set up.” Xena said. “When Dinar Queen here is done, we’ll stop by.”

The Potadians moved on, leading their small wagon by, heading over to the spot Xena had indicated. “Marcus.” Xena tapped one of the town councilors on the shoulder. “Make sure those people get set up, and don’t tax them.”

Marcus looked past her. “All right, Xena. Friends of yours?”

“From Gabrielle’s hometown.”

“Ah, of course.” The man went after them, catching up to Tectdus and offering him a clasp as they walked.

“All right. We’re set.” Gabrielle was putting a small wrapped bundle in her belt pouch. “Wow, that was a surprise, huh?” She said, as they left the jeweler behind and started across the frosted ground. “Xe, did I see someone with horses for sale coming down?”

“He had.” Xena responded, with a brief smile. “I bought them all for the army.”

“Really?”

“Good blood He brought them here to show me, matter of fact.” The warrior said. “I guess word’s out about that too.”

Gabrielle looked quickly up at her companion’s profile. But there was only calm acceptance there, not a hint of the troubled conscience she’d come to expect. “How far are we going to take this, Xe?”

She asked. "I realize most of the guys in the army have other skills to contribute, but can we afford this big a force just to defend the town?"

Xena's pale eyes studied the area, then turned and lowered to meet hers. "That's a good question." She admitted. "But the fact is if word about your valley really gets out, we're probably gonna need em."

"Mm." Gabrielle grunted softly, then she reached out to touch Xena's arm. "Gate."

"I see em." Xena said. They were near the front of the market and now she turned, facing the entrance and casually pushing her cloak back off her shoulders and folding her arms as the small column of horses entered.

Three of her soldiers drifted over and intercepted them, one reaching up to put a hand on the bridle of the man in the lead, who held the staff that had their banner. Bennu arrived a moment later, tilting his russet head up to talk to the man.

"What do you think?" Gabrielle asked. "Looks polite so far."

They watched Bennu nod, then he turned and pointed at them. The man in the lead also nodded, then directed the rest of the group towards the communal paddock, and dismounted himself. He handed off his banner and the reins of his horse to one of the soldiers, leaving them behind as he accompanied Bennu towards them.

"So far so good." Xena repressed a smile. "Let's see what we got." She started forward with Gabrielle and they met the newcomer halfway across the market, stopping by the wine seller in a clear spot.

"Ah, Genr'l." Bennu spoke first. "This be Carulous, from Phillipi"

Xena studied the man, then extended a hand out. "Welcome." She said, briefly. "I take it you got my message."

He studied her in return. Their eyes were on even level, and he had a cropped head of dark brown hair with dark gray eyes in deep sockets. "I did." He took her arm and returned the clasp. "So I thought I would bring a few men out here to see who this message came from in truth."

He had a deep, baritone voice and he wore his armor as though he lived in it. "And so you are the message sender. Xena of Amphipolis."

Xena nodded, and released him. "That's me." She agreed. "This is my partner, Gabrielle." She introduced the bard.

"Madam." Carulous inclined his head in her direction. "I have to admit it was a shock to us, to get a note such as that. May we sit down at table and discuss it?"

"Sure." Xena indicated the bridge. "We can meet up inside the town. Not much space for it down here."

Carulous nodded. "I will leave my men here to enjoy the market. We've been on the road a good while" He said. "And it seems there is much to enjoy."

Xena gave Gabrielle a sideways look, and a faint lift of her eyebrow. The bard immediately gave her a pat on the shoulder. "I'll catch up with you later, hon." She said. "I've got two disputes I have to sort out here. Give me a yell if you need me."

"Will do." Xena mentally gave herself a shake. "Let's go. If you haven't had anything on the road, we can grab something to eat up there."

"It would be more than welcome." Carulous said instantly. "Please lead on."

It had been a while… no. Xena brought herself up sharply. She had never been in this role before, exactly, and so, had never looked at making allies this way. Her previous incarnation as a warlord had never had a fixed home to it, they'd roamed over what lands they could taking what they could

and any alliances had been momentary and lasted just as long as the desire for more plunder made them moot.

This was something else entirely "I've been to Philippi." She said, in a casual tone. "Not for a couple years though."

Carulous nodded. "We have had our successes in the last while. You'll know then we are a river port town, not so different from here."

"Right." Xena led the way over the bridge, being given space in the crowds crossing as she passed through them. "We've had mixed luck lately. But we've started growing. Seemed like good sense to reach out to neighbors for common issues."

Carulous smiled briefly. "After the march of the Spartans through us? I suppose that's a good thought." He agreed. "And now that we have another trouble growing in our backyards, we thought it was a good idea to answer your outreach as well."

"Another trouble?" Xena glanced sideways at him as they climbed the slope and passed through the town gates.

"Makes me wish for more Spartans." Carulous said, bluntly. "They were swiftly gone and easily paid off. This is somewhat different."

Ah huh. Xena climbed up the steps and pushed open the door to her mother's inn. Gonna be one of those days. "Lets discuss it over a pitcher of ale."

Carulous chuckled briefly. "Seems like we have at least this in common. Maybe its' a good sign."

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Gabrielle was glad enough to step out of the crowd into the small booth where the Potadeians had settled, sharing a mug of cider with them as they finished setting out wares that were already being inspected by the throng of shoppers.

She was surprised to see Tectdus there, and said as much when he stepped back from the table to drink with her.

"Ah, Gabrielle. I'm getting on in years." The smith said. "Winter's hard on these old bones, I feel every hit of the hammer on the anvil. I left Lennat minding the shop."

"So traveling here in winter was better?" The bard asked him.

"Wasn't a bad trip. Just had the snow yesterday, but was an easy ride." Tectdus disagreed. "Besides, we were looking for some news about a lad went missing from town. Figured with everyone here, maybe we'd find out about him."

"Anyone I know?"

The smith settled against one of the crates. "Remember Sallah? She went off out of town just fore you left home."

Sallah. A fiery, loudmouthed girl a few years her senior, who had fought with everyone she could get her hands on. "I do." Gabrielle said, thoughtfully. "We all thought she ran off with that goat herder who was passing through, the one who stole that bale of pelts."

Tectdus nodded. "That's her. She came back, just last season. Had a kid with her, scrappy little boy who had a chip for the world." He said. "She had enough of the herder, he'd got him children in half the towns round the place. Bad lot."

That would figure. Gabrielle remembered the girl as never being satisfied with anything, a bowlful of complaints all day long. "So she came back home?"

"Tried to, sort of. Her folks were killed in the raid, in the war." The smith said, quietly.

"Ah." Gabrielle grunted softly. "So what did she do?"

“What she could do. Worked in the kitchen at the inn. They were all right to her. Gave her and the kid bed space in the back, but she wasn’t happy.”

“Hey, I lived in my mother in law’s barn for a good long time. You take what you can get, you know?” Gabrielle’s lips twitched a little. “But I remember Sallah. She wouldn’t take that really well.”

“No.” The smith said, keeping an eye on the table that held along with the rest shoes and pot hooks that came from his anvil. “She used to kick the kid around. He just lit and took off one day, right after some folks came thorugh we didn’t like much.”

“Yeah?” The bard lifted a hand and returned the wave of a pair of townsmen going past. “What kind of people?” She watched some of the Phillipi men wander by, with skins at their belts and apparently enjoying the market.

“Hard men. Looked like they had some slaves with them, said they were taking them to port to sell them overseas.” Tectdus replied promptly. “They were looking around close, so we figured maybe the kid ended up being picked up by them.”

“Huh. Well, we haven’t seen that type here yet.” Gabrielle admitted. “Not sure they’d be bold enough to bring their custom in here. Amphipolis isn’t that big, but we’re not just a roadside stop either.”

No, though they once had been. Larger than Potadiea by more than half when she’d first encountered it, now with their garrison walls and stout gates, and the armored soldiers wandering through Amphipolis was starting to build itself up and out.

“Tis true. They only stopped by us to get some water from the horse trough and what news we were willing to give them. But day after they left, the kid was gone and Sallah was sure to fire they’d taken him.”

Well, it was a reasonable conclusion. Gabrielle mused to herself. “Could the kid have run off to just get away from town? If he wasn’t happy, I mean. Especially if she was knocking him around.”

“Well…”

“Hey, it happens.” Gabrielle smiled wistfully at him. “You get to that place where anything is better than where you are. Someone comes by and its your ticket out.”

The smith looked at her, for a long silent moment. “That way for you, lass?”

“Absolutely.” Gabrielle looked him right in the eye. “But I don’t think I’d have chased after slavers.” She set her cup down. “And on that note, I’ve got to get back to work.” She put her hand on Tectdus’s arm. “Would you come have dinner with us tonight? It’ll be up at the town inn.”

He smiled. “I’d be sure happy to, Gabrielle. See you after sundown.”

She emerged from the stall into the market, and like a shadow Cait fell into place at her side. “Hey Cait. “

“Hello.” Cait greeted her. “I believe those players were looking for you.”

“On the stage?” Gabrielle started in that direction, edging her way through the crowd with some difficulty. “Sheeps! Where did all these people come from?”

“They all heard about this market.” Cait stuck to her like a burr. “Gosh the merchants are happy though.”

“I bet.” Her queen said, as they got into the more open area near the stage. She could see the performers up on the platform, and she quickly trotted up onto the stage, moving across the wide surface with Cait at her heels. “Hey guys.”

“Gabrielle!” One of the young players came over. “Oh, I’m glad you’re here. We had a question about the show tonight.” He waved the group over. “It’s a bigger crowd than we thought.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Well…”

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Xena settled into her usual seat and waited as Carolous took the opposite chair. The inn was, unusually for these times, almost empty since most everyone was down in the market. She watched him look around before he faced her, finding a quietly intense expression tensing his features.

A good looking man. Roughly the same age as she was, with a thin scar moving along his jawline to the point of his chin. His eyes were guarded, but there was a general air of straightforwardness that Xena found appealing.

One of the servers moved their way at once, putting down mugs for each of them and giving Xena an inquisitive look.

“Hungry?” Xena asked her guest, who nodded. “Two plates of whatever they’ve got, Chara.”

“You got it.” The server moved off and disappeared into the kitchen.

Carolous picked up his mug and took a sip, his brows lifting in reaction. “Do you export this? I’ll take a barrel if so.” He said. “If the plates as good, you’re a lucky woman.”

Xena smiled. “I’ll pass along the compliments.” She lifted her own mug and then took a swallow. “It’s my family’s inn.”

He looked up in surprise. “You’re from these parts then?”

“My birthplace.” Xena smiled briefly. “Hate to disappoint everyone who thought I was born under Hades breastplate.”

He leaned back in his seat and smiled, his face relaxing. “Well, I will tell you that will be a relief to those just cross the border. There was much wondering being done as to why you picked this place to stake a claim.”

The door to the inn opened and Bennu came inside, with Nala. He crossed over to where Xena was sitting and touched his chest. “Genr’l, just wanted to let y’know we grabbed us some pickpockets down the market. Put em in the lock.”

“Scumbuckets.” Nala added, briefly. “Didn’t figure on half the women walking around being Amazons.”

“Didn’t they see half the men walking around in armor?” Xena growled. “Keep them in the lock until the market’s over, Bennu. Then boot em out on the road.”

“Aye.” Bennu saluted again, then nudged Nala’s arm. “S’get us a bite.”

They skirted the back table and went to the kitchen door, pushing it open and going through.

Xena shook her head. “Market’s going better than we expected. Looks like we attracted everyone with a spare dinar for leagues.”

“Not surprising.” Carolous said, wiping his lips. “In this part of the hinterlands, you’ve become the biggest stopping point on the old east road. We’d heard that, even before you sent the note.” He glanced past her at the now closed door. “So it’s true then, you’ve got Amazons here?”

“Scores of em.” Xena’s eyes twinkled a little. “There’s a village up in the mid heights above the town.”

“Huh. Good neighbors?” Carolous seemed doubtful.

“More or less.”

Chara came back and set down a big platter, which had steaming, freshly carved meat on it, along with a loaf of bread, and two bowls of soup. “Here ya go. Eustace said to tell you it’s lamb barley.”

“Thanks.” Xena claimed her bowl . “We used to house a militia here, after the last war. But Athens sent lackeys here once too often for my tastes. I figured if I was going to teach plowboys to fight I might as well start opening up land to protect with em.”

He was already nodding. “Phillipi started much the same. We banded together, us and two nearby towns for protection from a couple bands of warlords. They’d come through every moon and take everything they could get their hands on. Got old.”

Xena remembered being one of those warlords and smiled a bit at the irony. “Yeah.” She commiserated. “That’s why we ended up with a militia, once I decided to retire and settle back home.”

“Us as well. We gathered a bunch of guys and put up a fine little force, and they kept the peace. Phillipi was glad of it, and more than happy to kick in to buy arms and beer for the men.”

“And then you got neighbors?” Xena ripped the loaf of bread in half and handed him one portion. “That’s the big seaport south of you? I figured that’s where the Spartans came ashore.”

Carolous nodded. “Abbas. Yes. They.. “ He took a bite of the sliced meats and bread. “They, like your Amazons use to be more or less good neighbors. We did trade with them, down the river. “

“But?” Xena had picked up her soup bowl and was sipping from the edge of it.

“But.” He glanced around then back at her. “One day, after we hadn’t seen any of the raiders for some time, we got an emissary from Abbas. Either hand over crops and dinars, or they’d wipe us off the map.”

“From a trading port?”

“A trading port that had been taken over. Ever hear of a pirate called Toda?”

Xena’s eyes shifted off him and went slightly unfocused as she flipped through memories of the past. Then she looked back up at him. “No, can’t say I have.”

“Us neither.” Carolous promptly said. “He came with a fleet of ships and took the port town, it seems, and now he’s made it a base to send out pirates over the land like he did on the sea.”

“Huh.”

“We handed over crops and coin.” He said, without a trace of embarrassment. “The lot that showed up were well armed and mounted and it wasn’t a raider band. We weren’t going to take a chance – militia or no.”

Xena used the excuse of having her mouth full to consider that before she answered. Was this really the kind of ally she wanted? One who’d turn their belt pouches out without attempting to fight?

And yet, it was just exactly that she’d done with the Spartans wasn’t it?

She chewed thoughtfully No, it wasn’t. She hadn’t given anything. The Spartans had moved according to her orders. “How many of them were there?” She took a sip of ale.

“Hundred, mounted.” Caroulous gave her a bitter smile. “I didn’t have the luck of guarded walls. We hadn’t gotten that far. Not like here.”

Ah. Well. Xena shook her head. “That’s a tough call.” She commiserated. “They’d have done a lot of damage. Killed a lot of people maybe.

He nodded. “Exactly.”

“But that probably means they’re coming back.”

“Right. But they’d only cleared the pass back to the coast when your note showed up.” His lips twitched a little, almost another smile. “So my town council met and we talked. Your name and reputation aren’t unknown in Thrace.”

“Had to figure out which of us was a worse deal?” Xena looked amused.

“No, not really.” He wiped his bowl out with a bit of bread. “I know things were different back in the day, but your more recent tales tell a different story.”

‘That’s true.” Xena said, quietly. “”I’m neither a warlord or a mercenary these days. Just someone working to protect their home. So.” She leaned on the table. “You interested in making a pact, or are you here to ask for help?”

He smiled easily back at her. “You don’t pull punches do you, Xena?”

“Never.”

“Then both.” He said. “Yes, of course we’d love to enter into an alliance with you. I’d be an idiot not to, though you have far more to offer than we do. But we also would ask if you could think about what to do with Toda and his crew. They took over that entire port city Wont’ be long before he’ll be looking around for more.”

Xena had already considered that. She wasn’t sure if this pirate, whoever he was, would consider her a threat, but in the general area, she was the biggest threat and eventually this guy would hear about it. Someone would tell him, hey, keep clear of Amphipolis. It’s dangerous there.

Which would make her, if she’d heard that immediately head that way. She wondered if Toda had that in common with her, or if he had sense.

“He’s running a lot of dark stuff there.” Carolous went on. “Slavery, of course, but buying and selling drugs – the market there’s full of that far eastern stuff. He feeds it to kids, you know? Has them around him all the time.”

Xena’s dark and finely arched eyebrow lifted.

“One of the merchants that came through there, heading past us to here, told us. Said it was a pretty wild place. “

“So what was his bargain with you? Pelts and grain for protection?” Xena asked. “One of the, hey, it sure would be a shame if some warlord ran thorugh here, huh?”

Carulous nodded. “You have it.” He said. “Said if we handed over the goods, not only would the not attack us, but they’d provide men and arms if anyone messed with us. Some of my town though it was an all right deal.”

Xena’s pale eyes studied him. “But you didn’t believe they’d make good.”

“No.” He folded his hands and studied her right back. “I could see the animal in their eyes. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, I do.” Xena smiled at him. “I think he needs a closer look.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

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Gabrielle lifted one hand up, acknowledging the applause as the players took their final bows and all gestured to her, sitting there in the front row.

“That was fun.” Ephiny said, relaxing in her comfortable, backed chair next to her queen. “I like how they did the horses. Much better than bringing the real ones on the stage.”

“Are you kidding me?” Gabrielle leaned back in her own chair. “Bring horses up there with Xe watching? She’d flip out.”

Ephiny chuckled. “Where is she, anyway? Thought she’d be up here with us.”

Gabreille half turned and pointed. “Right over there, with some of her guys and our visitor from Thrace.” She watched her partner swivel around and meet her eyes, as she gave her a thumbs up. ‘Can’t wait to hear what that all’s about.”

“Trouble?”

“When isn’t it?” Gabrielle accepted a mug of freshly mulled cider from one of Cyrene’s servers and took a sip from it. The rich, pungent spices tickled her nose and she savored the taste of pears and apples in it

One of the best parts of the harvest. The ciders and the fruit pies Cyrene baked that lasted well into the cold season and which both she and her partner loved. She took another sip and turned her head to regard the crowd, acknowledging the cheerful attitude and general air of satisfaction.

“Been a good market so far.” Ephiny conveniently echoed her thoughts. “Das and Renas sold out, and so did Paladia. Talked to Johan and he said the merchants from town have done well too.”

“And the players made out too.” Gabrielle indicated the half barrel set up at the side of the stage, where the crowd could toss in the odd dinar to mark their appreciation. She could hear the clink of coins even from where she was, and she knew these youngsters that had worked so hard to bring her story to life would earn some shopping money themselves.

It was good. ‘They asked me what share I wanted from it.” Gabrielle indicated the barrel. “I told them I had all I needed in life. Have at it.”

“That a good idea? Never did turn dinars down, myself.” Her regent said. “You never know, you know?”

“They worked hard, and they came back here just on a wish and prayer. Remember what happened to them last time?” Gabrielle said. “If I’m ever desperate for coin I can always walk the road myself y’know.”

“True.”

“But honestly, I’ve got Xe and Dori. And the town. And you all. What more do I need? “ Gabrielle asked in a practical tone. “Look at those kids. Some of them are so thin you can see through them. I heard them talking about how amazing it was going to be to be able to buy as many bowls of soup as they can eat and what it would be like to have fresh bread whenever they wanted.”

“You’d know what that’s like. We may not have had gourmet food, but wasn’t many times we didn’t have any at all.” Ephiny remarked. “Well, time to head back up the hill.” She stood up and the guards scattered casually around stood up as well. “See you back at the village, Gab.”

“Be up in a little while.” Gabrielle got up and stretched, then went over to the stage where the players were gathered. “Good job, guys!” She stepped up onto the platform, sensing a rush of energy at her back and pausing to let Xena catch up with her.

“It was a lot of fun, Gabrielle.” The older, bearded man who was the leader of the players said, with a smile. “They liked it! Good story.”

“Thanks!” Gabrielle grinned, as Mikah eased between the milling crowd and came to her side. “MIkah you were great.”

The young man smiled. “It felt great to get back to this.” He admitted. “I had no problem working around the town, but this is more my style, you know what I mean, Gabrielle? I really enjoyed it.” He looked around at the market. “This feels really good.”

“Definitely a success.” Xena draped her arm over Gabrielle’s shoulders. “You done for the night, your majesty?” She eyed Gabrielle. “I’m putting up our guests from Thrace in the barracks. Mom has no room at all tonight.”

It had been a long day. Gabrielle was glad enough to leave the market, waving a good night to the players and milling Amazons as she and Xena headed for the bridge. Halfway there, Iolaus caught up to them, a new, heavily lined cloak settled over his shoulders. “Hey there.”

“Hey you two.” Iolaus said. “Gabrielle, nicely done play. I really liked it.” He complimented the bard.

“Thanks.” Gabrielle smiled. “How are you doing? I see you got some shopping in.” She reached over and fingered the cloak’s surface. “This is nice.”

“Doing fine.” Iolaus agreed briefly. “It was good to just browse like a regular person for a change. No one knew who I was. Felt like a rock off my shoulders.”

Gabrielle knew what that felt like. She could think of times when Xena had just tired of being herself, and they’d slipped into some small town or other, giving assumed names and just sitting in the common room in quiet anonymity.

She slipped her hand inside the crook of his elbow, and gave his arm a squeeze in silent sympathy. “It was a good day. I got some Solstice presents, and some birthday presents.” She remarked. “Some nice stuff for Dori, and some of the jarred honey that came in from the west coast, did you see it?”

“I did.”

They crossed the bridge and started up the slope to the town gates, along with a bunch of other cloaked figures, as the cold wind off the river came up behind them and fluttered the fabric around their legs.

The torches at the gates were being changed out, the flickering light outlining the crowd as they pass through, most of the figures splitting off and moving either towards the inn, or the barracks, with a column of laughing men and women heading to the cots further down the path.

“Well, see you ladies in the morning.” Iolaus lifted his hand in a wave as he started for the back door to the inn. “Sleep tight.”

“You too, Iolaus.” Xena called out, as they continued past. “I brought Dori up before we had dinner out there.” She told her partner, as they dodged slower walkers. “And I got the fire in there stoked while I was at it.”

Gabrielle could sense the mild turmoil in her. “Let’s go and get warm, and you can tell me all about whatever it is that’s bugging you.”

Xena smiled wryly.

“Its going to bug me too, isn’t it”

“Yeah.”

“Great.”

**

It was blessedly nice to come into their quarters, with it’s cozy fire and waiting hot water pot waiting for them. Gabrielle hung her cloak up on the peg near the door and loosened the laces on her sleeves, moving closer to the fire as she pulled her shirt off over her head.

“Town the guy’s from is about the size of this one.” Xena was on the other side of the fire, lifting her armor off. “Except without the walls.”

“Uh huh.” Gabrielle got one of her shifts on and went to fill the water pot from the pitcher standing by the mantel, moving the pot over to warm. “Have you been there?”

“Long time ago, yeah. They’re building out a little, have a small defense force,” Xena got into her own shift and shook out her leathers, setting them near the worktable before she came over to where her partner was assembling cups of tea.

“So the problem is?” Gabrielle finished fiddling with the herbs.

“Problem is they’ve got very bad neighbors.”

“This is going to be one of those, boy I wish I hadn’t done that kinda things huh?”

“Pour the tea.”

They sat down together on the couch. For a while they just sipped their tea and listened to the sound of bootsteps outside, and the rattle of wind against the dried branches. “Looks like some bad news sea dog took over Abbas. It’s about the same size as Therma.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle drew the word out. “That’s pretty big. It’s the place you figured the Spartans came in from?”

Xena nodded. “This guy sounds like he wants to take over that whole area. Sent a mounted force of five score to bully Phillipi out of crops and coin.”

The bard’s eyes widened. “Five score?” She said. “That’s not a raiding party.”

“No.” Xena agreed. “He’s running a den there, drugs, slaves, that kind of thing. Probably has pirates from across half the Aegean putting in there.”

“That’s not good. They’re not that far across the pass from us. You think they know we’re here? Or.. Amphipolis has been around a long time. You think he knows you’re here?”

Xena was silent for a good long time. She cupped her hands around her tea and turned her head to look at Gabrielle. “I think we need to find out what his game is. Before it gets too late.” She said. “Last time we ignored a threat didn’t turn out so good.”

“No.” Gabrielle muttered. “Not so good.” She studied the flames in the fireplace for a while. “We should find out, you’re right.” She took a breath.

“I’ll save us both the heartache. I’m going to send a recon party that doesn’t include me.” Xena said, bluntly. “I don’t want to know bad enough to go through that again.”

Oh. Gabrielle felt her jaw snick shut, as her eyes widened a little. “Wow, Xe. You caught me by surprise there.” She got up and went over to the hearth, refilling her cup with herbs. “Who are you going to send? Can a few of my Amazons go too?”

Xena studied the profile outlined in firelight, seeing the profound relaxation in Gabrielle’s shoulders and hearing the smile in her voice. “Bennu and Jaxson, and three or four of the scouts. Would love to take a couple of yours too.”

Gabrielle turned, swirling the herbs in the hot water to steep them. “You’re really not going?”

“Really not.” Xena turned sideways and extended her long legs up on the couch. “At some point in my life I have to learn not to live on the sharp edge of the sword, hon. Besides, you don’t develop leaders in the army if you’re the only one who gets to lead.”

Gabrielle put her cup down, walked over to the couch and knelt, then leaned over and gave her partner a kiss on the lips. ‘You are awesome.” She pulled her head back a little and looked into her partner’s eyes, finding a grin, and a gentle loving expression that made her heart skip a beat. “Thanks Xe. But that wouldn’t have been heartache for me. I’d have gone with you. No big choice on my part.”

“I know.” Xena leaned her forearm on Gabrielle’s shoulder and gently massaged the back of her neck. “And who knows? It might come to our having to go to war again, sweetheart. But let’s find out what’ going on first.”

Gabrielle squirmed up onto the couch and put her arms around her partner, giving her a squeeze. ‘I hope not. I want some time just to live.”

Xena set her cup down and returned the hug. “Right there with ya.” She said, exhaling in contentment. “Lets be grown ups for a while.”

Gabrielle started laughing, burying her face into the side of Xena’s neck.

**

Iolaus eased off his boots and extended his feet towards the fire, settling back into the comfortable chair and folding his hands across his stomach. In an animal comfort sort of way he was happy, not having to find a cave or a rock to sleep behind, shivering, or hunt desperately for scarce game for his dinner.

It was all right to be here, in Amphipolis, surrounded by decent people who didn’t look crosswise at him, and accepted by all as a friend.

It was good to be around those people all day, and he'd had a surprisingly nice time in the market, walking around with Xena's brother Toris, and his wife Granella.

Now it was equally as nice to be relaxing in Cyrene's snug back room, with a warm fire and a comfortable bed, knowing he had no place he had to be, and recognizing he had all the time he needed to decide what he was going to do next.

He missed Hercules. It was lonely without him around, they'd been traveling as a team for so long that it was strange to be in so much silence by himself. Though things had been so crazy with them recently – and traveling with Herc's mortal sisters had been horribly uncomfortable - he still wished he was with them.

There seemed no sense in hiking around in winter looking for him. Herc had a lot of good sense, and he reckoned the demi-god would know Iolaus would head for Amphipolis and so, either he would hear tales of his return somewhere, or Herc would turn up here looking for him.

A soft knock came at the door and he looked up at it ."C'mon in."

It opened, and Cyrene stuck her head in. "Hello there." She nudged the door all the way open. "We're just shutting the kitchen down and I had some leftovers. Thought you might like some, since dinner was a while ago."

She entered and set a platter down. "Got everything you need, Iolaus? I'm glad you're getting to spend some quiet time here for a change."

Iolaus smiled, shaking his head slightly. "Yes, I remember the last time I spent time here. Wasn't very peaceful!"

"My pigs still remember you." The innkeeper's eyes twinkled. "You know Eustace swears that the smoked meat from that hog was the best she ever had, and it lasted forever."

Iolaus managed a smile. "I have to admit that was the biggest porker I'd ever seen in my life." He glanced at the platter. "Thanks for thinking of me. You've all been so kind."

"Have a good night." Cyrene chuckled, waggling her fingers. She retreated out of the room and closed the door behind her.

Ironic. Iolaus got up and went over to the platter, breaking off a piece of nutbread and nibbling it. Ironic, because of all of them, it turned out that the one with the most normal, loving family had been Xena.

Given what she'd done, what she'd been – it seemed so incredible. He remembered Gabrielle telling him about meeting Xena's family for the first time, and how theyd almost stoned her to death.

Really.

That same woman who had just been in here, making sure he had snacks for the night, had been a party to stoning her own daughter.

Now look at them. "I guess anyone can be forgiven, in enough time, eh?" He took another piece of nutbread with him and went to the small bed, putting his snack down on the wooden table beside it as he stripped off his clothing.

He slung his sword in it's sheath over the headboard post and sat down to unlace his boots, then he lay down on the bed and wriggled into a comfortable spot, glad of the fire's warmth soaking into his still a little chilled bones.

He could hear the sounds of people still, coming up from the market, and walking past the inn towards their homes, and suddenly he wondered what it would be like if his next move just wasn't to make one.

What would it be like to stay here? He studied the ceiling, dimly seen in the candlelight. If Herc was stuck somewhere for a while?

He drew in a cautious breath. What if Zeus finally made him stay? Put him somewhere, punishment for trying to help his sisters?

Trying to kill one of them?

Was he sitting somewhere, looking down at the world, no longer a part of it? Not even able to send a message?

Iolaus hoped so, in a way. He hoped the instant, assurances of both Gabrielle and Xena were as accurate as Xena's ever were and that the truth wasn't really that he'd just been left behind as the gods went and dealt with each other in places he couldn't go.

And if that was true? He swallowed. Well there were things he could do here, weren't there? He had skills. He could even help out the new little troupe out there performing. Xena would let him stay, he knew.

He'd been on the road a long time. Maybe it was time to just go still for a while.

He thought about that, too, as he listened to the soft laughter floating in through the leaded window panes, footsteps heading to the rows of cabins that stretched behind the inn, each with it's little garden and chicken coops.

"What would it be like, I wonder, to go home to one of those every night?" He asked aloud. "I talked to Gabrielle today, and as much she says she loved wandering the world with Xena she sure seems happy now.

Happy, and settled and content. Happy running her Amazons and raising her daughter, and, presumably, enjoying her life with Xena all the more because she knew what it was to lose it.

"Nice." He dusted his fingers off and half turned, blowing the candle out and then squirming under the covers. "Maybe that'll work out for me too." He was aware of trying to convince himself, but underneath it all he also felt some nugget of truth there.

He was tired. He closed his eyes and waited for sleep to take him, putting aside the question for tomorrow.

And the world slowly faded out, that faint sort of dislocation that came just before sleep did making the slightest of echoes in his ears as his body relaxed into the soft mattress.

Balanced on the edge, in this world and not, and a voice gently called his name. "Iolaus."

A dream so soon?

"Iolaus."

He opened his eyes and looked around, lifting up off the bed onto his elbows and peering into the corners of the room. "Someone there?"

Silence.

After a few moments he lay back down, shaking his head and closing his eyes. This time, after a few minutes, he dropped all the way off into sleep.

**

Dori looked up from her task as the barn door opened. "Boo! Look!" She took a step back from Rusty's side. "I brushed him real good."

"So I see." Xena held the door open as Cait and Nala came in behind her. "You did a good job, kiddo." She moved past Rusty's stall to the ones behind it. "Okay, Cait, you go ahead and take Shadow, and Nala, I think Jasper's your speed."

"Say that again." Nala waved at Dori as she went over to the last stall, where a stolid bay horse was standing, looking inquisitively out at them. . "Hey there, Dori."

Dori looked from one to the other then over at her parent. "What's you doing Boo?"

“Not a thing.” Xena told her. “Cait and Nala are going for a ride. That’s all.” She took a step back and let the two riders get about the business of saddling. Both women were in thick leathers and cloaks, with heavy riding boots and full weaponry. “Sounds like fun, right?”

“Yes.” Dori came over and started to brush Xena’s leg with the curry comb. “Can we go ride too, Boo?”

“Sure. We’ll go riding later on. “ Xena let her hand drop down on her daughters’ head. “But Cait and Nala are gonna ride a long way. We’ll see them when they get back.”

“Cat, you bring me rocks?” Dori asked, plaintively. “I lost some.”

“Of course.” Cait finished putting Shadow’s bridle on. “I’ll pick up one every league for you.” She promised the child. “That’ll be great fun.”

Xena chuckled. “Be careful.” She warned, after a moment. “Keep Bennu and those guys in line. No heroics. We want information and your hides back here in one piece.”

Nala led Jasper out of his stall. “Got it.” She answered briefly. “Cait, got some dinars with ya?”

“Yes, I do.” Cait pulled aside her cloak and showed a small bag tied off at her slim waist. “Two dozen fox pelts, that lot’s from.” She said

“Here.” Xena went to the press in the corner of the barn and opened it, removing a sack and upturning it on one of the water barrels. “Take some of this. It’s not stamped here.” She sorted through the coins and handed them both a couple handfuls.

“Boo can I have some!” Dori pulled herself up so she could see the top of the barrel. “Pretty!”

“Here.” Xena handed her one, a bright silver coin with a tree stamped on one side, and a flower on the other. “You keep this, okay?”

“Tank you, Boo.” Dori took the coin and went over to the little chest in the back of Rusty’s stall, where she kept a collection of treasures. She added it to the box and closed it. “You watch that Rusty.”

“Thanks.” Nala put the coins away. “I was a little worried about that – the town stamp is pretty distinctive.” She patted Jasper on the cheek. “Lets get going, Cait. Benny and the boys are waiting for us at the river crossing.”

“Good luck.” Xena leaned against the stall divider.

“Thanks.” Nala said, turning to lead her horse to the door.

Xena and Cait looked at each other for a moment, then Xena pushed off from the wall and opened her arms, giving Cait a hug. “Be careful.” She muttered in a low tone. “If we’ve got to come out after you bunch none of us’ll ever hear the end of it.”

“I will, I promise.” Cait stepped back, blushing a bit, but looking pleased. “Do keep an eye on Pally will you? I thinks she’s actually quite miffed she’s not going.”

“No problem.” Xena waved as Cait led Shadow out and a moment later, the door closed and it was quiet again. She went over and sat down on a box next to Rusty. “Cmere punkie.”

Dori came over to her and wrapped her arms around Xena’s knee, putting her chin on the top of the joint. “Hey Boo.”

“Hey Dori.” Xena leaned back and lifted Dori up into her lap. “Where are your cousins? How come you’re in here by yourself?”

“Dere at school.” Her daughter informed her. “I didn’t want to go. Mama said I didn’t got to.”

Xena studied Dori’s snub nosed profile. “You don’t like school?”

“No.”

“I didn’t either.” Xena told her. “I couldn’t sit still and just listen to somebody yap.”

“Mama tells better.”

“That’s true.” Xena bounced her a little on her knee. “Your mama is the best storyteller in the world. Did you know that, Dor? I don’t mind listening to her all day long.”

Dori grinned at her. “Go mama!”

Xena stood up with Dori in her arms. “Let’s you and me go ride, and maybe we’ll find mama. How about that?” She walked over to the pony and set Dori down on his back, picking up his reins and handing them to her. “Now sit up straight.”

Dori wiggled into position, dropping her knees down and taking a firm hold with her legs on the pony’s bare back. “We go!” She pointed his head at the door and squeezed his sides. “Go go go!”

“Ah ah.” Xena moved over to Iolaus’ stall and unhooked the rope at the front, grasping his mane as he moved eagerly forward and launching herself up onto his back. “Dori, wait for us.”

Iolaus caught up to Rusty at the door, and the horses bumped the portals open, and she kept Iolaus alongside as Rusty started down the path at a brisk trot.

The pace didn’t disturb Dori at all. Xena watched her daughter as she moved with the animal, a smile of pride crossing her face as she watched her ride. “Lets go down across the river, Dor, and find Mama.”

“We go!” Dori laughed. “Go Rusty!” She urged the pony faster and a moment later they were cantering past the inn, waving at Cyrene who was standing on the porch. “Gramma!”

“You two be careful!” Cyrene yelled. “Xena, there’s ice on that bridge!”

“Got it!” Xena guided Iolaus with her knees, the stallion racing free without so much as a halter on. She got in front of Dori as they went down the slope, the bright sun of a crisp cold day drenching them.

She could see Cait and Nala, with Bennu and his group and ahead of them on the bridge she saw the group from Phillipi making their way down. They heard the hoofbeats behind them and paused, then turned as they saw the two horses heading their way.

“Go fast!” Dori was in high delight, her hair being blown back by the air. “Boo!”

Xena chuckled, slowing Iolaus a little. “Take it easy Dor. There are more people there.”

Dori took hold of her reins and they trotted together up to where Caroulous and his party were waiting.

“Morning.” Xena held a hand up, as Iolaus came to a halt. “Wanted to give you all a send off. “

Carolous lifted his hand in response. “Good morning, Xena. My compliments to you for our lodging. Your men were most accommodating.” He glanced at the pony and it’s small rider. “Is this your little one? Surely she must be. She looks just like you.”

“Yes, she is. This is Doriana, our daughter.” Xena responded. “You have everything you need to travel? I can see my gang is picking up a few things in the market.”

They started across the bridge, and Carolous fell in beside Xena. “We really appreciate you sending your troops with us, Xena. A half dozen of my men have agreed they will go with them in this scouting party.”

“Good.” Xena had her hands resting on her thighs, and one eye firmly fastened on Dori’s tousled, dark head. Iolaus tossed his head, eying the other horses as their hooves clattered along the wooden planks of the bridge.

Downstream, the water was already showing a low level, and there was frost whitening the dust brown grasses exposed at the edges. Though the sky was a bright blue, and the sun was shining, Xena’s weather sense told her that wouldn’t last, and they’d be glad to escape inside.

Off the bridge they spread out and headed to the market, and Xena spotted Gabrielle bargaining at one of the stalls. As she watched, her partner straightened and turned, looking right at them and a big smile appeared on her face. "Look Dor, it's mama."

"Mama!" Dori pressed her knees into Rusty's side and the pony obligingly sped up into a canter again, as she headed towards where Gabrielle was standing. "Mama!"

Xena chuckled.

"She's an adorable child." One of the other men said. "Quite a rider."

"Yeah." Xena nodding approvingly as she watched her kids perfect balance. "She's been riding since she could sit upright. Loves horses." She sorted out a bit of Iolaus's mane. "Gets that from me."

Carolous glanced at her, then at Dori, then at Gabrielle, who had come to greet rider and pony. Then he looked back at Xena, with a faintly bewildered look on his face.

Xena just ignored him. She nudged Iolaus forward and smiled a little as the stallion put on a few fancy steps, his nostrils flaring as he caught the scent of two of the mares waiting for them near the edge of the market. "Ah ah ah."

Iolaus snorted and shook his head.

"Don't start with me, buddy. You got plenty of action this year." Xena patted his neck as she used the advantage of his high back to scan the crowd, and the market.

Everything seemed quiet.

And yet. Xena's ear twitched and she turned her head sideways and down, listening past the early sounds of the merchants and the laughter of her family nearby.

Bennu noticed, and a moment later he was at her side, his hand laying on Iolaus' golden neck. "Problems, Xena?"

"Horse on its way in, fast." Xena said. "Send someone to see if it's the watch from downriver."

"Aye."

"What's up, hon?" Gabrielle took his place as he moved quickly off.

"Nothing maybe." Xena swung her leg over the stallion's rump and sat sideways on him, her hands resting on the base of his neck and his hindquarters. "I hear a horse coming."

"They could be coming to the market."

"Nothing in this market should be making them come that fast."

"Ah." Gabrielle had her other hand wrapped around Rusty's bridle. "You giving Dori bareback lessons? Let her leave the steering bits on for a while if you are."

"Nah, Dori just wanted to go for a ride and I didn't want to take the time to tack him up." Xena told her. "Everything all right down here?"

"Sure, fine." The bard answered. "Merchants are happy, town's happy, Amazons are happy. I'm waiting for a drunk unicorn to come and poop all over the place because this much success is scaring the fleece off me."

"Mama, look." Dori hopped off Rusty's back and pointed. "Dere's a ducky!"

"That's great, sweetie. But he's swimming with his family. We can't go after him." Gabrielle told her. "Are your friends still in school? I think I see your cousins coming down the path."

Dori's head whipped around and she spotted the twins. She scrambled back over and reached up to grab Rusty's mane, pulling herself onto his back. "Mama leggo!"

“Be careful.” Gabreille handed over the reins and got out of the way as Rusty clattered back onto the bridge and back the way they’d come at a brisk pace. “Oh boy.” She waved at Toris, who was coming down behind his kids.

Toris waved back, and then pointed at Dori, shaking his head.

Xena just chuckled.

“You and your horses.” The bard sighed. “I enjoyed the market, but I’ll be glad when it’s all gone and we can go back to setting up stuff.”

“Mm.” Xena saw Bennu returning and she straightened up as she read his body posture. “Hm.” She got herself seated more conventionally on Iolaus’ back as the red haired soldier came closer. “What’s up?”

“It’s the watch comin in, surely, but he’s got something.. body maybe, over his horse’s haunches.” Bennu reported. “Hurt maybe.”

“Okay.” Xena said. “You keep moving out. We’ll see what’s up with the watch.” She guided Iolaus with her knees past the scouting party, reaching down with one arm to grab Gabrielle and pull her up behind her. “C’mon, mama.”

Gabrielle got her arm around her partner’s waist. “Mind if I close my eyes since no one’s steering?”

“Ppfft.”

They detoured around the group and headed through the market at a trot, then moved into a canter as they cleared the last booth and approached the outer town gates. A half dozen soldiers were already there watching the oncoming horse, and they moved aside as Xena and Gabrielle arrived.

The gates were open, and they could see all the way almost to the bend. There was a horse galloping along the river road, puffs of dust coming up from his hooves and when he got closer, visible steam coming off his coat.

The rider waved an arm as he closed in. “Need a healer!”

“Eh.” Xena slid down off Iolaus’ back and headed for the gate. “Going to be one of those mornings, huh?”

Gabrielle inched forward on the horse’s back, deciding to stay onboard so she could see what was going on over everyone’s head. She hoped whoever the guard was bringing in wasn’t too badly hurt, possibly someone had stayed out in the cold too long.

She felt Iolaus start under her as the mounted guard thundered thorugh the gates and pulled up, the soldiers around them closing in to help him shift his burden off his horse’s haunches. “Easy, big boy.” She patted her mount on the neck. “Your mom’s got it under control.”

And Xena did – kneeling beside the fur wrapped bundle as her men let it gently to the ground and pulled the covering aside. The warrior took one look, then looked directly up at her and Gabrielle felt that whoomp of solid emotion that had her sliding down off Iolaus and running over.

She dropped to one knee at Xena’s side and looked down at the huddled form, inhaling sharply as she recognized, barely, Alana’s once haughty features. “Oh crap.”

“Yeah.” Xena evaluated the woman’s condition quickly, then looked up at the guard, who had dismounted and was catching his breath. “What happened?”

“Was coming back from the pass, Genr’l.” The watchman said. “Just passing the ford and saw something moving in the grass. Was her.” He indicated the woman. “Been sore used.”

“Thanks for coming fast.” Gabrielle said. “Xena… “

“Yeah.” The warrior covered the woman up again in the furs. “Not good. She’s been beaten, probably some broken bones, maybe worse. We should get her up to the .. “She paused. “The barracks. We’ve got beds there, and two of those rooms in the back with single beds.”

“How about up to the village?” Her soulmate said, quietly.

“Eventually. Let me check her out first.” Xena said. “Need a stretcher, boys.”

“On it, genr’l.” Two of the guard headed for the nearby woodpile.

“What’s up?” Ephiny arrived, with Eponin at her heels, apparently having been summoned. “Is that.. it is.” She put her hand on Gabrielle’s shoulder. “Crap.”

“That’s what I said.” The bard exhaled. “She was the only one there, Beren?”

The watch nodded. “Aye, Gabrielle, she was, like she’d been thrown down, you know? Was just moving a bit, didn’t say anything to me when I got hold of her.” He looked down at the battered woman. “Poor thing.”

Xena touched the woman’s eyelids, feeling no response to the slight pressure. She slid her long fingers over her skull and grimaced a little. “Concussion, probably. She’s got two or three big bumps there.”

“Genr’l, this do” The guard came over with a cloak fastened between two relatively straight poles. They knelt down and between them, Xena and Gabrielle they shifted the injured woman onto the cloak, then stood and lifted her.

“Take her over to the healer’s rooms in the barracks.” Xena ordered. “I’m going to go up to the inn and get my kit.”

“I”ll get it for you, Xe.” Gabrielle said. “Go on with them. Iolaus’ll follow you – he just splutters all over me.” She put her hand on Xena’s back. “Ephiny.. “ She lowered her voice. “Let Nala and Cait know. Have them keep their eyes out for anything on the road.”

“They’re going the other direction, but sure.” Ephiny tugged Eponin’s sleeve. “Let’s keep it quiet though. Wait till we find out what the deal is.”

Xena followed the stretcher. Gabrielle headed across the bridge ahead of her on her way to the inn, diverting to intercept Toris as he herded the kids to come meet her.

Trouble, again. “Hey Tor.”

Toris was watching the stretcher heading past them. “What happened? Someone get hurt?” He had Rusty’s reins in one hand, while the twins and Dori chased a squirrel across the rough ground.

“One of the Amazons that left yesterday ran into some trouble I guess. We don’t know much. Xe’s going to see what she can do for her. She’s pretty banged up” Gabrielle said. “I’m going to go grab her kit.”

Toris nodded. “I’ll take the kids down in the market. Hope it’s not too bad, even though I know you all didn’t get along with that gang.”

“Hope it isn’t for a different reason. I want to find out what happened to her.” Gabrielle said, grimly. “And where the rest of them are.”

“Never ends.”

“Never does.”

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Xena leaned back on the stool she was crouched on, wiping her hands on a bit of damp cloth. The Amazon’s eyes were closed and she was breathing with short, rapid pants, insensible to the outside world.

Which was, the warrior acknowledged, a good thing. Aside from the head injury, the woman had suffered broken ribs, a broken leg, and a number of other, lesser hurts. “Hope she stays under.’ She commented briefly.

Gabrielle was sitting on a bench against the wall, leaning forward a little with her elbows braced against her knees. "They took her weapons." She noted.

"They raped her." Xena said, after a moment of silence. "Looks like more than once."

Gabrielle grimaced.

Xena got up and picked up the basin of water she'd used to clean off the injured woman and went to the corner sump, pouring the blood tinged liquid into the trough and watching it flow away. She then rinsed the basin out and set it back down on the table against the far wall. "Let me get someone to sit with her."

Gabrielle got up and went over to the cot, gazing briefly down at Thera. With the bandages covering part of her neck and jaw, face blank in unconsciousness she seemed hardly older than a child. 'Guess we need to wait to find out what happened to you." She sighed.

Xena returned from the inner door that opened into the barracks. "I sent the guard back down towards the pass with a dozen soldiers. See if they can find any raiders."

"Could just as easily have been Tectdus' group that got attacked." Gabrielle mused, taking a step back as one of Xena's men came in and settled quietly at the bedside. "Except maybe they had a wagon, and were men."

"Deggan, come get me if she wakes up. See if she'll drink if she does." Xena left him with a waterskin, and clapped him on the shoulder. "She got hit in the head, might come out of it not knowing what's going on."

"Aye, Xena." The older man nodded. "Got my kit here. I'll watch the hurts." He touched the healer's pouch at his belt. "Sent one of the lads over to get some soup from the inn, if it goes all right."

"Good idea." Xena handed Gabrielle her cloak. "We'll be back." She got her own cloak on and fastened it, then she and the bard left the infirmary and walked down the inner hall to the main entrance to the barracks.

There was a big and sturdy porch on the outside, where in good weather the soldiers could work on various small projects. To the inside were long sleeping rooms, with cots and space for the men and women who made up Xena's army to have their personal gear.

It smelled of curing wood and leather inside, and from the sparring room in the very center of the complex the sound of swords ringing together could be heard through the walls.

Many of the soldiers were out and about, some were up the mountain helping the Amazons mine the valley, some were hunting, some were collecting firewood. As Gabrielle walked with Xena through, she could almost sense the contentment of those she did see.

The inside courtyard, besides holding the sparring chamber also had stables and working spaces, everything with the unweathered just finished look of new construction.

Which it was. "Hard to believe we did all this in such a short time." Gabrielle commented. "We're going to have to expand down the hill along the river at this rate."

"Yup." Xena agreed.

They walked together in silence for a minute or two. "What do you think happened, Xe?" Gabrielle eventually asked. "That was a well armed group of Amazons."

"It was." Her partner mused, thoughtfully. "Weather was clear. There's really no place for them to have stopped this side of Potadeia."

"I thought they'd go through the pass, and stop on that side."

Xena paused. "Maybe the rest of them did." She studied her partner's profile. "Maybe that power play happened."

Gabrielle's face tensed, one of her hands coming to rest on her hip. "And they left her behind?"

“Could have thought she was dead, with that head wound.” The warrior said. “Left her, and some bastard found her and took advantage of a helpless woman.”

“Ugh.”

“C’mon.”

They emerged into the chill and headed up the path that went along the slope up to the town, heading to the common paddock where the sound of children’s voices was loud and distinct. In the paddock the goats were huddled warily on one side, and a circle of kids were around Rusty on the other.

Dori had one hand on his bridle and she was pointing at his hoof. Some of the children were laughing, but two of the boys were yelling something in an apparent challenge.

Dori shook her head.

Solon and Lyceus got up on either side of their cousin and yelled back at the two aggressors, but then everyone started laughing again, and it was all over with by the time Xena and Gabrielle were in hearing range.

One of the kids broke from the group and wandered over to the goats, holding his hand out to one who sniffed at his fingers suspiciously. He turned his head. “Can we ride dese?” He pointed. “Got lots!”

The children turned and headed in a group towards the now alarmed looking goats, while Dori and her cousins stayed where they were, petting Rusty’s shaggy coat. “No ride dem goats.” Lolo said, looking up as a shadow fell over them. “Aunties!”

“Hey kids.” Gabrielle climbed over the paddock fence while Xena merely leaned against it. “What’s going on here?”

“Mama, I found out about the pointing thing.” Dori said. “The one Lolo found it?”

“Ah.” Gabrielle went over and scratched Rusty’s ears. “ Hon, I forgot to tell you about that. They found a caltrop in the barn.”

Xena straightened up and vaulted the fence. “What?”

“I found it! I found it!” Lolo said. “In the straws.”

Gabrielle removed the item from her carrybag and handed it to her partner. “So what did you find out about it, Dor?” She knelt down next to her daughter, carefully avoiding what you usually found in animal enclosures.

Xena leaned back against the fence and studied the caltrop. She turned her head a little as footsteps came up behind her, then relaxed when she recognized Iolaus. “Hey.”

“What’s going on?” He leaned on the other side of the fence. “Someone said someone was attacked on the road?”

“One of those Amazons who came in same day you did.” Xena said, briefly. “Got into some trouble on the road. Watch brought them in.” She handed him the caltrop. “The kids found this in the barn.”

“Yow.” He turned it over in his fingers. “That’s not good. Especially not in that stable.”

“No kidding.” Xena sighed. “I thought it was too relaxed around here. Should have kept my mouth shut about it.”

“Hon.” Gabrielle was walking over to her, with one of the children at her side being held by the hand. “Georgie has something interesting to tell you about that piece of metal.”

Georgie was the son of the local smith, and now he was looking wide eyed at Xena. “Didn’t mean to do nuthin!” He said, at once.

Dori came over, leading Rusty by the reins, and her cousins clustered behind her, all of them up against the fence where Xena and Iolaus were standing. Rusty was chewing a bit of dried grass, and now he extended his head forward and nibbled on Xena's cloak.

"It's okay, Georgie. Just tell Xena what you told me." Gabrielle encouraged him. "Then we can go into the barn and I'll tell everyone a story. How about that?"

The children had trailed after them and now all of the broke into a clamor of approval.

Georgie was one of the kids who had been disagreeing with Dori, Xena noted, and now he looked overwhelmed and a little terrified of her. She dropped to one knee much as Gabrielle had, and relaxed her expression. "So what's the story Georgie? Where did that thing come from?"

"T'market." Georgie said, after a doubtful moment. "Man there, he gave me a dinar, said it would be lucky for him if'n I dropped the thing up in the stable."

"Mm." Xena made a low sound in her throat. "Was this guy a visitor or someone who lived here?"

The boy was already shaking his head. "Didn't know im. Just wanted the coin to spend on my mama. Get her some stuff." He rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes. "I didn't know it could hurt the horsies honest."

"Bad mens." Dori commented.

"It's okay, because none of them got hurt." Xena told him, consciously gentling her voice. "If we go down to the market, could you tell me if you see the guy though?"

Georgie nodded.

"You're gonna get him in trouble." One of the other boys said. "He won't give you no more coins."

Xena's head lifted and she stared past Georgie at the other boy. "You think it's okay to hurt your friends and neighbors for some coins?" She asked, flatly.

"Was just a piece of iron!" The boy answered. "Didn't hurt nothing." He backed off a step, uneasy under that cold, blue stare.

"That piece of iron was made to puncture the foot of a horse or a cow." Xena said. "Sometimes it hurts them so bad you have to put them down. You know what that is?"

The boy blanched. "Oh."

Gabrielle's hand dropped gently on her partner's shoulder. "It didn't, because Lolo found it. If he hadn't, and it had stayed in the barn, it could have hurt one of the horses very badly."

Lolo puffed his chest out. "Dats right."

"I'll tell you if I see him." Georgie spoke up. "I didn't mean to do a bad thing. I don't want to hurt none of the horsies."

"Good boy." Xena stood up and ruffled his hair. "Let's go for a walk down there, and maybe we'll find some cookies."

"Cookies!" Dori said, alertly. "We go too?"

"Everyone." Xena went to the gate and swung it open, so the children and Rusty could exit. She followed them out and closed the gate to keep the goats inside, waiting briefly for Gabrielle to join her.

'He's probably left by now." The bard said, softly.

"Probably, but let's find out. " Xena motioned Iolaus to join them, and made a hand signal to two of her men who had been watching unobtrusively. "It's not making sense."

"No." Gabrielle sighed. "Really starting to be one of those days."

**

The merchants were busy packing up as they all arrived, but halted when they spotted the group entering the square, enticed by the idea of getting rid of a little more stock and not having to cart it off.

Dori was on Rusty's back, the pony's reins held firmly in her mother's strong hand. "Okay kids, let's take a walk around and see what we can find."

The children were clustered around Gabrielle, some with their hands on Rusty. Behind them Xena and Iolaus walked along together, watching the crowd.

Townsfolk were starting to close up the booths, and they came first to the one near the stage that held the Amazon's. Paladia was standing with Aalene, two stout packs leaning against the trestle tables next to them.

They looked up as the group approached, and Aalene came forward to greet them. "What's all this?" She laughed as the kids chorused hellos. "Morning, your majesty."

"Hi there. We're just taking a tour." Gabrielle responded. "You all done here?"

"Just about. Most of the mob just went up the hill. Paladia and I were just getting the last of our gear up." Aalene indicated her companion. "We're about to head up."

Georgie was standing next to Xena, earnestly looking around the square. "Everybody go." He said. "The man was ober there." He pointed at the stall, now closed down and empty, where the leather seller had been. "Was with the guy there."

Xena went in that direction, strolling quietly across the churned up ground that even now had a thin skin of frost on it. Overhead the clouds were beginning to gather on the horizon, and the winds were coming up, flapping the sheltering overhangs the townsmen were busy strapping down.

"Looks like weather's getting worse. " The baker said, as Xena passed. "Care for a bun, Xena? Save me the trouble of carrying it."

The warrior selected one and leaned on the counter, motioning Iolaus to do the same. "Thanks Sara. You noticed any one hanging around at the stall across from here? Not the seller, someone else?"

The baker studied her in silence for a moment, then she half shrugged. "There were a lot people around. Strangers I mean. I saw some folks from Potadeia way, and a few from through the pass." She pondered a moment. "Man or two, I didn't like the look of."

"Uh huh."

"One bearded fellow. Kept trying to get free goods from me, and from Ballus there, with the wine. Said we should be glad to hand over for no cost, since the market was doing so well."

Hm. Xena chewed on the bun thoughtfully. It had nuts and dried fruits in it, and was liberally laced with honey. "Well can't say I blame him, Sara." She winked at the baker. "He had good taste."

The woman smiled at her. "Ah, g'wan with you, Xena. But no, this fellow, he seemed slimy. You know what I mean?"

"When did he leave, do you know?"

"Last night." Sara supplied promptly. "Right after the show finished. You know that was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed it."

"Yeah, they did a good job. I liked it to." Xena dusted her fingers off. "Thanks Sara. Glad you had a good time, and a good market." She started to turn, when something caught her eye and she stopped, leaning closer to the edge of the table and peering hard.

"What is it?" Iolaus knelt at her side.

“You’re missing your profits, Sara.” Xena got her arm down between the table and the support and then stood, bringing back a glittering bit of metal between her fingers. She glanced at the imprint, then offered it to the baker.

“Goodness.” Sara took it, frowning. “How could that have ended up there? What stamp is this, Xena, do you know it?”

“Its from Thrace.” The warrior answered quietly “From one of the port cities there.” She pushed away from the trestle. “Later.” She walked away from the stall and went over to the spot where the hide vendor had been, circling the closed booth, the musky scent of the skins still lingering.

Georgie came running over to her, and pointed at the barrel to one side. “Dere.” He said. “The guy was dere, and he gave me the coin when I come back.”

“You told him where you put it?” Xena thumped her boot against the barrel idly.

“Yah.”

Xena thumped the barrel again, the sound striking her as somewhat strange. “Thanks for showing me, Georgie.” She put her hands against the barrel and pushed against it. “What the hades is in here?”

“Water?” Iolaus kicked it. “Ow. No.” He hopped once of twice. “That was idiotic.”

Georgie started to laugh.

“Garun.” Xena motioned over one of the soldiers nearby. “Get this thing open wouldja?”

She tipped the barrel over and gave it a healthy shove with her boot, rolling it out into the path as her men came over with axes. “Cut the top off.”

Gabrielle had started her way with Dori and the kids all were running over to see what was going on. Xena watched Garun brace his boot against the wood and swing, and as he did, she held a hand up in the bard’s direction. “Hold up.”

The ax hit the barrel and one of the spars split and she got a glimpse of a bit of gray and white. Garun whacked it again and the side came off and a sodden stench started to rise.

“Ew.” Georgie pinched his nose and took a step back.

“Gab, get the kids back.” Xena waved them off. “Go on back there, Georgie. There’s something bad here.”

Gabrielle stopped and half turned. “Aalene, give me a hand?”

The Amazon came running, and Paladia was right behind her. They just got the children corralled by the time Xena and the soldiers pulled the barrel open and a large figure came rolling out of it, to sprawl stiffly on the ground, still and lifeless.

Georgie clapped his hands over his mouth, his eyes growing huge and round in his head. He turned and ran, getting back over to the rest of the children and ending up throwing his arms around the bard’s legs. “S’him!” He choked out. “He’s all dead!”

Xena and Iolaus came to stand over the body, blocking the view from the rest of the kids. They looked at each other, and Iolaus shook his head a little.

“All right. Take him over to the table over there. Let’s see if he can tell us anything.” Xena said. “Get everyone else inside.”

“Aye, Genr’l.”

**

Gabrielle was very glad to sit down at the kitchen table in the inn, with a mug of hot tea. The kids had been coaxed off to play in the barn and she’d just returned from there herself after offering up the promised story. “Sheeps.”

“So what happened?” Cyrene joined her, with a bowl of soup that she put on the table and plunked a spoon into. “Everything was rolling right along I thought.”

“Where do I start.” Gabrielle leaned back against the wall and stretched her legs out along the bench. “It started with Auntie Gabrielle finding the kiddies playing defend the fort in the barn.”

“I remember walking in on some of that, back in the day.” Her mother in law smiled briefly. “My two boys being run over by my little girl.”

“Eheheheh.” Gabrielle chuckled. “Pretty much how it was this time, but to be fair, Dori had Rusty on her side.” She hiked a knee up. “Anyway, I saw a caltrop on the ground and it turned out Lyceus had found it in the barn.”

“That’s not good.”

“No, so to make long story short, turns out one of the town kids got a dinar to drop it in there, and the guy we found dead in a barrel’s the one who gave it to him.”

Cyrene sat up straight and blinked at her in silence for a long moment.

“So how was your day?” Gabrielle toasted her with her mug. “Xe’s seeing if she can find any identification on the body and figure out how he was killed. “ She took a swallow of the tea. “And checking on that Amazon that got beaten on the road.”

“Terrible.” Cyrene managed to say. “Even though they weren’t nice, no one deserves that. I went down to the barracks and brought the boys some soup and stopped in. My gods. Amazing she lived.”

“That’s what Xe said.”

“At least the market went well. Hopefully today wasn’t a harbinger of a bad winter to come.” The innkeeper sighed. “And I don’t like the sound of that mission to Thrace. We’re asking for trouble if you ask me.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle cradled her mug in both hands. “Unfortunately once we knew they were there, we couldn’t really ignore them, mom. That just gets you into worse trouble. We learned that the hard way.”

“Mm.” Cyrene grunted softly. “I just hope no one ends up getting hurt.” She took a moment to drink some of the soup right from the bowl. She put the bowl down and wiped her lips, in a motion endearingly like her daughters. “I was talking to Dori earlier. She doesn’t like school now?”

Gabrielle sighed. “She likes the Amazon school better.” She admitted. “Maybe it’s that they do things, not really sit and learn. She’s not really good at sitting and paying attention to someone who’s talking at her.”

Cyrene chuckled wryly.

“Oh yeah, I can see where it came from.” The bard smiled at her. “I just want to make sure she gets exposed to different influences, you know? She’s learned from me, from Xena, from the Amazons.. this is her home. I want her to know what that’s all about too because I grew up in a place like this and I think there’s value in that.”

“She’s a very lucky little girl.” Cyrene said, in a serious tone. “Most kids don’t get a choice. Many don’t get any teaching at all. It’s a luxury, we all know it. We made the choice, to all pitch in and support the teachers, and build the little school there.”

“Oh I know.” Gabrielle got up and took her cup over to the ever present pot on the back of the stove. She filled it with the fragrant harvest soup and came back over, sitting back down across from her mother in law. “Wasn’t many of the kids who got schooling at home because the parents had to pay. My da decided to pay for me because he thought that would make me more appealing a wife.”

“Xena taught herself to read.” Cyrene reminisced. “I remember coming into her room one day and there she was with .. “She thought a moment. “Some story about horses.”

“Gee. Shocker.” Gabrielle started laughing.

“ I know, but I tell you it surprised me. She read the page to me and I just couldn’t believe it.” Her partner’s mother said. ‘Myself, I think Dori’s just ahead of the rest of the kids, and she’s bored. The gods only know, Xena would have been.”

The outer door opened and Xena herself entered, bringing a gust of cold, damp wind with her. She closed the door and pulled her hood down, shaking a few leaves loose from her hair. “Gonna snow tonight.”

“Eustace said the same.” Cyrene got up and retrieved a fresh bowl, filling it with soup and offering it to her offspring. “Going to be a long winter. Did you see the fleeces this year?”

Xena took the bowl to the table and sat down next to Gabrielle. “Guy was choked to death. Leather belt.” She drank a bit of the soup. “Must have waited to stuff him in that barrel until the rigor faded.”

Gabrielle wrinkled her nose. “You mean there was a dead body out there in the market and no one picked up on that?”

Xena shrugged. “I told the boys to put him on a pyre. Sounds like he was a scumbag but I don’t want the garbage lying around here.” She put one hand down on the table and cradled the bowl in the other, and Gabrielle reached over and once and captured the hand in her fingers.

“You think he just ticked someone off?” Cyrene sat back down across from them. “If he’s the one who’s paying kids off to scatter caltrops – maybe he did worse and paid for it.”

“Could be.” Xena agreed. “One less thing for me to worry about.” She flexed her fingers and squeezed Gabrielle’s hand. “Alana woke up, they told me. She was back under by the time I got up to the hall.”

“Any better?”

Xena shrugged again. “Bumps gone down, and she’s breathing easier. She didn’t say anything when she came around, but the guy sitting with her told her where she was.”

“I’m sure she loved hearing that.” Gabrielle grimaced slightly. “I’ll walk over there. If she comes around again, maybe I can ask her what happened.” She glanced at her partner. “Should we move her up to the village?”

Her partner finished drinking down her soup, then put the bowl down. “My advice is, leave her in the barracks.”

“Why?”

“Xena’s right.” Cyrene spoke up, dryly. “That bunch did not like you all. I heard them talking when they left. I think if I was roughed up like that, I’d rather not face the pitying stares of people I know I don’t like.”

Gabrielle blinked. “Wow.” She looked at Xena. “Is that what you think too?”

Xena nodded. “We don’t know what happened. Could have been an attack on that group, could have been an attack on her, but think about it, hon.”

Gabrielle thought about it, while her two companions finished up their soup. Alana hadn’t liked them. She hadn’t liked her, for that matter. The night they’d spent in the village had turned out a disaster, and she had to acknowledge maybe her partner had a point. “Huh.”

“Lets let her get her senses back, and then maybe see what to do.” Xena correctly interpreted the grunt. “It’d be a bitch littering her up the trail anyhow. Barracks are snug and warm.”

“You’re so smart.” Gabrielle leaned against her with an affectionate pressure. “I really didn’t think about that, you know? I guess I thought .. well, we’re taking care of her so of course she’ll be grateful to us. But probably not, huh?”

“Mm.”

Cyrene watched them, smiling a bit as Gabrielle rested her head against Xena's shoulder and circled her upper arm with both hands. "So you think that woman's going to recover?"

"I think so." Xena said. "Shall we go collect our child, and give everyone the news up the hill?"

"You got it." Gabrielle stood up and collected the bowls and cups, moving them to the wash up area and dunking them in the soapy basin on one end of the wide, stone space.

They said goodbye to Cyrene then went out the back door to the inn and down the path to the stables. The paddock in front of them was empty, and they went to the barn door and pushed it open, surprised to hear silence from inside.

It was dimly lit, and the horses housed inside were somnolent, though Argo and Iolaus went to the front of their stalls and snuffled at them as they entered. Rusty was in his stall, and as they went over, they spotted a new addition to it, a small hammock was slung, and Dori was napping inside it.

"Aw." Gabrielle leaned against the stall door. "That's so cute."

Rusty was chewing on some hay, eyeing them with equine amusement. He lifted his head above the door and nudged Gabrielle, sniffing at her carry sack still slung over her shoulder.

Xena examined the hammock, and allowed herself to be charmed at the many colored wool yarns that made it, and the hammered iron rings that held either end to the ropes tied to the stall posts. "It's cute." She agreed. "Hand over the booty to the runt and I'll wake our little princess up."

Gabrielle fished a small, somewhat withered apple from her bag and offered it to the pony, who immediately crunched it up, with what could only really be described as a smirk on his face. "Wonder who put that up?"

"Toris probably." Xena reached over and tickled Dori's arm. "Hey shortie."

Dori's eyes fluttered open and she lifted her head, looking around "Boo!" She poked her fingers through the hammock strings. "Look at this! Fun!"

"So I see." Xena pushed her back and forth a little. "That's cool."

"I wanted to stay with Rusty so they got this." Dori explained. "Boo I like being here with Rusty. He gets lonely when I go up."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged looks. Gabrielle muffled a grin, and wandered off to pay her respects to Argo. "This one's yours, Boo." She pulled another apple from her bag and offered it to the mare, who had been watching her alertly. "Here you go, girl. I didn't forget you."

Argo chewed the apple appreciatively, while Gabrielle gently stroked her cheek. "Let's listen to your mother do a sensitive chat. That'll be fun, right?" She whispered into one golden ear.

"Okay, Dori. We've talked about this before." Xena was saying behind her. "You live with us, he lives with the rest of the horses here."

"But Boo." Dori sounded upset. "He doesn't talk to them like he talks to me."

"See, that's what she gets for marrying me." Gabrielle continued to whisper. "Cause that imagination did not come from Xena, know what I mean?"

"I get it." Xena said. "But that still doesn't mean you get to bring him up to our house. It's hard. He'll get hurt."

"Boo!"

Argo whickered softly, and nosed around the edges of the bag.

"You've got lots of friends in the village, Dor. Don't you like playing with them?"

Gabrielle fished out another apple, aware of the stallion watching her closely in the next stall. "Got one for you too, big boy."

“They’re yucky Boo.”

“Uh oh.” Gabrielle handed off her last apple to Iolaus. “I think I’m about to get pulled into this sensitive chat.”

“Hey mama.” Xena called out over her shoulder. “Your Amazons are being dissed.”

“Tolja.” Gabrielle turned and wandered back over. “You don’t like your friends up there, honey?” She walked inside Rusty’s stall and came up on the other side of the hammock. “I thought you had fun with them.”

“Dere’ mean.” Dori said. “They make peoples feel bad, mama.”

“Oh really.” Gabrielle frowned. “What do you mean, honey? Were they mean to you?”

“No , mama.” Dori shook her disheveled head earnestly. “Other peoples.”

“Hm.”

“Hm.” Xena repeated. “Let’s go up to our place, and we can talk about it.” She ruffled Dori’s hair. “When the weather gets better, maybe we can see if Rusty can come up to visit there.”

Dori’s eyes lit up. “Boo! Yes!”

“You are such a sucker.” Gabrielle mock sighed.

“Hey you were going to drag goats up there.” Xena helped Dori out of the hammock and swung her down to the ground. “You can come back here tomorrow, shortie.

Dori hugged Rusty goodbye and they left the barn, walking along the path in a suddenly more significant wind. The sun was already behind the clouds and it was a dim sort of gray light surrounding them, most of the townsfolk already in their homes.

There were soldiers around, some heading down to the barracks, some heading to relieve the watch on the back gates. By the time the three of them got there, they were the only ones passing through, and the guard was about to close the gates for the night.

“Gnight, Genr’l.” The guard captain gave her a casual salute. “Weather’s turning.”

“Again, yeah.” Xena said. “Tell the forward watch to keep an eye on that injured Amazon. Come get me if you need me.”

“Will surely.” The man said. “Have a good rest.”

The gates closed behind them and they were alone on the path. Gabrielle shifted her staff to her outside hand and put her other hand on Dori’s back as they started up the path. “Getting windy.”

Xena nodded, putting herself on the outside of the path as they moved upward and the gloom increased. “Hope those guys found some shelter.”

“Cait and Benny and them?”

“Yeah.”

The Amazon watch greeted them at the edge of the village, and ushered them through the entrance. There was already a fire built in the sturdy guard house and five or six Amazons were gathering to set the guard, Pony’s distinctive figure among them.

A little sleet was falling by the time they crossed the big open square and headed up the path to their hut, turning the last curve to find an upright, wolfish figure waiting in front of it.

“Guff!” Dori let out a squeal of delight and bolted for him, throwing her arms around his neck as he wagged his tail. ‘I missed you!”

“Hey boy.” Xena pushed the door open, letting everyone in ahead of her and joining them inside. The fire was already started in the fireplace, and there was a platter of bread and cheese on the table, and it seemed friendly and more homelike with all of that.

She sat down on the couch and let both Ares and Dori crawl over her legs, while Gabrielle went and put her staff away in the corner. “Hey Gab?”

“Hey Xena?” Gabrielle detoured over to warm her hands. “How about I cook tonight?”

“How’d you know that’s what I wanted?”

Gabrielle chuckled. “Because you’re thinking about things and you want to talk.” She looked over her shoulder at her partner. “Am I right?”

Xena smiled.

“That’s what I thought.”

**

Cait returned to the campsite, with a double armful of wood to find the fire circle neatly made and waiting. Bennu and Nala were pulling a big log into place, and the men from Phillipi had collected kindling and handfuls of dried moss from the nearby trees.

They had made reasonably good time, and had found shelter at twilight in a stand of heavy trees off the edge of the road. The horses were cropping winter dried grass in a small clearing behind them, and they’d found a creek winding out of the hills past them and down to the river whose water was icy but clean.

The conversation on the trail had slowly gotten less stilted, and the men from Thrace had relaxed as they’d traded experiences with Xena’s soldiers and the two Amazons. They seemed nice enough, proud of being their town militia, and having that in common with Bennu and his men.

Cait put her wood down and went over to her pack, kneeling beside it and opening the top. She removed a thick wad of folded cord and two coils of rope, then stood and shook out the cord, fastening the two ropes to it.

“That was a damn good idea.” Nala had joined her, and removed her own hammock from her pack. ‘Grounds cold as mountain goat’s ass.”

Cait smiled. “Pally made them.” She fastened the hammock to branches on two nearby trees and tucked her furs into it. “She quite surprises me sometimes.”

“Everyone, most of the time.” Nala chuckled softly. “No one thought we’d end up appreciating her. Not even you.”

“Definitely not me.” Cait agreed. “I only didn’t kill her because I promised Xena I wouldn’t until she’d had another chance.” She went back to her pack and picked it up, using another bit of rope to fashion a sling for it and fastening it to the tree her hammock was hanging from.

She removed a packet of travel bread and smoked meat, and assembled a sandwich. “It was lovely of Cyrene to stock us up, wasn’t it?”

“She’s good people.” Her fellow Amazon agreed. “Even if she wasn’t our Queen’s family, she’d be. Solid, you know?”

“Yes.” Cait leaned back against her tree and chewed her sandwich, watching Bennu and one of the Phillipi men lighting the fire, wishing it was started already and almost tasting the tea she knew she’d be making once it was. “I remember the first time I saw her. I was hiding in some bushes near the hen house.”

“Waiting to grab some eggs?” Nala’s eyes twinkled a little.

“Yes, but also I wanted a chicken.” Cait said. “Cyrene saw me, and I thought, well, rats. But she brought over a little pot of stew and left it for me.”

“Probably wanted to keep you away from the hens.”

“Probably.” The young Amazon agreed with a smile. “But you know, it didn’t really matter why she did it. I was just so.. “She paused. “I’d never had anyone do that before. Mostly they set the dogs on me.”

Nala had seated herself on the edge of her hammock and was watching her. “I grew up in the village.” She said. “I remember seeing feral kids run off. Wondered what happened to them.”

“Wasn’t much fun.” Cait admitted. “I really was wild, you know? I used to hide around Amphipolis after that, if I found a tramp in the woods I’d kill them. Keep them out of Cyrene’s business you see.”

“How old were you?”

Cait didn’t answer for a bit. “I don’t actually know.” She finally said, with a short laugh. “I just felt like I was the absolute weirdest person anywhere and then one day Xena came to visit and I said ah, well then, that’s all right because at least there are two of us.”

Nala started chuckling. “Shes a step more than feral. I’ve seen her fight.”

“Oh yes.” Cait dusted her fingers off and unhooked her waterskin from her pack, taking a drink from it. “I remember seeing her practice with her sword the first time, and I knew instantly that’s what I wanted to be. “

“You’ve done pretty good.” The older Amazon smiled at her. “Not many your age make queen’s chief guard.”

No, that was probably true. Cait put her waterskin back and went over closer to the fire, glad of her thick, lined cloak. “Right.” She came up next to Bennu. “Four candlemark watches?”

“Aye, Cait. But we figured we’d trade off like, us do it one night, and our friends here t’other.” Bennu said, indicating the group from Phillipi, who were nodding. “They offered to start off tonight.”

“Right.” Cait repeated, looking Bennu in the eye. “Sounds good.”

Carolous stood up from where he’d been kneeling at the edge of the fire, getting it started. “We’re grateful to you all, you know. It’s hard for fighters to come ask for help.”

“Aye” Bennu and Jax had rolled a fallen log nearer and now he sat down on it. “Better to ask early than late.”

The soldiers all settled in, unrolling their furs and taking out trail rations as they relaxed. The fire had caught and brightened, and they gathered around it’s warmth as the air got colder around them.

It was an odd mixture, Cait thought. The men from Phillipi were more relaxed out here than they had been in town, but most seemed older, and weathered, with the tanned faces of farmers and outdoorsmen who didn’t always wear armor.

Bennu and Jax, and the four other men from Xena’s army were regular soldiers, and they were as comfortable in their leather and metal as Xena herself would have been had she been there. Even though they lived in the town, there was a little separateness about them.

“Ah, is it Cait?” Carolous spoke up after a little while.

“Yes.” Cait had her legs pulled up crossed under her, and she leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “That’s me.”

“Would you mind if we asked a question or two about Amazons? We are not familiar with them – there are no.. is it tribes? In our homeland.”

“Sure.” Nala responded for her. “We don’t mind people asking so long as they’re polite and not jackasses.”

Bennu and the other soldiers chuckled. “Mad fighters.” Bennu commented. “Had em in whole squads in the last war. “

Carolous nodded. “That’s what we heard in the tavern at the market. We were speaking with some of the troops who fought there as well. You gather together and live just with women?”

Nala nodded. “Well, and some sheep and goats.”

“The occasional chicken.” Cait added. “But I heard a story once about the beginnings of the Amazons.. would you like to hear it?”

The men all leaned forward a little, and one brought out a wineskin to pass around to wash down the dry rations. “Surely.” Carolous said. “A tale for sure none of us has heard.”

Nala eyed her companion. “I don’t think **I’ve** even heard it.” She said.

“Excellent.” Cait got herself settled. “Well, here we go then….”

**

Iolaus was sprawled in a chair near the fireplace, a roughly cut stack of parchment bound together in his lap. He was reading through it, pausing occasionally to take a sip from a mug on the small table by his elbow.

He hadn’t a clue that the history of Amphipolis, which was what the collection of pages was would be interesting, but in fact it was – far more than he had guessed it would. Copied and recopied, and probably judiciously amended through the years it was an interesting journey through three quarters of a century of hinterland living.

Outside, he could hear the wind rising and he glanced at the fire and wriggled his shoulders into a more comfortable position, glad now that he hadn’t volunteered to join the expedition out to Phillipi.

He had thought about it. But not that hard. There was something in him that was resisting the whole self sacrificing motif at the moment.

A soft knock came at the door. “C’mon in.” He put the tome aside and looked up as the door opened and Johan stuck his head inside. “Ah hello.”

Johan came inside and shut the door. “Just wanted to let ye know, lad, a bit of news I heard from our friends from Potdeia.” He sat down in the chair opposite Iolaus. “Seems they heard on the road you’re being looked for.”

“Oh yes, I know.” Iolaus agreed mournfully. “Some crazy people got the idea I sank a boat on purpose.”

Johan nodded. “Aye, that’s what they said, that they’d had someone ride through with a drawing of ye, and offering a reward.” He pulled a folded bit of parchment from his belt pouch and handed it over. “No worries on us here, but the smith there said he saw some travelers in the market had these, and did see you.”

“Hm.” Iolaus studied the parchment which had a rough, but reasonable drawing of his likeness. “A hundred dinars, huh? Should I be insulted?”

Johan chuckled. “Be glad. Were it ten times that we’d have legions riding in here on search. This, and maybe a few bounty hunters might try it.”

“You’re right. It’ll take them a few weeks to get back to any place big enough to tell them they saw me, and by that time, maybe they’ll have something more interesting to hunt.”

Johan nodded. “Tis true.” He slapped Iolaus on the arm. “And in any case, be a bolder man than these parts hold to come up here against Xena. They’ll lose more than dinars if they try it.” He got up and headed for the door. “G’night to ye.”

“And you, Johan.” Iolaus waited for the door to close. Then he carefully folded the parchment up into a triangle shape, and tossed it into the fire, watching it catch and go up in immediate flames. “Yeah, he’s right. I’m not worth going up against her, that’s for sure.”

Give it a moon or two, in fact, and he figured he’d be forgotten. The world would move on.

For a while he just gazed into the fire, leaning on one elbow, not even a random thought running through his head. Just listening to the crackle, and the patter of sleet against the roof of the inn.

On the periphery of his hearing, there was a low murmur of voices from the common room, and the gentle thump of footsteps on wood as the other occupants moved towards their accommodations.

It felt like a moment out of time, the echoes growing longer and softer, as he felt a sense of dislocation coming over him.

“Iolaus.”

The voice again. He slowly turned his head and looked around, searching the dark corners of the room, but found nothing in the shadows at all. Just faint motion as the fire in the fireplace fluttered.

“Iolaus.”

He stood up. “Who is it?” He turned his body in a circle, ending up facing the fire again. “I can hear you.”

The fire popped unexpectedly and he jumped, one hand going to the hilt of the knife at his belt. The flames spurted up and the light washed his vision out for a moment. He blinked and covered his eyes with one hand, then felt the nape hairs on his neck lift up in an icy prickle.

Then the room was suddenly filled with fog, and he sucked in a shocked breath as he lost sight of everything around him.

“Iolaus!”

Now the voice was much louder, and it had taken on a familiar timbre. He blinked furiously and waved the fog aside. “Herc?”

“Shh. Stop moving. Stop freaking out.”

Panting a little, Iolaus did, letting his hands drop to his sides and keeping his eyes closed against the harsh sting of the fog. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Hercules’ voice returned. “Open your eyes.”

Iolaus squinted cautiously, and then opened his eyelids fully, finding a familiar outline now between him and the fire. “Herc?”

“Yeah.”

He blinked a few more times and his friend’s features almost sharpened into focus. “Are you here? What happened?”

Hercules lifted his hands and moved them in a calming gesture. “I’m not here. Not.. not in any real sense.” He said. “I don’t have much time. My father put me in a kind of in between place and it’s just right now that he’s distracted that I can talk to you.”

“Oh.” Iolaus felt a weight lift off his chest. “So he grabbed you huh?” He could see Hercules’ face now, as though a faint glow was on it. The rest of his body was out of focus, a blur of skin tone and leather not quite familiar. “Off the boat?”

“He didn’t want anyone to interfere with Athena and Artemis.” Hercules acknowledged. “So he separated us. He sent them… I don’t know where. And me he took up to this place.” He gestured vaguely. “It’s a lot of nothing really. I can’t get past it.”

“Oh.” Iolaus repeated. “That’s terrible. You don’t know where they ended up? We heard here that Athens was looking for them. Looking for me too.”

“I know.” Herc made a face. “Sorry about that, buddy. “

“No problem.” Iolaus muttered. “That’s how Xena and Gabrielle figured it went down. Smart ladies.”

Hercules watched him for a moment with quiet compassion. “I’ve only got a few moments. I can hear the gongs going off so listen. Ares told me..”

“Ares told you?”

“Iolaus, please just listen.” Hercules said. “Ares told me he thinks the girls got picked up by slavers. They stopped in one of his temples and left an offering.”

“Huh. Could be. We heard there were slavers in the area.” Iolaus said. “We heard that Athens was offering a reward for them or any word of them.”

“Not heading that way.. “ Hercules turned suddenly and looked behind him. “Gotta go. Just.. see if you can find out where they might have been taken, okay? Just think hard about it.”

“What?” Iolaus took a step forward. “Wait, don’t go!”

But then the fog was gone, and the chill, and the snap of the fire was suddenly loud and bright in his ears. He reached out in pure reflex, but there was nothing there to touch. “Son of a Bacchae.”

His knees felt weak and he sat down abruptly. “Wow.”

His heart was still thundering, and he felt a little lightheaded. He sat back in the chair and exhaled slowly, picking up his cup and draining it, giving the ball of emotion in his gut time to resolve and leech away.

A faint smile appeared on his face. Then he reached up and rubbed his eyes, letting them close as he slumped deeper in the chair.

**

Gabrielle picked up her quill and dunked it in the ink cup, resting her head on one hand as she started to write.

Today was one of those days. The watch brought back one of the Amazons we ran out of town – the queen Alana. Shes still unconscious, so we don’t know what happened to her, but there are only two real possibilities. One, that they were all attacked n the road and Alana was left for dead..

Or two, that her rival challenged her and won. But if that happened, would they have left her there like that? Really?

Maybe they would have if they’d thought she was dead too. No sense in taking a body back.. but sheeps. They should have given her a pyre after all.

How awful that must be, if that was the case. You lose most of your tribe, and then what’s left abandons you. I guess I know what Xena meant when she thought Alana would rather stay down in the barracks – the soldiers are all unknown to her. It’s much easier to accept the pity of people you don’t really know isn’t it?

Isn’t it.

Gabrielle studied the words, feeling a bit somber. Behind her, Xena was sharpening her sword, the soft hiss and scrape in well remembered rhythm. She half turned and looked at her partner, who was sprawled on the ground near the fireplace, long legs stretched out on the rug and crossed at the ankle.

Dori was asleep in her bed, and Ares was curled up on the bearskin rug next to it, his paws twitching as he slept.

Ah, her family. Gabrielle smiled and then she turned and went back to her diary.

But that's what it would have been like for me, if Velasca had won, and Xena had never come back wouldn't it? She would have killed me, or just beaten me and left me somewhere, and I wouldn't have had anyone to help me.

And I wouldn't have gone home. I get that now. Not and seen those pitying eyes of my family. I wouldn't have then, and I don't think I would now. I remember how I felt coming back here for the first time – after the worst times we had.

Took me a long time to get that view of myself out of my head.

But on to other things. Xena sent a squad of her troops, and I sent Cait and Nala out with the folks from Thrace, to look around and see what the deal was with that port city. We all hope they're just a short term annoyance. No one wants to end up going to war.

Not even Xena.

She blew gently on the page to dry the ink, then closed the diary, putting the quill down and half turning in her chair. "Hey hon."

"Hey Gabrielle." Xena looked up and smiled, her pale eyes almost ochre in the firelight. "You ready to go to bed?"

"With you? Always." Gabrielle smiled back.

Xena wiped her blade down and sheathed it, then she stood up and put the weapon on it's shelf above Dori's reach. She walked over and extended her hand, pulling Gabrielle up when she took it and wrapping her arms around her.

The melancholy she'd been feeling faded. Gabrielle took a breath full of Xena's scent and savored the hug. "I love you."

"Back atcha." Xena guided her over to the bed and they fell into it together, getting under the covers and snuggling up as Xena reached out and pinched the bedside candle out. "Let's leave tomorrow for tomorrow."

"Sounds good to me." Gabrielle felt the gentle touch under her shift and she was glad enough to let the long day's troubles dissipate replaced by the slowly ramping burn of passion. Xena's lips found hers and they both smiled.

You had to savor life, didn't you? Every single moment of it.

**

"Gabrielle."

Halfway across the lane leading to the inn, Gabrielle paused on hearing her name. She turned and peeked out from under her hood, giving Iolaus a little wave. "Hey. Good morning."

Iolaus caught up with her. "Hey. Can we talk?"

Ah heh. "Sure. Join me for some breakfast? I've got a council meeting in a candlemark." Gabrielle guided him towards the back door to the inn's kitchen.

They went inside and found the kitchen quiet. Gabrielle grabbed two mugs of hot cider and a plate of bread and brought them back over to the table. "Here, let me get something to put on that."

Iolaus picked up his mug and sipped it, watching his friend as she scoured around the kitchen collecting edibles. She had thrown her hood back and the oil lamp on the hanger outlined her face and profile.

She had really grown up in the last few years. Iolaus remembered the baby faced youngster that had first collided with Xena and it was hard to imagine that kid growing into the woman who was now plunking a bowl on the table and taking a seat opposite him.

She was so intense now. All the awkwardness of her shy adolescence was long gone and the powerful will was very evident.

But a little fun was too. Gabrielle winked at him and took a bit of bread and cheese, and an apple from the bowl. “So what’s up? Since people don’t usually grab me first thing in the morning to talk about the weather.”

‘Hah hah.” Iolaus glanced around, but they were obviously alone and he hoped it stayed that way long enough for him to get his story out. “Everyone already thinks I’m skanky here, I’d rather only you hear this.”

Both of Gabrielle’s fair eyebrows lifted. “No one here thinks you’re skanky.” She objected.

“A fugitive then.” Iolaus said. “So.. I had a weird dream last night.”

‘Uh huh.” Gabrielle chewed on her apple.

“Or.. well, I think it was a dream. Today when I woke up it sure seemed like it.” Iolaus said. “I was kind of in this foggy place, you know?”

“Okay.” Gabrielle responded. “I’ve had a few dreams like that.”

“So, but Herc was talking to me in it” Iolaus got that out fast. “I mean, he was in the foggy place too, and he was telling me that Zeus put him someplace, to keep him from interfering with his sisters.”

“Huh.”

“Which.. I mean, that sounds pretty like we’d figured, right?”

“Right.”

“But then he said something like, maybe his sisters ended up being kidnapped.”

Gabrielle’s brow lifted. She put her apple down. “Are you sure this was a dream?” She asked. “Usually dreams.. at least my dreams aren’t nearly that coherent.”

“Well, mine either but what else could it be?” Iolaus asked. “Anyway he said to try and find out if anyone has heard anything about them being picked up by slavers, or something like that, and then it was over.”

Gabrielle’s eyes shifted off him and to the right, going a little unfocused. Then she looked up sharply. “Tell me about the fog.”

Iolaus blinked in surprise. “The fog? It was foggy.” He said. “Just sort of misty and weird. You know what fog’s like.”

“Did it smell like roses?”

“What?”

“Think back to it. Did it smell like roses?” Gabrielle repeated her question. “You know that kind of spicy sweet smell they have?”

Had it? Iolaus found himself caught offguard. “I don’t remember.” He said. “I wasn’t thinking about that. I was j.. I don’t remember it smelling like anything.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle rested her wrists on the table. “I was just remembering something and thought it may be the same thing but maybe not.” She said. “That sounds like a really specific kind of dream though, Iolaus. That wasn’t random.”

“Well, that’s what I thought too.” Iolaus said. “I mean.. when I woke up I thought maybe.. you know it was something my mind just made up because it’s what I want to believe.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle repeated the low noise. “That thing I was remembering.. I thought that same thing about it. It was when Xena .. as far as I knew, was dead.” She gazed into her cup with a pensive

expression. "It was like that, with the fog. Xe talked to me in that and when it was over I remember thinking was that something I just made up because I wanted it so badly to be true?"

They were both silent for a long moment. Then Iolaus cleared his throat gently. "But it wasn't."

"Oh no, definitely not." The bard said.

"But.. Herc's not dead." Iolaus said. "I mean, he can't be."

"No, Xena wasn't either." Gabrielle smiled faintly. "Not really. But it makes sense that Herc would try to contact you, Iolaus. And it sounds like what he told you is probably something we should consider."

Iolaus smiled briefly, with a touch of embarrassment. "Thanks for not thinking I'm nuts." He reached over and clasped her hand. "I'd kinda decided I was going to believe it was true even if it was a dream."

The door abruptly moved inward, and they looked up as Paladia stuck her head inside. "Hey." She addressed Gabrielle. "That chick who got clocked is yelling for you."

"Eh. Great." Gabrielle stood up. "C'mon, Iolaus. Maybe she's seen something on the road that ties into that message you got." She put her cups and the bowl on the washing up deck and headed for the door. "Paladia, you remember what Athena and Artemis looked like?"

"Yeah." The taller woman backed hastily out of the way to let them go past.

"Grab a parchment and quill and c'mon with us too."

**

Xena had Dori by the hand as they crossed the open space in the village and headed for the gathering hall. They had just finished breakfast and now they were on their way to have a little talk with the children's teachers in the village.

It had been a toss up – as to who was going to have the talk. Xena had finally convinced Gabrielle to let her do it, since it took the whole issue of her partner being the queen out of it.

And, of course, it put the whole issue of people being intimidated by Xena into it. "C'mon Dor." Xena picked up her daughter and carried her up the steps, much to the child's delight. "You're gonna help me find out what's going on."

"Go Boo." Dori wrapped her arms around Xena's neck as they entered the hall. "Dere dey are." She pointed at the group of youngsters, who were sitting at a table listening to two of the older Amazons.

The two of them looked up as they sensed someone approaching and Xena noted the look of alarm, and suddenly pale faces that let her know that Dori's tale had probably been accurate. "Good morning."

The young Amazons all waggled their fingers at her in greeting. Xena put Dori down at the table, then pointed at an empty table a little behind them. "Mind if we chat?" She pinned both women with an intent stare, daring them to deny the request.

"Okay sure." They both stepped back. "Just work on your drawing, okay?" They instructed the children, before they turned their attention to the tall woman waiting for them.

"Siddown." Xena indicated the benches. "Dori told me about something that happened yesterday and I want to know what actually happened."

The two relaxed a little.

"Not that I think my kid's a liar, but she's her mother's daughter." Xena said. "And she's got a wild imagination she didn't get from me."

The older of the two Amazons nodded. "Thanks, Xena. We were talking this morning about coming to talk to you because we figured Dori might have said something."

“So?”

Bente, the speaker, nodded again. “So, the kids were playing yesterday. You know, kid games. They were hiding stuff and then finding it.”

“What Dori said was, they were picking on one of the younger ones.” Xena said. “Taking her things and hiding them.”

“Well, I mean, they’re kids.” Bente said, and her companion nodded “Kids do that, you know?” She studied the angular face across from her. “Maybe you don’t.”

Xena’s pale eyes twinkled a little. “I’m the pack leader in the family.” She acknowledged. “Go on.”

“So, the kids establish that kind of pecking order too. It gets them ready to be Amazons. “ Bente said, in a serious tone. “It’s nice to say life’s always fair and everyone’s a friend but you know that’s not true.”

Xena nodded.

“So.” Telan, her companion spoke up. “I guess Dori didn’t like them picking on little Cari. So she went up to the two who had Cari’s bag, were holding it up over her head, and whacked them.”

“She hit them?”

Bente nodded. “She shoved one of them, and sent her flying, then the other one went to grab her and she took hold of her arm and pulled her down to the ground.”

“Hm.” Xena grunted thoughtfully. “Then what?”

“She got Cari’s bag and gave it back to her and told her she shouldn’t cry.” Telan said. “But then, the rest of the gang figured they weren’t going to put up with that and they all went after Dori.”

“We were running over to stop them.” Bente said. “We didn’t want Dori to get hurt, but turns out we didn’t need to worry. Not sure which one of you, no disrespect, taught her to fight but boy.” The Amazon shook her head a little. “She’s got a mean punch for a five year old.”

Xena looked past them to where Dori was kneeling on the bench, with a quill in one hand and a smear of ink across her face, busy drawing on a piece of parchment. “Neither of us taught her to hit people. But she’s seen us fight often enough.” She admitted. “She’s strong for her age.”

Bente nodded. “But what.. I mean, it wasn’t just that she defended herself.” She said with a hint of a smile. “It was the attitude. She wasn’t’ scared when they all faced off against her. She just put her fists up and let out this yell, and it scared the rest of them into running away.”

Xena rested her chin against her fist, with a wry smile.

“So, we knew it would be trouble, but you know what, Xena? We also thought about what she’s going to be when she grows up and takes Gabrielle’s right.” Telan said, a bit shyly. “It was like, wow. That’s an Amazon.”

The warrior sighed. “Yeah. Gabrielle and I have talked about it. What Dori was pissed off about more than anything was that her little friend was being picked on for what she considered no reason.” She explained. “She doesn’t get being competitive.”

“No, I noticed that.” Bente said. “She shares everything and wants everyone to just have fun.” She added. “But she also doesn’t take any crap.”

Xena shifted and drummed her fingers on the table. “I’ll talk to her tonight.” She said. “But I’m not sure I want to tell her not to defend her friends and I know her mother wont’ go for that either. So you might have to deal with her doing that.”

Both of them nodded. “Thanks for talking to us about it, Xena. We were a little worried about approaching Queen Gabrielle.” Telan said.

The sudden absurdity of the comment almost made Xena start laughing. "I'll let her in on the story. I want Dori to have fun with the rest of the kids here. She went down to the barn and was just talking to her pony after what happened. "

"Aw." Bente said. "That pony is so cute."

"Yeah but then she wanted me to bring the pony up to the hut. I'd rather she play with other kids." Xena stood up. "Let me know when there's problems okay?"

"Okay." Telan looked profoundly relieved. "Thanks!" They got up and went back to the table with the children, and Xena sat for a moment watching them.

The older girls were giving Dori a slightly wary look. But the younger ones, the threes and fours and the little curly haired Cari looked delighted to see her and two of them had joined her in working on her parchment.

The oldest one there was probably around ten, and old enough to understand rank. Xena found herself caught between consternation at Dori's apparent aggressiveness and raw pride that her kid was ready and willing to defend her buddies and herself.

She'd never wanted Dori to become a fighter. But really, given her and Gabrielle's nature, what had she expected? Even Gabrielle's poetic soul came with a bucket of kickass and as for her?

"Boo!"

Xena looked over at her child. "Yes?"

"C'mon and help draw dis, pleeeeese?"

The warrior got up and joined the children's table, hoping her beloved soulmate was at least as well entertained.

**

Gabrielle threaded her way through the busy soldiers, gathered inside to work on armor and weapons. The barracks were warm and quite cozy, with carpets and mats on the walls, and sturdy tables where men and women were at work making arrows and fixing crossbows.

Many called a greeting to her, and she lifted her hand in answer, giving it a wave as she and her little gang entered the hallway and headed for the healer's ward.

Gabrielle pushed the door open and entered, looking around quickly and spotting the small room near the window that Alana had been sheltered in. "Okay." She exhaled and headed inside with Paladia and Iolaus at her heels.

Alana was propped up on two pillows in bed, her face a mass of bruises. She looked around as the croud came in and pushed herself upward a bit. "You."

Gabrielle pulled up a stool and sat at the side of the bed. "Me." She agreed. "I heard you were calling for me. I didn't know you were awake."

"No one would tell me anything." Alana said, speaking with some difficulty due to her bruises. "Who is it that cared for me? I must know."

Gabrielle studied her, seeing the fear and distrust there along with a touch of shame. Bingo, Xe. She complimented her absent soulmate. "Xena did." She replied in a quiet tone. "She's our chief healer, for one thing and for another, she knew you'd expect that as a sister."

Alana relaxed back onto the pillows. "Who found me?"

"Our watch." The bard said, in the same even voice. "Halfway down the road towards Potadeia. You were alone."

The Amazon studied her face briefly. "Your watch?"

“Amphipolis’s watch” Gabrielle clarified. “Of which I’m a captain. We have outposts all the way to the pass and a little beyond.” She shifted a little. “The man who found you said you were off the road in a patch of some trees. We checked the outer posts and no one’s reported seeing the rest of your group.”

Alana looked past her. “Who are you?”

“This is Iolaus. He’s a friend.” Gabrielle said. “What happened, Alana. Were you attacked?”

The woman stared at her in silence.

“If you were, and you can remember what they looked like…” Gabrielle indicated Paladia, who was seated on a nearby bench, parchment and a bit of charcoal in hand. “We can send out the guard to see if they can find them.”

“I didn’t see anything.” Alana said, finally, in a stiff voice. “One moment I was filing my waterskin. I heard a noise. Then I woke up here.”

“So you have no idea who did this?” Gabrielle asked, consciously gentling her tone. “No reflection in the water, anything? We’d like to help if we can.”

“I’m sure you would.” The Amazon said. “But there’s nothing to be done. I thank you for the care. I’ll be out of your debt as soon as I can.” She closed her eyes, and turned her cheek on the pillow, away from them.

Gabrielle pinched the bridge of her nose, then exhaled. “Well get some rest. I’ll let Xena know you came to.” She got up and backed off, exchanging a glance with the soldier/healer who was sitting patiently by. “Thanks.”

“M’lady.” The man gave her a respectful touch of his fist to his chest.

“Nice.” Paladia said, as they exited the barracks back out into the weather. “All Amazons have pinecones up their ass or something?”

‘They aren’t all like that.” Iolaus spoke up.

“You haven’t lived with em. Have ya?”

**

Cait pulled a bit of cloth from her shirt up over her mouth as she guided Shadow along the path. They were heading down slope along a ridge and the wind was starting to swirl around them with some ferocity after a relatively mild morning.

She felt good though, after a decent nights rest and the physical discomfort they were suffering wasn’t extreme, just annoying. She took out a bit of wood from her saddlebag and a small knife, and started whittling.

Nala was in front of her and Bennu was behind her with the rest of the soldiers at his tail, and the Phillipi men leading the way.

The night watch had been uneventful. Cait was keeping her eyes on the visitors anyway, never ready to trust anyone until their worth had been proven.

The path widened a little and Nala drew up even with her, peering ahead at the downward slope. “That’s where the ambush was last time, wasn’t it?”

Cait nodded. “Yes, and where Queen Gabrielle spotted that hornet’s nest. Good job, that.”

“It was. We probably saved a few punctures to our hides with that. Those soldiers were no joke.” The older Amazon agreed. “We ever figure out what side those were on?”

Cait thought about that as she carved on the wooden wing of a bird she was working out. “Oh gosh it was so hard to say, at the end there. Everyone was a bit squirrelly, weren’t they? The lot from Athens, and the lot from Sparta, and all that.”

“I missed most of it.” Nala glowered. “Boy am I glad that’s all in the past and half those idiots went somewhere else.”

“Me too.”

They were almost at the base of the mountain and now the path was becoming the road that would skirt around the foothills and approach the pass that lead into Thrace.

The last time she rode along this path it had ended in spotting a Spartan army, but this time the road was far colder, and the area seemed very deserted.

Bennu came up to ride on her other side as they came to level ground and as they did, a fine, light snow started to fall. “Ah.” The soldier grunted.

“It was scorching hot last time we were here.” Cait remarked. “I really can’t decide which is worse.”

“Depends on how you look with most of your clothes off.” Nala replied placidly. “I think the attitude’s gotten better back home mostly because half those women don’t have to walk around sucking their guts in all the time.”

Cait chuckled, and Bennu did too, after a moment. “Got a point.” He said. “Hot’s bad in armor, cold’s bad in armor. But if you gotta wear armor, better it be cold.” He pronounced. “Envied you all on that last bit of a trip.”

Cait remembered the sweating, miserably flushed faces on the ride and nodded. “Too right.”

The pace picked up as they headed towards the plains, the ground around them becoming coated with a furry looking covering of frosty snow. The clouds were dense overhead and the sun completely obscured.

Caroulous came cantering back to them “Just other side of the pass, there’s a rockslide that makes a bit of a cave system. We can stop there for the night if you’re all right with that.”

“Sounds all right.” Bennu said. “Looks like weather’s worsening.”

Carolous looked up, shading his eyes as white flakes drifted down and dusted his skin. “Tis true.” He said. “But the caves should give us shelter from it. We stopped there on the way to Amphipolis – can be decently defended as well.”

They continued on, moving out of the shelter of the trees into the open, and pulling up hoods and wrapping cloaks as a stiff wind hit them.

Cait watched Shadow’s ears flicking, and she put her carving away for later as she shifted forward a bit and tightened her knees against the horse’s sides. She liked the mare very much, being one of the lighter built of the animals and more suited to her frame.

Gabrielle, she recalled, also preferred riding her and said the smaller horse was easier on her back on long distance rides.

Riding had not quite come naturally to her. Cait acknowledged. Amazons were not, in general, horse riders and she’d grown up feral and more interested in catching rabbits than riding on anything. She’d only learned to ride around the time of the war, and it still was something she had to think about rather than it being second nature.

She envied Xena for that a bit. Watching her mentor on horseback was simply awesome, her balance and motion were so natural it seemed like she was really part of the animal she was riding. And it seemed to Cait that Dori was just the same.

She wondered how long it would be before she woke up in the village to find that pony running around.

Cait chuckled, then a faint sound came to her ears and she straightened in the saddle, her motion catching Bennu’s attention as he turned his horses head aside. “Yelling.” Cait said, briefly. “And perhaps a lovely fight.”

The column straggled to a halt at Bennu's shout, and when the hoofbeat's echos settled, the rest of them heard the noise too.

"Right." Nala shifted her cloak off her shoulder, exposing her sword hilt. "Let's see what we got." She turned off their path towards the sound, with Cait and Bennu right behind her, and the rest of the Amphipolitans at their heels.

After a brief hesitation, the men from Phillipi followed.

**

The town council meeting was most of the way over. Gabrielle was seated at the big, rectangular wooden table in the council hall with a handful of other townsfolk, including Johan and Cyrene.

The hall was new, and recently finished. The table however was an old one, the wood worn and smooth under her forearms as Gabrielle leaned against it. It had once been in the back of the inn, near the fire and there was still a hint of smokiness about it.

"Well." Ben put his quill down. "I have to say that's the best harvest we've had in years and years. So much that we managed to sell off some surplus at the market and made a deal with the traders from Potadeia in return for a wagon full of their blankets."

"Shepherd blankets?" Gabrielle asked, in mild delight. "Where are they? I"ll take a couple. I wore the last one I got from home out to nubbins."

"We've got them in the back here." Ben pointed to his right. "Glad to get them – thick, heavy weave they are, and nice colors."

Gabrielle nodded. "Most of the sheep are kept up in the hill folds all winter. You need a nice thick blanket when you're watching them up there." She smiled a little. "I can remember my mother cutting a hole in the middle of mine for my head, and tying it around me with a rope so it wouldn't get lost."

Paladia was sitting on one of the benches near the wall with Aalene at her side. They were acting as Gabrielle's guard, though it was her opinion that the Queen needed a guard like a cat needed shoes. It got them out of the weather though, near a nice fire, with a cup of grog and not on a hunting party.

She listened to the talk with some interest, finding it hard to imagine Gabrielle as a little moppet running around after the lambs as a kid since she was so used to seeing her in her various different but privileged positions now.

"Glad I didn't grow up in a place like that." Aalene muttered softly. "I've been to Potadeia. Makes Amphipolis look like Athens in comparison."

"Yeah." Paladia muttered back. "My place was like that. Six huts and a farting pig."

"I grew up a featherhead." The other Amazon said. "My mother was a fletcher and bowyer. We did okay, but if she could see what we have now, she'd have screamed."

Having stuff was good. Paladia had to agree. She had a pouch of coins back in her and Cait's quarters from the sale of her pictures and she thought about what it had felt like to have less than nothing back when.

This was much better. The whole Amazon thing had worked out, to her surprise. They were okay. Cait was okay. Even Gabrielle had turned out to be okay.

Paladia grunted, as the meeting seemed to come to it's end and Gabrielle got up from behind the table. "What do you figure now, back up to our place?"

"I think so. We've got adjudication coming up and her nibs likes to have some time to get all the cases sorted out before that." Aalene got up and went to the pegs on the wall, retrieving Gabrielle's cloak and bringing it over to her.

"Thanks." Gabrielle threw the garment over her shoulder. "Let's see what color blankets they've got – maybe they'll have some of Mara's blue ones."

“Thought I saw some blue..” Ben said, as he led the way to the storage room. “Should have figured you were partial to that color, Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle chuckled softly in response, then paused and turned as the outer door to the gathering hall opened rather sharply.

“Gabrielle.” The soldier who entered spotted her. “Looks like a small group of guards coming up the road. Flying an Athenian banner.”

“Ah rats.” Gabrielle sighed. “Aalene, run up the hill and let my better half know, would you? Two dinars to six, they’re looking for either her or Iolaus.

“Right.” Aalene grabbed her cloak and headed for the door. “I”ll let him know to stay inside on the way.”

Paladia and Gabrielle exchanged resigned glances. “Shoulda sent him with the nutcase.” Paladia commented. “Those people are just a big fat pain in the ass.”

“True.” Gabrielle swung her cloak on and fastened it. “C’mon. They’ll go to the inn I’m sure. Better let mom know.” She turned back to where Ben was waiting. “They got any.. ah thanks.” She lifted her hands and caught the blanket thrown her way. “See you guys later.”

**

Xena relaxed in her chair by the fire, ostensibly reading from the small bound parchment resting against her knee.

Her senses were focused on the rest of the room though, and she had at least one ear cocked to listen to the class going on at the table nearby.

She knew she was the focus of attention of her own, and if she’d let her eyes lift from her book a few dozen others would dart off elsewhere and find something else to look at.

It was mildly funny to her. She wasn’t really sure what the fascination was at the moment since she was fully dressed in well tanned hides and there had to be a limited interest in watching her read but it was what it was, and she amused herself by occasionally looking around just to see the reaction.

The children’s group was now working on making snares. Xena wasn’t sure that her daughter was really aware of what the snares were for, but she was crouched intently over hers, trying to get the bit of gut to lay flat inside it’s circle of twigs.

Everything seemed peaceful today, whether because no one wanted a repeat of yesterday, or whether the kids were conscious of Dori’s nearby protector. Little Cari was sticking close to her friend, though, sitting next to Dori on the long bench, her piping voice audible over the low grade murmur in the room.

Xena watched the kids for a minute, then she shifted a little in her chair, and propped her elbow on one arm of it, turning the page of her book and looking back down.

Across the big room tables were being cleared, and a circle was forming as two of the more senior warriors were getting their swords out to start a little sparring. Xena felt a bit of interest stir at that, and she pondered the thought of getting her own sword and joining in.

“Boo!”

“Yeeees?” Xena’s eyes shifted to her daughter. “Whatcha got, shortie?” She asked as Dori climbed down from the bench and came over to her, carefully carrying her creation.

“Dis right, Boo?”

Xena put her book down and sat up, holding her hands out flat. “Put it here, let me check.”

Dori put the snare in them. Then she sat down on the footstool next to the chair and waited, watching Xena’s face intently. “Is good, Boo?”

Xena studied the snare. “Good job, Dori.” She said, after a pause. “Did they tell you what to use this for?”

Dori frowned, and shook her head.

“Put your finger in the circle there.”

Dori did, and jumped when it closed on her, and held her hand fast. “Oh!”

Xena loosened the snare and put it down on the footstool. “That’s for catching animals.” She told her daughter solemnly. “The animal puts his foot in there, and it holds him so he can’t get away.”

Dori looked at the snare, then up at her parent, then back at the snare. “That’s bad, Boo!” She stated. “Why we do that?”

Ah. Xena picked her up and sat her on her lap, well aware of the interested onlookers. “It’s kinda like when we go catch fishes, Dor.” She told the child. “Then your mama makes them yummy, right?”

“Fishes.” Dori repeated.

“Right. So that catches little animals, the same way as you and I catch fishes.” Xena held up one hand and wiggled its fingers. “So then they take them and make something good to eat with them.”

Dori reached out and grasped the hand, holding it still. “We catched aminals?”

“Yes.”

Her daughter’s pale green eyes studied her gravely. “But we don’t get buppits, Boo.”

“No.” Xena smiled gently at her. “We don’t. But buppits catch animals too, you know.” She told her. “Everyone wants something good to eat, don’t they?”

“Rusty just has stickies,” Dori observed. “He don’t get aminals.”

“That is one smart kid.” Pony had eased into a chair nearby. “You know that?”

Xena nodded “That’s right, shortie. Horses only eat grass. But we can’t eat grass, right?”

“No.”

“So we’ve got to work a lot harder, don’t we? Your mama works real hard to make things that taste good for us, right?”

“Go mama.” Dori kicked her feet out a little. “But horsies like happles, Boo.” She said. “C’n we get some happles?”

Xena ruffled her hair. “Sure.” She handed back the snare. “Go put this back right over on the table, then we can go find some apples.”

Dori took the item and trotted back over to the class, climbing up on the bench and setting it down as the rest of the children started talking about their own projects.

Xena sighed. “I was hoping not to have that little talk yet, but eventually she’d have to figure out where that rabbit stew came from.” She picked her book back up. “Need something?”

“Just taking a break.” Pony said. “I’m gonna have to get into that circle over there soon. You see that stance? “ She shook her head. “Knock her over with a pinecone.”

Xena studied the fighters for a minute. “Good luck with that.” She shook her head, then looked up again as the door opened and Aalene came inside, obviously searching for someone. “Uh oh.” She whistled softly then lifted her hand as the Amazon turned.

“Now what?” Pony groused. “Those goats get out? Your mother’s bull get loose? Random gang of drunken raiders attacking the market?’

Xena felt no urgency from her partner, so she assumed the same sort of thing as well. “We’ll find out in a minute.”

Aalene arrived. "Xena, the watch came in and told us there's a handful of Athenian soldiers heading this way. Gabrielle said to come get you."

"Ah." Xena got up and tucked her book away into the pouch at her belt. "Only a handful?"

"That's what they said. Half dozen I think." Aalene confirmed. "Flying a banner."

"Figures." Pony got up. "I'll come with." She went to get her cloak. "Eph's taking a nap, least I'll have something to entertain her with when she gets up."

Dori spotted all the motion and came running over. "Boo, where you go?"

"C'mere, shortie. You're going too. We're going to go find your mama and see what trouble she's getting into. How about that?"

"Whee!" Dori turned and bolted for the door, causing Xena to quickly dodge several Amazons and leap over a table in chasing after her. "Go go go!"

Pony fastened her clasp and started after them, shaking her head as Aalene joined her. "Glad as hell I'm gonna be retired by the time that kid grows up."

**

Gabrielle was standing near the fireplace, hands on hips when the inner door opened. She looked over to see her partner entering, with Dori scooting ahead of her. "Hey you two!"

"Mama!" Dori held up her hands and gave a little leap towards her mother as she was caught and lifted. "Mama we should have stikies and happles to eat! No aminals!"

Gabrielle studied her, then looked over at her partner with a perplexed expression. "What?"

"Class up the hill was in snares." Xena explained briefly. "I had to tell her what they were for."

"Ooh." Gabrielle gave Dori a hug. "I see." She patted her daughter on the back. "We can talk about that later, Dor. I think you'd get bored with just hay and apples after a while." She told her.

Xena came up next to her and put a hand on Gabrielle's back. "So we've got soldiers headed this way?"

"Not so much, Xena." Johan was seated at the nearby table. "Seems like just a group of travelers, watch said."

"Carrying a pennant?" The warrior gave him a skeptical look.

"Dressed like locals." Johan said. "Or anyhow, not like the last lot of them that showed up here."

They all sat down at the scattered tables, and the servers had brought around pitchers of ale when the front door opened and three of Xena's men came in with a half dozen strangers who were led immediately over to the back table

"General." The oldest of the soldiers saluted. "These folks asked to see yah."

Xena was seated against the wall, and she remained there, casually regarding the newcomers. "What's on your minds?" She asked.

The group was, as the guard said, dressed for traveling. They had solid cloaks on over thick tunics and leggings, all well made but without any gilt or markings. The apparent leader of the group stepped forward and put his hands on the chair opposite the one Xena was sitting in.

"You are Xena?"

Xena blinked mildly at him. "I am." She admitted.

"My name is Delphas. I represent the regional authority on behalf of the Athens council." He said. "We know you are harboring a criminal here. I am here to offer you a deal for him."

Well, now wasn't that refreshing honesty. "Sit down." Xena said. "Let's start off by you telling me exactly who you're looking for and why." She said, motioning the server over. "There are people I'd hand over to you free of charge, and people you'd never have enough coin to offer for."

Delphas sat down, nodding a little and folding his hands in front of him. "I understand." He said, in a courteous tone. "May the rest of us take a seat?"

"Sure." Xena indicated the next table over, where two of the town elders were sitting. The other travellers went and sat down with muted sighs of relief, holding their hands out to the fire.

"It's been a cold march." Delphas said. "We have been out looking for this criminal for two sevendays. Yesterday, we met a man on the road, and he pointed us here. He'd been at a market here and said he saw our mark wandering free."

Xena merely looked back at him, one dark eyebrow lifted.

Delphas cleared his throat. "We know this man as Stephan." He said. "He is the local leader of a gang of raiders who have been robbing and murdering people all along this side of Therma, and has been charged with robbing the tax rolls that were on their way to Athens."

Xena looked at Gabrielle, who shrugged faintly. Then she lifted her eyes past their visitor to her soldiers. "We know that name?"

"Not as such, general." The older one said.

"Johan?" Xena turned to him next. "Did you find anyone called that in the market?"

Johan pursed his lips, and looked past them, silent for a long moment. "No, lass." He finally said. "No man by that name came to my notice." He looked at Delphas. "Could he have gone by some other?"

Delphas looked puzzled. "But we are sure he was here." He said. "He doesn't care if people know about him why would he hide behind a false name?"

Johan shrugged. "Donno, lad." He said. "Just saying we didn't have cause to notice anyone by that one in the market. What's he look like?"

"Middling height, pale hair, big, thrusty kind of nose." Delphas produced promptly. "Had a scar on his arm, below the elbow here." He pointed at his own arm, and drew his finger down to his wrist. "Twisted, like a scythe had taken him."

Johan looked at Xena.

"Didn't know his name." Xena admitted. "But he was here."

"Ah." Delphas nodded. "And now?"

"Now he's dead." The warrior replied in a mild tone. "Found him stuffed in a provisions barrel. We put him on a pyre."

'So that's who he was." Gabrielle mused. "He paid one of the local kids to put caltrops in our stable." She explained to Delphas. "Seems like a petty, mean thing to do."

The man looked stunned. "You're sure?" He asked Xena.

"That he was dead? Yes." Xena replied. "We don't know how he got that way though. No one came forward to say he'd been in a fight, or anything."

"Huh." Delphas leaned back in the wooden chair, and let his hands fall to his thighs. "By the gods, to hunt like that and come to nothing. "

Dori appeared, entering the room from the kitchen where she'd escaped to find a snack. She came over clutching a cookie in one hand, and latched on to her mother's overtunic with the other. "Mama."

Gabrielle picked her up and sat her on her lap. "Is it just him you're looking for? What about the gang he was leading?" She bounced Dori up and down a little on her knee. "Is this the same gang we heard were going around grabbing people to sell them into slavery?"

Delphas shrugged. “That, I cannot tell you. I know his gang were ambushing people in ones and twos on the road, stealing from them, that kind of thing. That’s how they got ahold of the tax rolls. Two of the towns closer in reported the messengers carrying theirs had come back beaten.”

“Sure that’s true?” Xena asked, skeptically. “They could just be saying that.”

“They could.” The man said. “But we know from others this gang was running loose, and you yourself say he meant mischief here.”

“Weird mischief.” Gabrielle said. “I mean, whats the profit to them in potentially crippling our horses?” She asked. “Not even the cavalry’s. Our family’s. “ She hugged Dori. “My kid’s pony, my partner’s mare, and a few others.”

“Only thing that would have gotten him was my sword in his gut.” Xena said.

“Would you have ridden out after him?” Delphas asked, after a moment. “Yourself, I mean?”

“For that? Yes.” Xena asserted. “I would have cut them all to pieces.”

“Then perhaps the target was not your animals, but you?” He responded. “We hear his market is off in Thrace, and have expensive tastes.”

Xena blinked at him then turned her head and looked at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle frowned. “Do you really think they’d risk having Xena and a round of cavalry from here go out after them? She’s kinda dangerous y’know?”

“Stephan was not from these parts. He was from eastern Thrace, and only recently started inroads here, somewhat after the Spartan invasion. He might not know of your reputation.” Delphas said. “In any case, I will need some proofs of his demise. The council will demand it.”

“Little hard.” Xena leaned back. “He’s ashes.”

“Well..”

Paladia chose that moment to stand up from where she’d been sitting next to Aalene and come over, removing a piece of parchment from her sling bag and handing it over to Xena. “The guy who croaked, right?”

Xena examined it, then gave Paladia an appreciative grin. “Thanks.” She handed it over to Delphas. “This your man?”

Delphas took the sheet eagerly and peered at it motioning the others who’d come with him forward. “I think.. Gellen, is this the man?”

A tall, blond haired man with a thick beard and moustache put his hand on the table and leaned in to examine the likeness. “I believe it is, sir.” He said. “Hard to be completely sure.. “ He glanced up at Paladia. “You drew this?”

Paladia nodded. “Didn’t have a choice on the posing. He was dead.” She said, bluntly.

“Good job.” Gabrielle complimented her. “We were going to see if anyone in the tribe had seen him around.” She explained to Delphas. “We had a market stall there.”

“May we ask them as well? The more information we can collect, the better since it seems I will not be bringing the man himself back.” Delphas sighed.

“Sure.” Gabrielle got up and set Dori on her feet. “Let’s go on up there now, before the weather starts really getting bad.”

Xena caught the eye of two of her men, then shifted quickly to Delphas, then back to them. Both nodded and they followed the group out as Gabrielle led the way, holding Dori by the hand.

“Boo!” Dori turned at the door, not seeing her buddy joining them. “ You come?”

“Be there in a little while shortie.” Xena told her. “G’wan with mama and I’ll meet you up at our house.”

Dori scowled, but went with the gentle tug on her hand and followed Gabrielle outside. The door closed and that left Xena with Cyrene and Johan and a handful of the town elders. A moment later, the inner door opened and Iolaus entered, coming over to sit down at the table.

“Least they weren’t looking for you.” Cyrene said, patting his hand.

“Yeah, that’s a relief.” Iolaus admitted. “I thought for sure there for a minute he was going to call me out.” He leaned closer to Xena. “Has Gabrielle mentioned anything about what I told her this morning to you?”

“No.”

“It was kinda weird.”

Xena propped her head up on her fist. “Weird?”

“Weird.”

**

Cait was the first to crest the small rise and see the wagons, as well as the crowd of mounted men on horses surrounding them with weapons raised.

They were making so much noise and the screams of the wagoneers were so loud they had no sense of the Amphipolis force approaching and so she was able to drive Shadow right up into the fight and jump off without drawing their attention.

Then, of course, she drew it sharply as she pulled her sword from it’s sheath and dove into a bunch of raiders pulling two women from the second wagon in line. She ran the blade through the back of one of them, and yanked it right out in time to turn and cut the hand off of the second.

It dropped with his long knife in it to the ground and he spun, flinging his arm back and spattering the snow covered ground in blood.

Cait didn’t hesitate, seeing a clear path to his chest and she pulled her own dagger and plunged it into him, driving it through his leather armor.

He fell. She moved on.

Just past the wagon side she saw Bennu smashing a mace down on the head of another raider, and Jax was watching his back, firing his crossbow into a moving rider heading away.

Nala caught up to her and they were in a bunch of men on foot, the scrape of blade on blade and the grunt of fighting bodies suddenly loud and immediate. Cait relied on her speed to keep clear of the weapons and she ducked under a curved sword and got her dagger sheathed, putting both hands on her sword hilt as she stepped in and blocked the return swipe.

Xena made it look so blasted easy. Cait grunted herself a little, twisting her wrists and shoving hard against the raider she was fighting as he tried to run her over.

“Duck.” Nala called out and Cait did, feeling the other Amazon’s sword whisk over her head and catch the man in the side of his neck as she hopped sideways and got out of the way.

There were two men throwing a boy on the back of a horse and she headed that way, swinging her blade up and around and slicing through the nearest raider’s hamstrings. He went down with a startled scream and his partner turned, raising his sword as he saw Cait coming at him.

The boy had his hands and feet tied but he managed to look over his shoulder and start to kick out as the raider turned. He thumped his boots into the back of the raider’s head just as Cait got to him and knocked him offbalance.

Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Cait chopped quickly at his sword arm and then swung in and drew her dagger, thumping it into his gut as he stumbled to one side.

He stumbled back against the horse who kicked out in fright, smashing his head with a hoof as he dumped the boy on his back onto the ground, plunging forward when Cait smacked his behind with the flat of her blade.

She knelt quickly and cut his bonds, rising up and stepping back as he rolled over and got his hands and knees under him. "You okay then?"

He looked up at her in startlement. "Ares balls. You're a woman!"

"Too right." Cait turned, her blades moving in a circle as she looked out over the battle. "You can go back now to the rest of your lot. Looks like these rats are running off."

The boy got up and brushed the icy mud off him. "Who are you?" He asked, before he stared out over the wagon train. "And they aren't my lot. I'm just traveling with them."

The Phillipi men were chasing off the last of the raiders, and Bennu and Jax had dismounted and were helping right one of the wagons.

Cait watched them briefly, then she knelt and wiped her blade off on the cloak of her last adversary. "Did they want something from you all?"

"Who are you?" The boy repeated the question.

Cait stood and sheathed her blades. "My name is Cait." She said. "I'm an Amazon, and I live in Amphipolis. Who are you?" She put her hands on her hips and lifted her brows.

He stared at her. "An Amazon?" He asked. "Really?"

"Yes." Cait looked around again. "Sorry. Have to go along with the rest of my gang. Goodbye." She started off towards the gathering force, lifting a hand to wave at Bennu.

"Wait." He jogged after her. "My name's Jake. I knew an Amazon once."

"I'm sure you did." Cait kept walking. "There are quite a lot of them around." She caught up with Nala, who was wiping down her own blade. "Lovely fight."

"Yeh, not bad." The taller Amazon agreed, glancing behind them "Who's your friend?"

"This is Jake." Cait said. "Apparently he knew an Amazon once."

"No hey I did." Jake caught up with them. "They tied her up and took her away from my village. There wasn't much left there so we all decided to go somewhere else." He indicated the wagons. "But I guess we just ran into the bad guys again."

"I see." Cait said. "Well, at least we came along."

"That was cool. The other Amazon wasn't really cool. She said she was in charge of things and we'd all be sorry when she got her stuff back."

Cait and Nala stopped in mid walk and turned to look at him. "Really?" Nala said. "What was her name?"

"What did she look like?" Cait said, at the same time.

Jake shrugged. "Kinda ugly. Don't know what her name was… some other women with her called her Arty."

The two Amazons exchanged glances. "I see." Cait finally said. "Any idea where they might have taken her?"

Jake grinned. "Let me come with ya and I'll see if I can remember where they said they were going."

**

“Show me your snare, Dori.” Gabrielle hung up her cloak and made sure the door to her quarters was closed.

“No mama, don’t like it.” Dori was sitting near the fire, her small legs pulled up crossed under her. “Don’t want to hurt aminals.”

“Well.” Her mother pushed a pot of water near the fire to heat. “I understand that, honey, but the fact is, your mama and your Boo both catch animals, and then mama makes something nice to eat from them.”

Dori poked her lower lip out. “Mama that’s bad!”

“No, really it isn’t.” Gabrielle settled on the floor right next to where Dori was sitting, also pulling her legs up under her. “Its how life is. Those little animals catch things to eat too, either bugs, or grass or chestnuts, and those things, even chestnuts, need something to live on.”

“Mama.”

“I know, it’s hard for you to understand, honey.” Gabrielle told her. “But everything on earth, even trees and bugs, depend on something else to give them nourishment and keep them alive.” She took Dori’s hand and gently squeezed it. “So your mama and Boo try to make sure that when we do have to catch something that we do it very fast.”

Dori pouted again.

“You like what mama cooks, right?”

“Didn’t know it was aminals, mama!” Tears welled up in Dori’s eyes. “Don’t want to hurt them!”

Gabrielle sighed. “Honey, calm down.” She said. “I understand why you’re upset. I remember when I was a little girl, and I realized how my mama got our dinner. It really bothered me, because one of the things I did was take care of the animals”

Dori sniffled.

“Some of the animals I took care of were lambs. You know what those are right?”

“Baby sheeples.” Dori said. “Like gramma has.”

“Right. My mama and papa had sheep, and those were the baby sheep and I used to take care of them. And one day, papa came to where I was taking care of them, and took one away, and then I saw my mama cooking something nice for dinner and I realized then that the baby sheep I’d been taking care of was now giving us food.”

“Mama, that’s bad.”

“No honey.” Gabrielle put her arm around her. “It’s life. Just like sometimes mama and Boo have to fight with people? It’s just how it is.” She said. “So in order for you to grow up big and strong, you need to have good things to eat, and some of those things come from animals.”

“Wusty has happles and stickies.”

“And we eat apples, and sometimes herbs and mushrooms that mama finds. But we also need to eat other things, like Ares does.”

“Guff?”

“Right.”

“Guff has aminals?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle told her. “Guff mostly only has animals.”

“No cookies?”

Gabrielle chuckled softly. “Sometimes we give him cookies, sure. But mostly he has animals. That’s how he grew up, and how the puppies grew up too.”

“Buppits.”

“Buppits.” Her mother confirmed. “So don’t feel bad about that, Dor. I’ll try to make you things that are mostly not animals, okay? Like the soup we had yesterday, and cookies.”

Dori looked mollified. “Gramma has aminals?” She asked, after a pause.

“Yes, she does.” Gabrielle rubbed her back. “Sorry about that. We’re all just horrible.”

A soft knock came at the door. “C’mon in.” Gabrielle said, automatically. She remained where she was as the door opened and Ephiny poked her head in. “C’mon.” She waved her over. “I’m just explaining the birds and the rabbits to Dori.”

“Isn’t she a little young for that?” Ephiny came over and took a seat near the fire.

“Birds and rabbits as in dinner.” Gabrielle clarifled. “They did snares in class to day.”

“Ooooohhh.” Ephiny gave them both a fond look. “This is the kid who rescues lizards. Bet she didn’t take that well.”

“No, I think I’ll be making that lemongrass and vegetable soup for a while.” The bard replied, with a smile. “Lucky both Xe and I love it. How’d they make out in the gathering hall?”

“Meh.” Ephiny shrugged. “No one really remembers that guy, except that they knew him from being the body in the barrel. Renas thinks he might have come over and looked the jewelry but she’s not really sure.”

“Can you believe they thought he wanted to draw Xena out after him? On purpose?” Gabrielle said. “I mean, how idiotic can you get?”

‘Yeah that’s a mistake you only make once.” Ephiny agreed. “Aalene told me that and I laughed my head off.”’

“Mm.. but then, if not that why?” The bard mused. “Maybe he was just seeing how easily he could buy someone here?”

“Mm.” Ephiny grunted in assent. “Maybe.”

Gabrielle got up off the floor and went over to the folded blanket on the table, unfolding it and shaking it out. It was mostly blue, with greens and tans woven in a crosshatch pattern. On one corner, the town sigil was embedded, and she smiled on seeing it. “Aww.”

“Mama where’s Boo?” Dori asked, suddenly.

“Boo’s down in the town, talking to her friends.” Gabrielle draped the blanket over the back of the sturdy couch. “She’ll come up here soon.”

“Want to go get happles.” Dori hopped off the chair and rambled off into the sleeping room.

“Ho boy.” Gabrielle came around and sat down on the couch, leaning back on the blanket and stretching her arm out along the back. “The stage players asked me if they could come up here and do some skits for the tribe. What do you think?”

Ephiny pondered that. “Why not?” She said. “Sounds like fun. They seemed like a pretty relaxed bunch.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Be something different every once in a while.” She leaned back and swung her legs up onto the couch, extending her legs and crossing them at the ankles. “Did you hear what happened with my little miss thing yesterday?”

The regent nodded back, with a faint smile. “I heard.” She said. ‘Bother you?” She watched Gabrielle’s face go quiet, and slightly pensive. “Freaked out the teachers a little.”

“I don’t know.” Her friend admitted. “I mean, what can I say? Can I tell her not to stand up for her friends? How hypocritical would that be?”

“Very.”

“She did exactly what I would have.” Gabrielle said. “What I have done, more times than I can talk about. Someone’s being tormented, being taken advantage of – no problem of mine, don’t even know the person and there I am with a big stick taking a whack at them. Don’t even have to think about it anymore.”

“Any more? I remember you with Terreis.” Ephiny said, in a mild tone. “She copies what she sees, Gab. Not only with you, but with big X. All she’s ever known is that her family steps in front of catapults for people on a regular basis.”

“Mm.”

“Now, she might end up being the only vegetarian ass kicker who lives with ponies the Nation has ever seen, but y’know”

Gabrielle started laughing silently.

“She’ll always be unique.”

“Shes’ got a big heart.” Dori’s mother agreed, with a smile. “I just want her to have both sides of the story, you know? She should know there’s another choice than her fists sometimes.”

“Talk then fight.”

“Exactly.”

**

Xena stood quietly in the barn, moving the curry brush over Argo’s back as she listened to the quiet sounds of the horses around her. “Hey girl. Arencha glad that little tyke found that damn caltrop? I’d have hated to see that in your foot.”

Argo blew out a bit of straw and craned her head around, nibbling a bit of Xena’s shirt instead.

‘Yeah, I know. I remember that time too.” Xena sighed, switching the brush for a comb and combing out the mare’s long mane. “That was a dark road, and you and I should have been long off it and camped.”

She moved around to the other side of the horse. “You picked up one of those damn things and threw me and we both ended up in a bad place.”

Argo snorted and shifted her big feet, bumping against her rider.

She had broken her arm, matter of fact. Falling on it just the wrong way on a thick tree root and hearing the snap a moment before the wave of pain had hit her. So there she was, alone in the woods, broken arm, and a lame horse with a caltrop embedded in her foot.

Lousy day. Xena could still remember the pain of it, as she delayed taking care of the break and managed to get the iron spike out of Argo’s hoof, dressing the wound and then, at the end of it collapsing against a nearby tree.

It had rained and it had been cold, and she’d caught a horrible cold on top of it and she remembered huddling there shivering and in pain, on the cusp of giving it up.

Only the need to take care of Argo’s foot had stopped her. It had kept her from slipping into that fog, and letting the darkness take her, because she had to keep the fire going, keep the poultices steaming, focusing completely on this creature who was dependent on her.

“Yeah, those were tough days, huh girl?” Xena smiled as she finished up her brushing. “Now you’re treated like a queen in here, right? You got everything you need.”

Argo snorted again then tugged at a bit of hay in the net at the front of her stall.

“Me too, matter of fact.” Xena stroked the now spotless hide, before she went over and put the brushes up. “We got lucky, Argo.” She gave the mare a pat on the hip before she moved out of the stall and looked around the barn, moving through the straw and kicking it investigatively.

Rusty was watching her, laying down in his stall with his small hooves tucked under him, his shaggy coat flecked with bits of yellow dust.

“Hey there little man.” Xena went over and sat down on a nearby bale of hay. “You know what? Your little rider wants me to try and get you up the mountain path to the village. What do you think about that?”

Rusty looked thoughtfully at her.

“Maybe we’ll wait until it isn’t snowing.” Xena conceded. “If you started sliding down that slope, we’d both probably end up ass over teakettle with everyone laughing at us.”

She fished a carrot out of her belt pouch and offered it to him, watching with a grin as he crunched it happily.

Behind her, both Argo and Iolaus snorted and the stallion whinnied a little to catch her attention.

“Ah, they caught me.” She got up and retrieved two more of the roots, handing it over to the two golden horses who were watching her alertly. “Here you go kids.” She watched them munch. “Now I gotta go up and see what Gabrielle and Dori are up to.”

She lifted her head as the door opened, and then shifted the hay net around as Cyrene entered and closed the door behind her. “You have room to put that bunch up tonight?”

“If most of them share a room, yes.” Her mother came over and patted Argo on the nose. ‘You think they’ll get any information from those Amazons?”

“Maybe. If they poke them enough, one or the other might remember something about that ugly bastard. He was noticeable enough.” Xena said. “The whole deal doesn’t sound right to me though. If he was being chased by Athen’s stooges, why come here and start trouble?”

“Maybe he didn’t know.”

Xena gave her mother a skeptical look. “When you do what he does? You know when you’re being hunted.”

“Maybe you did.” Cyrene said. “But you, my dear, have more than your share of smarts.” She watched the faint blush appear across her daughter’s planed cheekbones. “I just hope that bunch goes back to where they came from and leaves us in peace for the winter.”

“You know what was funny?” Xena leaned against the stall divider. “They didn’t even ask about Iolaus.”

Her stallion nickered, nudging her in the back with his nose.

“Not you.”

“After what Johan heard in the market, about that reward – you’re right.” Cyrene mused. “Tell you what, when they come back down here, I’ll see if they know about him.”

They walked out into the now falling snow, pulling up their cloak hoods as Xena shut the barn door behind her. “I’m going to go check that Amazon.”

“And beat up some of your faithful men?”

Xena chuckled. “Maybe.” She parted from Cyrene at the inn path and continued on, taking the downward track to the barracks. It had grown quiet again, the townsfolk either in the hall, or in their homes, only a few cloaked figures coming up from the bridge.

She could hear swords crossing inside the military compound though, and the sound got louder as she walked along the front of the barracks and stepped up onto the porch, moving to the door and pushing it open.

Inside, here in the front, was a set of guards both of whom saluted her as she came inside. “Afternoon, boys.”

“Afternoon, Xena.” They replied dutifully. “That beat up lady in there was looking for you.”

“Thanks.” Xena went to the healer’s hall and stepped inside it, the warmth in the room appreciably greater than it had been by the guard. She crossed to the private room Alana was in and pushed the door open.

Inside, Alana was sitting up a little in the bed, bruises still very lurid against her skin and a pained expression on her face. “Xena, I must speak with you.”

“Okay.” Xena pulled up one of the low stools and settled herself on it. “Say your piece, then I’ll check your wounds.”

“No need.”

The warrior lifted her hands off her knees, and then put them back. “Have it your way.” She motioned to the junior healer who was sitting patiently against the wall. He got up without a word and left the room, and the silence settled back over them.

Alana studied her face, while Xena merely sat there waiting, still and relaxed, looking as though she was ready to wait there all night.

“You know what they did to me.” Alana said, finally.

Xena nodded.

“I don’t remember any of it.” The Amazon said. “How do I know it wasn’t someone here that did this?”

“They didn’t”

“So you say.”

The warrior shook her head briefly. “I was there when the watch brought you in.”

“And what if he did it?”

“He could have.” Xena said. “Problem with that is, he’s one of my men, and he knows what would happen to him if I found out. If he’d done it, he’d have kept riding.”

Alana turned her head slightly. “Oh yes. You would protect a sister.” She said, in a dry tone. “How could I forget.”

“No, not really.” Xena decided to take the remark at face value. “I keep discipline in my troops. Has nothing to do with the Amazons.” She extended her legs and crossed them at the ankles. “If it’s worth anything to you, I’m damned sorry about what happened.”

“Sure.”

Xena studied her briefly. “What is the last thing you remember?”

“Why should you care?”

The warrior leaned forward a little “Truth interests me.” She said, in quiet tone. “You may not want to know what happened to you, but this is my patch, and I do.”

Alana just stared at her.

**

They were packed up again and riding. The wagon train had been sorted out and put on it's wheels, and Bennu had convinced the wagon leader to head to Amphipolis rather than over the pass into Thrace.

Cait thought the people with the wagon train were quite happy about that When they'd listened to the description of the town, most had nodded in relief, and it hadn't taken long to convince them not to go forward.

Good thing that, since they'd likely either run back into those ruffians, or even more trouble if they'd kept on. She tugged her hood a bit closer and tightened down the ties in the front of her cloak as the snow started to get heavier.

One of Xena's men had remained with them as a guide, and his horse was now taken up by Jake, having wormed his way into the recon party, not without some subtle assistance from Cait herself.

"Not sure about that kid." Nala said to Cait, as they resumed their steady pace near the front of the group. "Seems like a trickster."

"Too right." Cait said. "But he saw that woman he said was an Amazon and I want him about if we see her where we're headed."

Nala eyed her. "You don't think it was an Amazon?"

"No." Cait said, briefly, then fell silent.

Nala waited, then adjusted her reins in her fingers. "All right then."

"I don't mean to be rude." Cait cleared her throat. "It's just it reminded me of something that happened when we were in Therma, during the fight and it's a bit hard to explain."

"Ah." Nala grunted. "Damned sorry I missed that."

"I can certainly imagine you were." Cait was aware of Jake slowly catching up with them. "We missed having you, and I know it was just ratty back at the camp."

Nala rolled her eyes expressively. "Sweetest thing in the world was seeing you and Pony come through that crowd of morons and knowing that for me, it was done and over."

Cait chuckled with little humor. "The queen certainly showed them what was what. You know, I think it was then, when she chased them all off, it clicked a bit that she was actually the queen."

Nala nodded emphatically. "The move was then. Yeah. You could feel it. It got real. Was like up to then most of those mooks thought, I mean really thought she was a figurehead and were like, yeah whatever."

"Not after that night." Cait smiled briefly. "Not after she knocked off that nasty bit of goods on her own."

"Bare hands, in the dark? Oh yeah." Nala agreed cheerfully. "That nailed it. I mean, her telling Xena to kill that moron in the hall – that was all right, and the kids liked it, but the seniors – after that night? They were like okay. She's an Amazon. We got it."

They rode on a bit further. Then Nala turned her head slightly towards Cait. "You think she'll turn it back over to Ephiny?"

"Not at all. No." Cait said, then fell silent as Jake caught fully up with them and came alongside her. "Hello."

"So hey." Jake spoke up. "You said you guys were from Amphipolis, right?"

"Right." Cait agreed.

"I knew people from there."

"You know a lot of people from places." Nala observed. "Got around for such a youngster didncha?"

Jake thought about that a moment. “I guess I did.” He said. “My family used to live around these parts, but they got whacked out when I was a kid, and me and my brother were taken.” He added. “But before that, some people from Amphipolis came to our town and caused a lot of trouble.”

“People from Amphipolis do tend to do that.” Cait said, politely. “But usually if they’re making trouble for someone they deserve it.”

Jake shrugged. “I don’t remember much. But there were Amazons there too.”

Cait and Nala exchanged looks. “If people from Amphipolis were there and Amazons were with them, I’m fairly sure who it must have been.”

“Huh.”

“How’d you get out of being caught?” Nala asked, to change the subject. “You run away from them?”

“That’s a long story.” Jake said. “Are we going to ride up through the pass to Thrace today you think? Reason I got in with that bunch is they said they were going there. “

“Oh, I think so yes.” Cait said. “We should be on the other side by sundown.”

“That’s good.” The young man said. “Maybe we can talk more tonight then.” He nudged his horse forward and trotted after Bennu, who had paused to survey the trail. He pulled up next to the man, and started talking to him, and they rode on together.

“You figure he bumped into our royals?” Nala asked.

“Had to be.” Cait said at once. “I’m quite surprised he didn’t ask about them by name. I’m sure he knows them.”

“Like I said, weird kid.”

Possibly true. Cait thought. She considered that they might find out more around the campfire, and also, she wanted to know why he was so eager to get to Thrace. There was, as Nala had said, something not quite right about him.

**

Gabrielle stepped back out of the sparring ring and set her staff end down on the ground, her hand curled around the well worn and familiar surface. “Next!”

Pasi walked over and offered her a mug of water, which she gratefully accepted. “Thanks.” She took a swallow, glad to clear the straw chaff and smoke from her throat after her set of staff bouts.

Two other Amazons took the place of her and her last opponent in the ring and started up, the softly tentative cracks becoming louder and more confident.

There was an air of comfortable competitiveness in the room, a good number of women gathered to watch and participate in the sparring, and Gabrielle’s presence and participation were no longer looked at with any sense of it being unusual.

She shared teaching duties in the weapon, in fact, with Eponin and she pretended not to acknowledge the fact that her classes were better attended than her weapons masters. It was a long gone time since she’d done it to prove anything to anyone.

Some of the Amazons were in leathers, since the room was warm enough for it. She was wearing a padded overtunic though, made by Xena to match the one she wore for her sword practice. It was soft, and had protection around her ribs and her hips to soften hits taken there.

It was sleeveless, and she could feel the faint warmth of the fire in the big pit against the bare skin of her shoulders, comfortable now as her body cooled down from the exercise. Her upper arms ached a bit from it, but in a good way.

It felt very good to be just one of the tribe, in this arena. Gabrielle smiled and flexed her hands, watching Solari neatly parry a strike, then reverse her motion and take her opponents staff out of her hands, a move the bard remembered teaching not that long ago.

Now that was pretty cool. It was good to know she was contributing to the tribe, being a part of their lives now for far longer than she ever had in the past and not only that, doing so without anyone thinking it was odd anymore.

She was no longer really a stranger. There was, she knew, still that bit of separation due to her rank and history, but she no longer felt like an impostor.

Most of the time, anyway.

Paladia was seated at a table near the hearth, busy with parchment and charcoal. One of the younger women was seated there watching her, apparently absorbing the way she was shaping something. Gabrielle had to smile indeed in seeing that, acknowledging truly how far they'd all come.

On the other side of the big gathering hall the children were seated in a circle, listening to Ephiny tell them a story. She couldn't hear what the regent was telling them, but she could hear the giggling and she turned her head to watch, spotting Dori on one end of the circle.

Everyone seemed happy. That was good.

"Hey Gabrielle?"

The bard turned back around to find Solari heading her way. "What? Did I miss something?" She looked around quickly.

"Nah, will you go through that knee sweep?" Solari asked. "I keep whacking my elbow."

"Oh sure." Gabrielle stepped back into the circle with her, as her former opponent backed away to clear space. She lifted her staff off the floor and brought it up to shoulder level as she waited for Solari to come over to face her.

Then she dropped the staff to her thighs. "Okay, so." She said. "The times I usually use this is when some big old dude is swiping at me with a sword, usually around this level." She indicated her collarbone. "So the drop is to let that go over my head."

Solari obligingly stepped back and then gently swung her staff around, and Gabrielle went to one knee as she did. "Keep going around." She said. "See what your knee does there? Goes up?"

"Right." Solari nodded.

Gabrielle tucked her staff under one arm and wrapped her hand around it, then swiveled around and used both her momentum, and the weight of her body to lend force as she moved. When her staff hit Solari's knees though she slacked off and just tapped her. "You need the extra motion to get their legs out from under them."

"Okay I got it – I wasn't putting it under my arm." Solari said, as she nodded. "I was just holding it like this." She held the staff out with it's end going past her elbow.

Gabrielle unexpectedly swung her staff up, and with a loud clack sent Solari's flying, giving her an impish grin when she yelped and shook her hand rapidly. "Don't. It's too easy for someone to disarm you."

"Ouch." Solari tucked her hand under her other arm.

"Yeah, I learned that the hard way too." Gabrielle got to her feet and twirled her staff a few times. "I can remember so many twilights ending with me yelling Xena's name in complete and utter frustration when she'd just keep doing that to me."

The women around her chuckled, and Solari waved her opponent forward again. "Let's try that." She said. "I'll try to keep my elbow out of it this time."

The bard went back to her sideline spot, and perched on one of the benches that surrounded the sparring circle. Pasi had refilled her mug and was standing by watching. "Glad we got this hall done, huh?"

The younger Amazon nodded. "Absolutely. This is awesome. That old one had so many holes in it you could see people walking by outside." She watched the action for a moment. "I heard that lowland Queen really got whacked. Is that true?"

"She did." Gabrielle said. "She doesn't remember how it happened though."

"Mm." Pasi made a low sound in her throat. "Would she tell you if she did? She seemed pretty obnoxious."

"Still is." Gabrielle folded her arms. "She doesn't much want anything to do with us. Xe was right to leave her in the barracks and I sure don't mind having that attitude in close quarters."

"Nice."

They exchanged wry looks. Pasi was one of the youngers that had stood by her in the last dust up, and she'd become a friend in the subsequent months as had several others most of whom were around Gabrielle's age.

Squeals made them turn around, to see a rush of small bodies heading for the passage between the gathering and dining halls. "Uh oh.. there goes the horde." Gabrielle watched Dori in the middle of them, as two of the child minders jogged behind.

One of the taller girls tripped, and fell near the door. Most of the kids ran past, but her kid stopped, and held a hand out invitingly to help her up. The older girl took it, and was hauled to her feet, and they ran out together at the very rear of the group.

Gabrielle chuckled, and got up off the bench as Ephiny strolled over. "Story time over?"

"Mmm." The regent murmured. "I wanted to see that whole group dynamic after what happened yesterday." She said. "I need to take Marisha aside and have a talk with her. She's old enough to come out of that gang and start trailing as a junior."

"That the one who was mixing with my kid?" Gabrielle eyed her. "Let's go grab a cup. We're about done here."

"Sure." Ephiny joined her as they walked towards the passage. "I heard from Soli she was talking smack after that. Time for her to move on. She's bullying the other kids.. or trying to." Ephiny smiled at her queen. "Actually, that's a good sign she's ready to move up. Getting near cycling."

"I'm not sure I like kids who beat up the younger ones." Gabrielle stated. "Especially that little cutie Cari. What did she do to deserve that?"

"Yeah, poor little kid. She's an orphan." Ephiny told her, as they walked together between the two halls. "Her mother died giving birth to her. She didn't have a partner – she got herself pregnant at the spring festival after you had Dori."

"Ah." Gabrielle murmured. "So who takes care of her?"

"Everyone. Anyone." Ephiny shrugged. "Happens sometimes."

Gabrielle looked around as they entered the dining hall and spotted the kids in a cluster around the smaller table they used. She followed Ephiny across to the service area and the big pot near the fire filled with spiced, hot cider, but kept the children in her peripheral vision.

"Mama." Dori saw her, and came running over. "Mama, they want to stay here sleeping over can I?"

"Ahhh.. now you're bringing up memories." Ephiny had seated herself on one of the benches. "I remember my first sleep out. We didn't have a nice place like this though, Dori. We had to sleep on pallets in the dirt."

"What?" Gabrielle handed down a small cup of cider to Dori. "What is all this about?"

‘Mama, can I?” Dori ignored the cup. “Want to stay here with my friends.”

Gabrielle sat down and put both cups on the table. “Okay, hold on a minute there, miss thing.” She picked Dori up and put her on the bench. “Weren’t you telling me just yesterday there were mean kids in that group?”

Dori gave her a puzzled look. “Can I stay mama?”

“That was yesterday, mama.” Ephiny poked her in the arm. “C’mon, get with the program.”

“Boo made everybody good.” Dori explained. “Now we have fun! Can I mama?”

Gabrielle gave Ephiny a questioning look. “What is this?”

“Just the kids, they keep them together overnight in the gathering hall. Little beds, baby fire, that sort of thing.” Ephiny smiled at her memory of it. “Someone tells stories, they get to paint each other’s faces, you know.”

Both of the bard’s eyebrows lifted.

“Okay so no you don’t know, but didn’t you… no.” Ephiny waved her hand. “Never mind, retract the question. It’s fun. I hope I have a girl this time, so she can join in.”

Gabrielle looked down at Dori, who was waiting for her with commendable and unusual patience. “You can stay tonight, Dor, if you promise me you’ll behave and stay here with the others. Don’t run around outside, or anything.”

“Okay mama.” Dori agreed instantly. “I can do? Good!” She hopped off the bench and went running back over to the children’s group.

“Why don’t I trust that innocent face?” Gabrielle mused. “Maybe I’ll have Ares stay too.”

Ephiny chuckled. “You don’t trust that innocent face because she’s your daughter.” The regent gave her another poke in the arm. “Don’t worry about her – after what happened yesterday none of the kids is going to mess with her. Trust me.”

“Was she that rough?” Gabrielle frowned.

“Well, she’s got Xena’s right cross.” Her friend admitted. “But no, it wasn’t that bad according to the minders. As in, she didn’t hurt anyone, but there was no doubt in anyone’s mind she wasn’t playing around.”

Gabrielle watched Dori mix back in with the kids, and she could see it – some of them gathered to her and some put a careful, respectful space between them. It was crazy. She was five. “Ah well.” She picked up her cider and took a sip.

“She’s a good kid, Gab.” Ephiny said. “It’s a good thing she stands up for her friends.”

“Oh, I know.” The bard said. “Problem is, Xena started out standing up for Amphipolis, and that didn’t end up so good for a while, you know?”

“Hm.”

“Hm.”

**

“We stopped for the night.” Alana finally said, after the silence had gone on almost forever. “There is a copse of wood just off the road. We hadn’t gotten much sleep so we decided to stop early.”

“I know that spot.” Xena said. “Just across the ford to Potadeia.”

“It was marked as a campsite.” The younger woman agreed. “We had supplies from the market, so we didn’t hunt. And as I told you, I was just filling my waterskin and then, nothing.”

Xena considered her in silence. “So you didn’t meet anyone on the road before you stopped?”

“No.”

“Anyone with you at the river?”

“No.”

Xena shifted a little closer, and then paused, as she saw the other woman flinch back. “Not going to whack you one, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Alana’s eyes narrowed. “It wasn’t my own people who attacked me, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

The warrior got up and went to the cabinet near the wall. She opened it and removed a bowl and some cloths, and a pouch with well worn ties. “Could have been.” She said. “That’s what they were trying to buy Ephiny’s help with.”

“Not all of them.”

“No.” Xena turned around and came back over with her kit. “Which is why I don’t think it was them. You didn’t have a consensus.” She sat back down and opened up the pouch. “So what kind of raider band could bushwhack a party of Amazon warriors without a sound?”

Alana’s expression shifted a little. “You really don’t think it was them.”

“No.” Xena said. “You were hit in the back of the head hard enough to fracture bone. Amazons are a lot of things, but they aren’t cowards. If she wanted to challenge you, she’d do it to your face.”

Alana remained silent as she watched the furs drawn back over her leg, exposing the splint Xena had put on there. The limb underneath was a mass of bruises, and there was a long line of stitches down the front of the thigh ending just above the knee.

Xena cleaned the stitches and daubed them with cream from a jar she held in her other hand. Then she examined the splint and adjusted it slightly.

“You really are a healer.” Alana said.

Xena didn’t bother to answer that. She settled the furs back over the splint and wiped her hands off, putting the cloth down next to her kit. “There are known bands of slavers in the area. Not that close to Amphipolis, but close to the pass.” She rested her elbows on her knees. “Maybe they got the rest of your group.”

“And left me?” Alana said, quietly “Or are you saying, the others went willingly, since it was no secret to us how little you thought of our people.”

“If whoever knocked you out represented themselves as being from Athens? Maybe they did go with them.” Xena said, in a mild tone. “There’s no reason for me to think well of people who show up here with airless threats from Athens demanding compensation for being jerks.”

“Is that truly how you see us, Xena?”

“Yep.” Xena stood up and picked up the bowl of water. “Leg’ll take three or four sevendays to heal up enough for you to walk on it. You got lucky with the whack on the head. Nothing swelled up in there.” She dumped the water and put the pouch back in the cabinet. “Your choice if you want to stay here, or go up to the village.”

“I want no part of your tribe.”

Xena nodded and turned, taking her cloak off the wall peg. ‘That’s fine by me. Don’t annoy my troops.” She swirled the garment over her shoulders and tied the fasteners. “If you decide to remember anything else, let me know.”

She went to the door and passed out into the corridor. “All yours.” She said to the healer apprentice waiting there. “She’s got a sharp tongue on her. Don’t let her get to you.”

“Aye, Genr’l.” The young man nodded. “Was speaking ill of the ladies up the hill. Paid no mind to it.” He shook his head. “Don’t have much patience for folks like that.”

Xena clapped him on the shoulder. “You learned a lesson young it took me a long time to get.” She admitted. “But do me a favor and pay attention to what she says .I’m trying to figure out what happened to her and she wont’ tell me anything.”

The man nodded. “Will do.”

Xena left the barracks feeling as unsettled as she had when she arrived. The pieces were just not fitting together, and now she had Hercules’ message to deal with as well. Unlike Iolaus, she knew his dream wasn’t anything of the kind, and now the thought of the mortal goddesses being caught by slavers was making her guts churn.

She knew – in the end – it would mean nothing but trouble for everyone.

She started up along the path to town, responding to the greetings of her soldiers heading in the other direction. The snow was starting to fall hard again, and she pulled her hood up as she walked along the path.

Most of the town was heading home for supper. The upper lane was almost empty, and Xena was halfway up it when she sensed a presence and halted, swiveling around.

She was alone. Then she heard a soft ‘psst’ and she stared through the trees, spotting a vaguely ghostly figure behind a tree, motioning her to come over.

With a quick look around, she approached the tree and slipped behind it, where the ghostly figure solidified, slightly. “Aprhrodite?’

“Shh.” The goddess put her finger to her lips. “Don’t like even say my name, okay?”

“Okay.” Xena folded her arms. “What’s up?”

“If my father hears me down here, I’ll be toast.” Aphrodite whispered. “I can’t believe I let my brothers talk me into this.”

“Talk you into what?” Xena whispered back. “Hercules got a message to Iolaus. Is he right?”

Aphrodite looked around carefully. “We don’t know! We don’t know where they are.” She said. “But if we don’t’ find them, and get them back upstairs, if you catch my drift, it’s gonna suck for everyone.”

Xena frowned. “Why doesn’t he just..” She snapped her fingers, then lifted her eyebrows.

“Shh.” The goddess came even closer, the fringes of her fogginess drifting against Xena’s shoulder. “It’s gotten out that they’re down here and like.. mortal.” She breathed. “And we can’t get a handle on it, because all the little peoples have kinda started to not believe in us so much.”

Xena blinked, honestly surprised. “What?”

“C’mon, Xena. You know about this.” Aphrodite said, uncommonly serious. “It’s all about up here.” She tapped on her forehead. “You said it once, I heard you. You do stuff because…” She lifted her own eyebrows.

“Because I believe I can.” Xena murmured.

“And?” The goddess hissed. “Who else does?”

“Gabrielle.”

“So it’s no different for us.” Aphrodite looked quickly around, then back at her. “If they find them before we do, and show them around, it’s just a matter of time. The rents tried to get them back and they couldn’t! it’s started already!”

Xena put her hands on her hips. “Ever hear of the saying hoisted on your own petard?”

Aphrodite stared at her. “What? Are you not listening to me, Xena?”

“I am.” The warrior sighed. “I’ll do whatever I can do to find them, but they could be anywhere.”

The goddess sighed back. “Not anywhere. We think they’re somewhere around here.”

“Here?”

“Well, you know.” Aprhodite waved her hand. “In the sticks somewhere.”

Xena studied her thoughtfully. “I’ve got some people checking out some of the lands east of here. We heard of some slavers operating in those parts. The two Amazons with them know who they are if they see them.”

“Great.” Aphrodite gave her a pat on the cheek. “I knew we could count on you. Get them out of this one, and I think you can write your own ticket with daddy, if you catch my drift.” She winkled. “Gotta go!”

And then the fog was gone and Xena was left to roll her eyes, groan, and lean her back against the tree.

**

Gabrielle was sitting on the bed, helping Dori pack her things in a little bag. “You want to take both of those, Dor?”

“Mama ,yes.” Dori presented her with Bittyboo the doll, and a new favorite, Buppit. “Gramma got me dis one.” She held up the roughly dog shaped toy. “He go have fun too.”

“Okay.” Her mother amiably packed the toys, and her favorite blanket. “So you’re going to have a good time tonight huh?”

Dori nodded. “We going to play hide and seek, and ball, and hear stories. It’’ll be fuuuuuuun.” She danced around in a circle. “And we get cookies!”

Gabrielle muffled a laugh. “Oh my gosh.” She closed the bag. “You’re such a lucky little girl. I never got to do this when I was little. I just had to chase the sheep!”

“Sheeps!” Dori bounced over. “What you do with the sheeps mama?”

Gabrielle put her arms around her. “What did mama do? Mama used to watch the sheep, and make sure they were safe, and tell stories to them.”

“You tell stories to sheeps?” Dori seemed amazed.

“I did.” Her mother told her. “I used to sit in the grass, on sunny days, and make up stories for them. But they weren’t good like you, they usually just ate the grass and ignored me.”

“Mama will you come tell us a story?” Dori asked suddenly. “Everybody likes when you tell.”

“Sure.” The bard stood up and held out her hand. “Let’s go over there, and maybe Boo will meet us. That’ll be fun, right?”

“Boo!” Dori agreed enthusiastically. “Let’s go, mama.”

They left their quarters and headed over to the gathering hall, boots crunching in the snow now thick on the ground. A cold wind was blowing through the village and Gabrielle was glad to get up onto the porch and into the firelit building.

Already there were childish squeals and laughter ringing out and Gabrielle realized in surprise that a few of the town children were also there in the gathering circle. “My gosh what’s going on here?”

The kids greeted her with a chorus of hellos, and the minders waved from where they were fixing up small beds near the fire. Gabrielle left Dori with her friends and walked over to the makeshift sleeping area. “This is cute.”

“Isn’t it?” Aalene had come over, after dropping off her daughter in the ring. “Its fun for the kids and not so bad for the parents either.” She winked at her queen, who managed a slightly abashed look. “I’m looking forward to some quiet time tonight.”

Hm. Gabrielle grinned briefly to herself. “Not a bad idea.” She turned back to the kids. “You guys want to hear a story?”

She took the opportunity of the general clamor to move over and sit down in front of the fire, as the children scrambled to get a seat next to her on the big bearskin rug. Even the older girls, usually a bit standoffish were smiling and pulling up small stools of their own and Gabrielle smiled back at them, noting the crowd gathering behind them of not so small figures.

And then, with a wash of emotion, she felt Xena’s presence, a moment before the crowd parted and she spotted her partner’s tall distinctive form. Their eyes met and Gabrielle could see the storm clouds there, but she held out her hand in invitation anyway.

Xena wound her way through the crowd and eased past the kids, taking her partners hand and dropping down onto the bench next to her. She lifted both hands and brushed her lips over Gabrielle’s knuckles, making eye contact with her in eloquent silence.

“Hey honey.” Gabrielle gave her a wry look back. “I’m going to tell this bunch a story. Wanna help?”

“Depends.” Xena settled herself. “Are there cows involved?”

“Would I do that to you?”

“Yes.”

The bard chuckled, folding her fingers around her partners. “Something happen?” She muttered, as the children crowded closer.

“Uh huh.”

“Can it wait for the story?”

“Uh huh.”

“Am I going to wish I stayed her talking all night?”

“Uh huh.”

**

Cait found a comfortable place to stand, half sheltered under a ledge of rock. It was dark, the snow was still falling, but she had a full belly of stew and cider, and she was content to be there on guard for her part of the watch.

Bennu was on guard on the other end of the cavern entrance, the others from Amphipolis getting some rest before it was their turn.

Cait rather liked the quietness of the watch. She often volunteered for it at the village, when she had no pressing duties in her role as Queen’s guard on tap. The long dark hours were great for thinking, and sometimes even talking to the others keeping watch with her.

Solari was quite interesting to talk to, in fact. Though she seemed lonely sometimes, and Cait half thought she really volunteered for watch just for the company.

Perfectly fine by her.

But here, it was only her and the cold, and the faintly drifting snow. She had her cloak tucked around her and beneath it a heavy leather sueded shirt and leggings along with thick boots so she was comfortable at the moment but she suspected she would be chilled before her watch was over.

It was very quiet in the forest in front of the caverns. They were far enough off the road for it to be invisible even if the moon were out to display it, the trees were thick, but most of them had lost their leaves.

Off to one side, she heard a rustle, and she turned her head in it’s hood that way, blinking slowly as she scanned the shadowy area. Instinctively her hand went to her belt knife and she drew it, curling her fingers around the carved wooden hilt and moving her arm a little away from her body.

The rustle came again and she went still. Then from under the almost dead bushes something moved, coming abruptly into the clear space before the cavern and just as abruptly stopping.

It stared at Cait, who stared back. Then it quickly turned and ran off, it's bushy tail catching just a hint of the snow as it disappeared.

Fox. She put her dagger back in it's sheath. Taking it had been an option, but she really had no urge to spend the night stripping and dressing it, though it had a lovely pelt. Cait settled back against the rock, crossing her legs at the ankles.

She heard someone come out of the cavern behind her and she half turned, then went back to her watch as Nala came out and stood next to her. "Not good sleeping?"

"Not sleepy yet." Nala agreed. "Quiet out here?"

"Just saw a fox in the brush. That's about it." Cait said. "I do wish it was a bit thinner - so I could see the road."

"Mm." The veteran Amazon grunted. "We figure two more days to Phillipi – I want to ask some questions there before we go skulking."

"Too right."

"Just seems too… I don't know. Maybe I think those guys caved too easy."

"I believe Xena thinks so." Cait responded, glancing around. "You could just see that look in her eye when she talked about it."

Nala grunted again.

Footsteps approached and they fell silent, standing in the shadows as another figure came over to them.

"You restless too, Jax?" Nala asked the soldier.

'Just twitchy." Jax said. "You know, I been with Xena too long maybe, to not trust the quiet. Feels like somethings watching us."

Both Amazons looked at him respectfully. Jax was roughly the same age as Xena was, and he'd been through a lot, including the last big war, and before it. One of the original militia.

"Want to take a little walk out there?" Nala asked. "Cait'll watch our backs."

"Good idea." Jax shifted his cloak to free it from his sword hilt. "Let's see if it's just quiet, or wrong quiet."

Cait watched them stroll off into the shadows, drumming her fingers lightly on her leg. "I've got a bad feeling about this." She muttered. "Or maybe I just should have asked to go first."

**

Gabrielle sat on the bench near the back wall, hands splayed out supporting her weight as she listened to Xena's low, wryly resigned tone. "Are you kidding me?" She finally said. "They get themselves into the ultimate pickle and they want YOU to fix it?"

"Not kidding." Xena said.

"After what they did to us?" The bard's voice rose. "Xena, that sucks!"

Xena got up and switched benches, sitting down next to her partner and ending up shoulder to shoulder with her. "Story of our lives." She said. "But I didn't say I'd go fix their problem. I just said I'd see if the bunch we sent out there saw anything."

Gabrielle gave her a droll look.

Xena held both hands out in self defense. "What was I supposed to tell her? It was Aphrodite. What would you have said?"

The bard grumbled under her breath.

"That's what I thought." Xena leaned back against the wall, watching the children across the hall near the fire at their games. Ring ball, and Dori was in the middle. She bounced around with a grin, ducking the hide stuffed ball as the other girls tried to hit her with it.

Xena had to wonder where that game came from. Pelt a kid with a sack? Really?

"Xena."

"Yes?" She turned back to her partner. "My guess is, they got picked up by those slavers Tectdus told us about. Probably had no idea who they were. Knocked em over the head."

Gabrielle covered her eyes with one hand.

"If they've got one coins' worth of sense, they'll keep quiet and not spill who they are." The warrior went on. "But Cait knows what they look like. If she sees them, we'll know."

"And then what?"

Xena folded her arms over her chest. "Well, hon, greater good or no greater good, getting them out of their hands is the right thing to do. Look what happened to Alana."

"You think it's the same guys?"

"Wouldn't surprise me." Her partner said. "That kind of skunk doesn't tolerate rivals."

Gabrielle thought about that in silence, her eyes going a little unfocused. "Yeah." She rested her head against Xena's shoulders. "You're right. Not even vengeful little bitches like that should have to go through what she did. Or what I did, for that matter."

She felt the hitch in Xena's breathing, and pressed closer to her. "Of course if we know where they are, we've got to help them." She took Xena's hand in hers and clasped it. "It's our destiny, you and I. To stand in that wind."

Xena smiled briefly. "I sent word down the hill to the barracks. Just to quietly start getting ready."

Gabrielle nodded. "I'll let Ephiny know."

They watched Dori jump over a thrown ball and laugh, then run to the circle as another girl took her place. "I'm glad she's getting a lot of friends." Gabrielle said after a long pause. "Its good for her, you know?"

"Yeah." Xena sighed. "Wish I'd had a bunch when I was her age. It was just me and Tor and Ly. Werent many other kids in town then." She let herself relax, glad there hadn't been any contention between them. "We never played that game."

"No, us either." Gabrielle said. "Or.. well maybe the boys did. The best the girls did was play pick up sticks in the barn."

They looked at each other. Then Gabrielle put her head back down on Xena's shoulder, feeling the muscles shift as her partner turned slightly and gave her a kiss on the top of her head, the exhale of her breath warming her scalp.

There was something so elemental about that feeling. It was like dunking your soul in warm soup on a cold day. Gabrielle watched her daughter at play, with her little friend beside her and took a moment to savor her life.

"Mama!" The game ended and Dori ran over, with Cari beside her. "Can I bring Rusty in to be with us to have fun? He can play games too!"

"No, honey." Gabrielle put her arms around her. "Rusty is down by Gramma, and it's too cold to try and bring him here."

“Mama, Boo said!”

“Boo said maybe when it’s warmer.” Xena spoke up. “You’ve got all your buddies here, Dor. Let him spend time with his friends down in the barn.”

“Horsie is cute.” Cari spoke up shyly. “Like him.”

“Do ya?” Xena turned her attention to the little girl, who edged back a little. She was a hand or so shorter than Dori was, and had curly reddish blond hair and was cute as a button herself. “Cmere.” She held out her hand.

Cari hesitated, then she quickly put her hand in Xena’s much larger one. Then the other girls all started shouting in a new game, and she withdrew it, looking back over at them.

“Go have fun.” Gabrielle gave Dori a hug and a kiss on the head. “We can talk about Rusty later.”

“Okay mama.” Dori said. “C’mon lets go.” She and Cari pattered off back to the game, which now seemed to involve a lot of running and laughter,

“We’re going to end up with that pony at the breakfast table aren’t we?” Gabrielle mock sighed. “Let’s go, Boo. Let Dori have her fun, and you and I can go have some dinner in our hut.”

Xena stood up agreeably and stretched. “Let me tell Dori we’re leaving.”

Gabrielle waited as her partner strolled over to the group, leaning over their daughter and ruffling her hair. Dori looked up, then looked quickly behind her. The bard lifted a hand and waved, then smiled as Dori went back to her play.

Xena observed the group briefly, then returned to her side, extending a hand out to her as she stood to join her.

They strolled over to the door and ducked outside, crossing the cold ground to their quarters, entering into the candle lit space and shutting the weather out behind them.

Gabrielle went over to the fire and nudged a cast iron pot closer to the flames, then paused as she felt Xena come up behind her and waited as long arms enclosed her from behind and their bodies pressed together. ‘Mm.”

“You really don’t want to go.” Xena said, after a brief pause.

Gabrielle turned, putting her back to the fire and let her hands rest against her partner’s body. “You really can read my mind, can’t you?” She asked. “How do you do that? How on earth do you know exactly what I’m thinking, Xena?”

The taller woman shrugged, and smiled. “We’ve known each other long enough.” She responded. “And you don’t exactly hide your feelings.”

Gabrielle’s face eased into a somewhat wry smile. “Not with you.” She admitted. “Not anymore. I don’t think I could now.”

“No, me either.”

Their eyes met and they stood quietly, studying each other for a minute, surrounded by the faint snap of the flames, and the soft hiss of wind in the drying tree limbs outside.

“Huh.” Gabrielle exhaled finally. “I never thought I’d get to where I really liked staying in one spot. But you know, it’s been okay.” She said. “I’m happy being here, and doing what we’re doing.”

“Mm.”

“I wish neither of us had to go.” The bard clarified. “I’m just so tired of us having to go pull everyone’s ass out of the fire and get nothing for it.” Her face scrunched. “Gah that sounds selfish doesn’t it?”

“Given what we’ve gone through the last few years? Not really.” Her partner said. “But maybe we’ll get lucky this time and something good’ll come of it.”

Well, that could be. The bard reflected. You never knew. "Do you want to really do this, Xe?" She watched the firelight reflect off Xena's angular features.

"I want to finish this whole deal. It's been hanging over me." Xena replied promptly. "We knew this would be coming."

"Iolaus said they were trying to keep us out of it."

Xena nodded. "Which probably just drew it all out."

"Probably." Gabrielle admitted. "So we get this taken care of, then we get our quiet winter, right?" She exchanged wry, understanding looks with her partner. "Ah, Xe."

Xena chuckled softly. She leaned forward and hugged Gabrielle close, giving her back a light rub with her fingertips. Then she released her and removed her cloak, taking that and her own over to the pegs on the wall.

Gabrielle turned and picked up her big wooden spoon, stirring the stew she'd left warming and sniffing at the steam that was starting to come off it. "Mm."

"I smell duck."

"Yes, you do." The bard agreed. "They brought in close to two dozen of the suckers. I grabbed two for us." She added a touch of herbs, then went over to the cabinet against the wall to get some platters out. "Hey Xe?"

"Yees?" Xena had just folded her overtunic and put it on the garment press.

"What would happen if we let them just kind of fade out?" Gabrielle turned and faced her, tapping her spoon against her lips a little. "If we didn't get involved?"

Xena sat on the press and folded her arms. "I don't know." She answered. "Hadn't really thought about it. "

"Hm." Gabrielle wiggled her eyebrows. "Interesting question?"

Xena hiked one knee up and circled it with both hands. "Made me think of another question. How much of the good attitude around here lately is because Artemis and Athena are mortal?" She asked. "Remember what happened when Ares was."

Gabrielle put the platters down and paused, leaning against the table. "But that was the reverse, Xe. Everyone was crazy angry."

"True."

"But you know." The bard said. "As soon as that happened, remember how chilled out everyone got in Therma." She added thoughtfully. "Was that them just stopping wanting the war, or …"

"Yeah. That's what made me think of it." Her partner mused. "The or part. Because Ares didn't stop wanting the war, after they were out of the way now did he?"

"Huh."

"Ah, who knows." Xena got up and came over, taking a seat at the table as she watched Gabrielle bring the platters over and load them up from the kettle. "We're both assuming Cait and Bennu are going to find them out there. Let's get past that first."

"True." The bard filled two mugs for them and sat down next to her. "You up for a little sparring after dinner?" She asked. "I'm kinda in the mood."

"Let's see if you stay that way."

**

Cait had been waiting in silence for about a half candlemark, her dark cloak blending in perfectly with the tall tree she was standing against.

A moment ago though, she'd heard motion behind her. Xena had taught her how to know what that was. The movement of air, the compression of a step against bare ground, faintest rasp of clothing against skin.

Most animals didn't make that sort of noise, and the hunting ones made no noise at all. Cait felt her breathing slow as she sharpened her senses, detecting that mildest of vibrations against the soles of her feet that was a human sized animal coming closer.

Could be someone just coming to relieve her.

Could be someone just coming out to relieve themselves.

Cait curled her fingers around her long dagger and drew it from it's sheath, lowering her hand to her thigh, and readying her other hand at the hem of her cloak to move it aside.

They were behind her tree. Cait went absolutely still, the only motion the cautious rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

They moved.

She felt the hands coming for her and she waited until they committed, before she slid to one side, hearing fingers impact the bark of the tree as she swirled her cloak aside and reached out to grab her adversary by the throat, bringing her dagger around in a fast, then slow motion as the point came to rest pricking skin. "Stop."

The figure went still. "Okay! Hey! No harm meant! I was just trying to surprise you." It was Jakes just out of adolescence voice, cutting through the cold air. "Don't stab me!"

Cait met his eyes in the gloom steadily. "I don't play."

"I get it." Jake had his hands up now, palms out. "I couldn't sleep. I thought maybe you'd want to talk to someone out here. It's boring."

How do you know. That's what she'd asked Xena, in the dark night when they'd shared watch at the front of the Amazon village. How do you know when someone's rot, or not?

You know. Xena had said, her pale eyes watching the open space at the gates, seeing far more in the gloom than Caits did. You do it enough, and you know. And then Xena had turned her head to look at Cait and told her, you see it in their eyes.

Rats. Cait released him and stepped back, holding her dagger ready in any case. She couldn't see anything particular in his eyes at all. Apparently she hadn't done this quite long enough yet. "Don't do that again."

"Trust me I won't." Jake cautiously backed away from her, and slowly lowered his hands. "You're a wild thing, aren't you?"

Cait slid her dagger home in it's sheath and returned to leaning against the tree. "I grew up talking to wolves and rabbits so I suppose, yes, I am a wild thing." She twitched her cloak back into place and resumed her steady scanning of the trees.

"Oh." Jake picked a nearby tree to lean against, at a safe distance. "Do all Amazons do that?"

"No."

"What do Amazons do?"

"Whatever everyone else does." Cait said. "Hunt, gather, plant things, get herbs, make clothing, raise children.. really, not any difference."

"Except no men." Jake said, succinctly.

"In the village, no."

'That's weird."

“Not really.” Cait said. “Bit of a relief actually. All that pissing and stink out of the way.”

Jake looked at her in silence.

“Maybe you could find someone more pleasant to talk to?”

**

Iolaus pulled his cloak more closely around his head as he led the white mare down the slope towards the bridge. “Shh.” He patted the horse’s neck. “I know it’s cold, sweetheart, but we’ve got work to do.”

The mare flared her nostrils, her breath visible on the air but remained quiet, walking along next to Iolaus without complaint.

“See, we’ve got to get this done, right? Herc and I agreed we needed to keep Gabrielle and Xena out of it, so that’s what we’re gonna do. We’ll ride out into Thrace, and find us those two and get them back where they belong.”

The mare blew out a breath, snorting softly.

They crossed the bridge, the thocking of the mare’s hooves muffled by the snow and headed out along the Thrace bound road after passing through the silent, empty lower market.

He figured he would get a ways off from Amphipolis, and then camp just off the road. He knew the others from the town were days ahead of him, but he’d keep the same general track and maybe he’d catch up.

“Should have gone with them.” He sighed, stroking the mare’s cheek. “Then you’d have company too.” He took a better hold of her reins and blinked a few snowflakes off his eyelashes, feeling a profound sense of relief in his guts to be on the move.

Whether it ended in success or not – he had to respond to the urgency he’d sensed in Hercules’s message, whatever form that message actually had been delivered in.

Xena hadn’t though it was a dream. Xena had, in fact, told him what she thought it really had been, having a unique insight.

Iolaus took a breath. Was the veil really that thin? Had Xena really stood just inside it and reached out to Gabrielle in just that way?

Of course, that was Xena, and she wasn’t Hercules….

His mental voice trailed off into introspective silence. Just a matter of degree, she’d said, facing him across the table with that faint smile, and the echo of new self knowledge in those pale blue eyes.

Sure. Hercules had known, the moment he’d met her. But they’d all always looked steadfastly past it, because she had. Even he had, after his own life had been given back to him – offered to her as a gift from the God of War.

But there had been a reason he’d come to her, years ago, to her and not to anyone else when he’d needed help to reclaim his lost friend. Even if he had never admitted it.

Even if she had never acknowledged it.

Hercules had told him all about it that night in Therma, after it was, they thought, all over. Before the tidal wave. He’d been so proud of Xena.

So envious of her.

Iolaus smiled and lengthened his stride, moving past the dark forest at the edge of the road and continuing down the barely seen shadow of it. Maybe he would catch up with Cait, or maybe, he reasoned, he’d bump into some fuzzies.

It was good to be on the move.

**

Dori sat on her little bed, listening to one of the biggers telling a story.

It was okay. Not as good as mamas, but everyone knew that mama told the best stories. This one was about a giant, who had gotten lost.

Dori knew about giants. Mama had told her all about how Boo had made friends with them and then, sometimes beated them up. She wanted to meet a giant.

"Dodo."

She turned to look and saw her friend there "What you do?"

Cari had her hands clasped together, and she cautiously opened them, exposing a tiny nose and whiskers. "I gots an mice."

Dori wriggled around, dismissing the story for this much more interesting diversion. She put out a fingertip and felt the nose wiggle against it. "Good." She approved "Nice aminal."

Cari opened her hands and the mouse sat there, nose wiggling furiously. Then it paused and used it's front paws to wash it's face. "So cute!"

"What do you two have there?" A loud voice interrupted them, and they both turned, to see one of the minders approaching.

"Uh oh." Cari's eyes widened.

The mouse didn't like the voice either. It gathered itself and jumped off Cari's hand, running between the minder's legs and into the storytelling circle.

Screams went up, and the minder herself jumped in mid air, whirling around and looking rapidly between her feet. "What the Hades was that?"

Dori got up to her feet, frowning. "What you do?" She demanded. "Just a bitty aminal!!"

The mouse ran across the straw covered floor, scampering towards the entrance. One of the older girls ran and grabbed a staff, coming back and aiming for it. "I got it!"

Dori's eyes got wide. "Hey!" She ran for the spot, and jumped over the animal, landing on her elbows and knees on top of it as the staff slammed down on her.

Owie. Dori felt the thing hit her again, and she let out a startled and outraged yell.

"Stop!" Another voice yelled. "Ragie, stop! Stop it!"

Everyone was yelling. Dori got owie real fast, and it made her start crying. Then things were happening, and people were coming over and then, real fast, it got very quiet.

Then she heard her mama's voice.

"WHAT IN THE HADES IS GOING ON HERE?"

It made her hiccup. Mama was mad and loud. Really loud. She was still owie, but she bit her tongue to keep quiet and looked down, relieved to see the mouse there, okay. "Pssehh." She told it. "Mama's mad."

More voices spoke up, then it got even quieter, then a shadow fell over her and she felt someone get close and it was Boo. "Got aminal, Boo!" She said, as Boo took hold of her. "Look!"

"I see, Dori. Let me take him."

Boo took the aminal, and the aminal liked that. All aminals did, when Boo took them. They loved Boo, just like Dori did. So that was okay.

But she was still owie, and then Boo was picking her up and she knew she was going to be okay too because Boo made everything okay.

“Looks like just a skin split. Let me go look at her.” Boo’s voice said, into all the quiet after Mama stopped being loud. “Looks worse than it is.”

Then Boo stood up and it was like flying, a little. It made Dori almost forget about being owie. She looked around and saw all the other kids watching her and she wondered where the mouse had gone. But then Boo was walking and they were going away from everyone.

“I”ll catch up with you” Mama’s voice spoke up, still sounding very mad. Dori was glad mama wasn’t mad at her, and that Boo was there to make things good.

**

Gabrielle waited until her partner and child were on the other side of the room, and Xena was occupied before she turned back and faced the circle of wide eyed kids, her hands planted firmly on her hips.

The girl, Ragie, had dropped the staff and was standing in frozen silence, her eyes the size of ducks eggs as she stared at the visibly furious Amazon queen in their midst.

“It was.. it..” The girl started, then stopped.

“Even if that child you hit wasn’t my daughter, I would do this.” Gabrielle said, after taking the time to swallow, and obtain a deep breath of air. “Solari take her to the punishment chamber. No rations.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Solari advanced immediately.

“I didn’t meant to hurt her..” Ragie blurted.

“When you pick up a weapon.” Gabrielle stared her down. “You take responsibility for what you do with it.” She took another breath. “Especially when it’s aimed at a sister.”

Solari took hold of her and led her out, pausing to give Gabrielle a comforting pat on the upper arm as she passed. “Definitely your kid.”

That at least made Gabrielle smile briefly. “Yeah that’s pretty much how I got into this whole mess, isn’t it?” She sighed. ‘Xe?” She called out, raising her voice and projecting it behind her.

“She’s fine.” Xena called back. “Just a bruise and a little cut. She’s already negotiating with me for cookies and to go back to her fun.”

Gabrielle exhaled, and then went to one of the seats and sat down, extending her legs and regarding her bare, and chilled feet. “Okay, so everyone sit down, and let’s talk about this.” She said. “Someone want to tell me exactly what happened?”

Cari was still wide eyed. “I gots a mice.” She said, in just above a whisper. “It got skeered.”

Gabrielle extended her hand out. “C’mere, Cari. Tell me about the mic.. I mean, mouse.” She watched the little girl approach timidly, and smiled at her. “It’s okay.” She told her, as Cari came up next to her. “Was it a nice mouse?”

“Yes.” Cari nodded. “Mices is cute.” She told Gabrielle, more confidently. “A little one, it was in my hand.” She held up her hand. “I catched it.”

“It was just a mouse.” One of the older girls said. “It ran out and Ragis was just trying to kill it.” She said. “It happened so fast.”

“It did.” The minder came over and sat down next to Gabrielle. “It was my fault – I saw them whispering about something and went over to see what was going on. I guess I scared the thing and it ran between my legs.”

“Mices got skeered.” Cari agreed. “Was going to get hurt. Dodo said oh no and got it.”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle felt a sense of calm return to her, after the heart jolting and mind spinning yanking of both of them out of bed into the night in nothing but shifts. She was glad of the fire.

Glad she'd been one step ahead of her partner as they'd cleared the door and seen that staff coming down on Dori's head, as she'd heard the growl of rage erupt from Xena's chest as her partner saw only the weapon and not the wielder.

Gabrielle ruffled Cari's hair. "So let me tell you all a story, okay? Maybe after that it will make more sense to you about why Dori would do what she did." She told the rest of them. "Cause I don't want you all to think she's totally crazy."

Everyone relaxed now, and gathered closer. Gabrielle as a storyteller was a well known and loved manifestation, far more than the yelling, bristling, mad as Hades woman who'd first come in.

"Let's talk about what the greater good means."

**

"Okay now?" Xena examined her handiwork, satisfied the bleeding had stopped. "No more owie?"

"Yes." Dori was balanced on her lap, legs hanging off and her head cradled in the crook of Xena's arm. "All good Boo."

Dori had been lucky. The girl had been slight, and her grip on the staff had been loose. It was, in fact, just a graze as she'd told Gabrielle. "You and your buppits."

"But Boo, they was going to hurt the mousie." Dori protested. "No good!"

"I know." Xena gently smoothed her hair back. "You did right, Dor. You always want to help your friends, right?"

Dori grinned. "Yes!"

"That's what you see us do, right?" Xena said. "So promise me, you'll always do that. Even if you get owie."

"Boo and mama do good." Dori said. "All the time."

Xena studied her quietly. "Not all the time." She said. "But we try real hard."

"What mama do?" Dori peeked past Xena's elbow. "Tell a story? We go Boo?"

About to stand up, Xena paused when Solari appeared next to her. "You have a talk with that kid or do I need to?"

Solari put a hand on Xena's knee. "Easy champ." She said. "Regis is not a bad kid. Not like some over there, with their snootful of attitude. She's okay. "

Xena looked from Dori's scalp to Solari, and back.

"No seriously. She came from Gillen's tribe, when they got whacked. One of the refugees." Solari said. "But not much into mice and stuff, yeah? They don't climb trees."

"She hit my kid." Xena said, in a flat tone.

"Honest, Xena. I don't think she meant to. She's crying like crazy, scared crapless." Solari said. "Y'know?"

"Mmph."

"My telling her she almost had her head taken off didn't help, of course." Solari continued, in a mild tone. "I don't think she realized you were actually still in your underwear and didn't have a sword on you."

That forced a chuckle from Xena.

'You hear her yell or something?"

"No. Just felt like something was wrong." Xena answered. "Yanked us both out of bed."

Solari digested this in silence for a minute. “Maybe Regis should stay in there for like a sevenday.” She remarked. “Honest, and serious, she’s an okay kid.”

Xena nodded. “Take your word for it.” She shifted Dori a little. “You ready to go back to listening to your mama? Will you stay out of trouble for the rest of the night?”

“Yes, Boo.” Dori promised. “No more mouses.”

“Mm.” Xena stood up with her daughter in her arms. She looked at Solari. “Lot of those kids orphans?” She asked. “Besides Dor, and Aalene’s girl?”

Solari glanced at the group. “This batch? Yeah I guess. From the war, and all that after. And the move. Some of them were left with us when their mothers decided to go somewhere else.” She considered. “I don’t much keep track of them. Kids aren’t my thing.”

Xena nodded thoughtfully. “Okay, well let me go put her down. Hopefully that’s all the excitement for the night.” She walked back over to the circle, with Solari beside her and set Dori down next to her mother. “Here ya go.”

Gabrielle paused in her story and gently examined Dori’s head. “You all good now, honey?”

“Yes mama. Boo fix it.” Dori sat down next to her, next to Cari. “We should go find more mouses.” She whispered.

“Dori.”

**

Xena was flat on her back on the bed, arms spread out, regarding the sturdily built ceiling. Nearby, the fire rustled and popped, but otherwise the hut was quiet.

She was alone, waiting for Gabrielle to come back over from the gathering hall, the bard taking a moment out to go speak to the hapless Regis in her solitude.

Stupid little punk.

The door opened and a gust of cold wind blew in, bringing a prickle of goosebumps across her skin, and she lifted her head as the door closed to see Gabrielle divesting herself of the borrowed cloak she’d gone to the lockdown in. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Gabrielle yanked off her equally borrowed boots and crawled into bed, throwing herself over Xena’s body and letting out a disgusted grunt. “Ugh!”

“Maybe that whole sleepover thing wasn’t a good idea?” Xena hazarded. “Next time maybe invite some of Dor’s little friends here?”

Gabrielle lifted her head and regarded her partner. “You want a bunch of little girls running around in here?”

“I”ll cope for one night. “ Xena responded. “That’s twice in a row with those kids. I don’t like it.”

“Mm.” The bard put her head down on Xena’s shoulder. “Sweetheart, I don’t really think there was anything malicious in this. I talked to that kid. She’s in there, in a corner, crying her eyes out.”

“Coulda been worse for her.” Xena remarked darkly. “Not surprised she’s upset.”

“It’s not that, hon. She’s really upset about hurting Dori.”

“Naturally she’d say that to you.”

“Xena.”

The warrior exhaled. “Yeah, I know. I’m being a jerk.”

Gabrielle wrapped herself around her partner and allowed the warmth to take the chill from her skin. “Dori and her animals. She can’t even fathom why Regis wanted to hurt that mouse.”

“No, I know.” Xena murmured after a moment. “She’s got such a clean soul.”

Gabrielle let the silence after that lengthen, as she lay quietly just looking up at Xena’s face. Then she lifted herself up and they kissed, putting aside firmly the worries and disturbance to focus on each other.

After a moment she paused, and studied the depths of Xena’s eyes, allowing herself to wonder, really, which one of them Dori had gotten that from. Under all the blood stain, there was, and always had been such a sense of burnished purpose there.

But she couldn’t deny the echo of Dori’s acts in her own history either. It occurred to her that her own admittedly sometimes off base protective instincts matched with Xena’s unquestioning belief in her own judgment might not be the best combination for her child long term.

Well. She kissed Xena on the lips. At least the mice would be safe.

**

Xena unrolled a hide map onto the long table and weighed the ends down with couple of rocks she’d picked up on her way down the hill.

She was alone in the barracks planning room, with dim gray light coming in the leaded glass windows along the outside wall. The inside wall was covered in a large scale diagram of Amphipolis and it’s surrounding area, all the way along the river to the pass, with Potadeia marked in it’s place on one side.

The other stretched to the Thrace border, and had the trail up to the forest people’s valley marked as well.

The map she had on the table though was from the Thrace border inward, and she refreshed her memory of the area and it’s winding roads and hills. She put a finger on Phillipi, and then the port city, noting the narrow pass just to one side of the long valley that connected the two.

Cait and the rest were, she figured, going down into that valley around now. She figured it would be another day for them to get to Philippi and two more after that to the port city if they stayed mounted.

So she had time for them to get there, and send word back of what they’d found.

“Xena?”

She looked up to find one of her troop captains there. “C’mon in, Redder.”

The man entered. He was tall and gangling, roughly the same age as Xena was, and had random scars that indicated a life of fighting behind him. “I’ve got the provision masters getting loads made up. We figure we’ve got enough stores to go a moon, maybe two sevendays more.”

“That should do it.” Xena said, regarding the map. “Take us a week or so to get out there. How long we stay depends on if we need to siege.”

The man nodded. “Could be they’ll duck out, if they’re pirates. Might just sail off.”

“Ehh.. “ Xena rested her weight on her fists, leaning against the table. “Been in there a while. I don’t think they’ll give up the sweet life so fast.” Her face creased into a brief grin. “I wouldn’t.”

“Not you you’d have been facing off against.” Redder smiled back. “Feel good to be out and on the march. Been a while.”

“True that.” His general agreed. “Make sure we’ve got enough spears and arrows laid by. They could have outposts here, and here.” She indicated spots near the narrow pass. “We could have to fight through it.”

Redder didn’t look at all dismayed. “Aye” He agreed. “Bring along Dag and Furstan, case we need to get a catapult going . They know how to build em.”

“Good.” Xena said. “Trees will have dried out enough I think. Better than if it was spring.”

“Aye, for sure.” He responded. “Have them seeing to wagons, for the weather.”

Xena nodded. “Make sure they wax the bedrolls. I don’t want half the army sickening.” She leaned against the table again, regarding the map, while Redder waited companionably in silence.

Two old campaigners, just going over mental lists. Xena was relatively satisified with the readiness of her troops, and she allowed herself to be cautiously excited about taking this force, all of them shaped and trained by her hand, out to war.

No one was even looking askance at her, not here, not in Amphipolis, not anymore.

One of the guards poked his head in. “Message from the watch, Xena.” He entered and handed it to her. “Seems like that pal of yours struck out last night.”

“Yeah, he left a note with my mother.” Xena glanced t the bit of parchment then handed it back. “Chances are we’ll catch up to him he’s headed in the same direction we are.” She sighed. “Wish he hadn’t gone out by himself though.”

“Bad time of year for it.” The guard agreed. “Nice fella though.”

“Yes he is.” Xena said. “All right, let’s get everyone in the hall after lunch and get some sparring in.” She caught the grins and returned one of her own. “Maybe if it clear a little we’ll do some horsework after that.”

“That’ll be fun.” Redder said. “I”ll pass the word.” He left the room with the guard, leaving Xena in solitary glory with her map and the set of armor resting on a worktable behind her. After one last satisified pass at her route, she went to the table and started sorting out her gear.

Not that different than what she’d normally wear, but with a long sleeved linen garment underneath and leggings to protect her from the weather. Xena unrolled her armor kit and removed a tool, starting the work of adjusting the leather and metal to fit over the additional layers.

Lined boots this time too, and her thick cloak. Xena whistled softly under her breath as she worked, glancing up as a soft knock came at the open door. “C’mon in.”

The fledgling healer entered. “X.. Xena?” He said. “May I speak with you a moment? It’s about the woman, the injured one.”

Xena waved him in but continued to work. “She having problems?”

The young healer came over to her. “She seems to have pain, yes, but what worries me is she has asked me for a knife or a sword, to protect herself with. She seems to think she’s in danger here.”

“She does, huh?” Xena skillfully unbent a retainer ring and added another link to it, then rebent it closed. “You mean from the men?

“I think so, yes.”

True, or just a scam? Xena worked on another clasp, finding a worn spot underneath it. “Peh.” She set the tool down and fished in her kit, removing a leather scrap. “”Anyone been in there to talk with her, or is this something out of her head?”

The healer considered that a moment, a good sign from Xena’s point of view. “Could have been a visitor, I guess. One of the grooms sat with her while I was having my breakfast. But no one said anything about having an argument or anything with her.”

“Mm.” Xena carefully stitched in a replacement underlayer. “She was raped.” She said, glancing up at the healer. “Multiple times. “

He grimaced.

“So she’s probably skittish around men. Maybe I’ll see if my mother has space up at the inn for her.” The warrior decided. “Going to be a lot of motion around down here. Who’s with her now?”

“Solari.”

Xena bit off the end of the gut thread. “G’wan up and ask if there’s a room we can put her in.” She instructed. “Not the back room where Iolaus was. Something private.”

The healer nodded and scuttled off, to be replaced at once by her partner’s cloaked and compact figure. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Gabrielle came over. “Whatcha doing?”

Xena went back to her pliers. “Adjusting this old junk.” She responded. “You hear what he just said? Our guest doesn’t trust us.”

“I heard.” The bard came over and leaned her elbows on the work table. ‘I talked to Ephiny. She agrees with you, by the way. She thinks if we don’t give a hand, even if we can’t actually save them, we’re going to pay a price.”

Xena nodded. “Uh huh.”

“She says if you go, I should go.”

Xena looked up, and a faint smile appeared. “That was in question?”

“No. She just got that out first. She said after that last time, screw Amazon law.” Gabrielle returned the faint smile. “I expected her to say it though, she said something like that when we were on our way back from Therma.”

“Good.”

“So we talked about what to do about sending Amazon fighters. Do I leave them here to defend the place, or take some with me to satisfy that primal urge.” Gabrielle boosted herself up onto the work table and sat there, legs swinging a little.

“Some want to go?”

“Oh yeah. They heard the soldiers talking about getting ready and they’re up for it. Maybe a score of them caught me in the gathering hall before I came back down here.”

Xena added a few more links to her armor. “They have to ride.”

“They know.”

Amazons. Xena swung her armor up and settled it onto her shoulders to check the fit, imagining in her head the extra room that would be needed. “You want to take them?” She finally asked, glancing up at her partner.

Gabrielle was studying the floor between her boots with a thoughtful expression on her face. She turned her head and met Xena’s eyes only after a relatively long silence. “I don’t.” She admitted, with a wry smile. “But I think I should. It’ll take the more antsy out and let them get it out of their system. Safer for Eph and everyone I leave behind.”

Xena reached over and put a hand on her knee, squeezing it gently. “Spoken as a true leader.” She said, casually. ‘Good job.”

“You still make me feel like a feckless teenager, you know that?” Gabrielle responded, after both a breathless silence, and a blush. “Just for that, I’ll make you those dumplings you love tonight.”

The warrior chuckled lightly. “I’ll take all of those I can get. Too much trouble when we’re out on the road.” She removed the armor and laid it back out on the worktable. “So now we’ve only got one thing to decide.”

“Who to leave Dori with.” Her partner concluded. “We always save the toughest things for last.”

**

Cait fastened the ties on her saddlebags, then pulled herself up onto Shadow's back. She settled her knees and picked up the reins, as Nala led her horse up next to her. "Well, that was a night."

"Buh." Nala climbed up on her horses back. "Damned ass wild goose chase. Glad I'll be in a bedroll tonight."

"Mm." Cait pulled her hood up a little and flexed her hands in her gloves. "That lot thinks we can make town by tonight." She indicated the group from Philippi. "Might even get to sleep indoors." She guided Shadow along the snow covered path.

"That'd be nice too." Nala said, as they joined the rest of the group in getting underway. They fell into line behind Bennu and the rest of their gang as they moved out of the forest they'd sheltered in and back onto the road.

The sky was clear, at least, though gray around the fringes with promise of more weather to come. But right now there was sunlight coming through the tops of the trees and as they turned and headed east.

They spread out a little and the pace picked up a bit. Though she hadn't gotten much sleep, Cait felt a little refreshed by the cold breeze against her face and she took a deep breath, happy to be on the move.

She could see Jake ahead of them, riding next to the Philippians again and talking to the second in command.

A relief.

"So your friend ever give up last night?" Nala asked, in a wry tone.

"Goodness." Cait shook her head. "You'd think simply not speaking to him would have driven him off, but no." She relaxed into her saddle. "He's rather creepy."

"He likes you."

'Yes, I got there myself, thanks." Cait responded drolly. "Spend enough time around an inn, you do understand all that nonsense."

'Guys tend to really believe everyone wants them." Nala remarked. "But you know I've known some women like that too."

Cait chuckled.

"So you're not interested in something casual with him? He's not bad looking."

Cait's brows contracted, and she turned her head to regard Nala. "I have a partner, you know."

"No, I know, but he's fair game. We do that sometimes, just out there." Nala said, in a mild tone. "That's how we end up with kids, you know?"

"Mm." Cait made a low sound in her throat. "Not really my thing." She shook her head. "I'm with Queen Gabrielle on it."

"Ah. Well, like she said, she'd have to go pretty far to find someone better than who she's with." Nala chuckled. "Hey you think Xena really fathered that kid?"

"Oh yes." Cait answered in a very positive tone. "There's no doubt at all, really. You just have to look at Dori."

"Some people said they just say that, and it's really her brother." Nala mused. "I mean, that's what it was supposed to be, remember?"

"I do, but that's not how it turned out." Cait glanced ahead of them, but they had put a little space between themselves and the others, and the wind was blowing in her face and taking her words behind her. "Xena's a bit god, you know."

Nala eyed her. "She is?"

“Yes.”

“You know for sure? I know everyone thinks so.”

“Yes.” Cait said. “I was outside the barn up in Therma, and I heard Gabrielle talking to someone about it. “

“Wow.”

“Well, I mean really. You could have guessed.”

“Huh.”

A shout made them both look up, and they saw one of the scouts galloping back towards them, waving an arm. “Now what?” Nala nudged her horse in the ribs. “C’mon, Cait. Let’s see what entertainment’s in store for us now.”

They rode up to the rest of the group who had pulled up to wait or the scout. “What’s going on?” Bennu asked. “Trouble ahead?”

“Looks like there was a battle.” The scout said, soon as he was in range. “A lot of bodies.”

“Here we go.” Bennu loosened his sword in it’s scabbard. “Let’s go see what’s what.” He motioned the scout to turn around and they started after him, the pace quickening to a canter as they spread out over and across the road, heading between a thick stand of trees on both sides.

Cait made sure her daggers were all accessable, and she caught sight of Nala pulling out her crossbow as she rode. Though it had seemed to her that the battle was over, you never knew.

It could be a trap, after all.

They swept around the bend in the road and down into a rocky dell, where vultures were busy and wheeled off at their approach.

Ten human bodies, five horses. They slowed down and fanned out, Bennu halting in the center of the carnage and sliding down off his horse.

Cait moved her horse around him and circled the dell, then she halted at the far end where a small stream was trickling and got down. She fastened Shadow’s reins to a tree limb and started hunting in the grass, looking for a flash of sunlight she’d spotted.

“Recognize any of em?” Bennu asked one of the Philiipi men. “They look like merchants.”

“They do.” The man he’d addressed agreed. “No one I know though.. could they have been at your market?”

Nala came over and studied the dead. “If they were, they lost their purses.” She indicated the man’s belt, where cut ties were evident. “But they’re dressed well.”

“And they were in our parts.” Cait came over and extended her hand, opening it to show a bit of jewelry. “That’s one of Das’s bits. She’s an Amazon of our tribe.”

“It is.” Nala confirmed. “So they were at market.”

“So maybe it’s just a road robbery?” Jake had come up next to Cait. “Stupid, not to go with a guard. Where did they think they were? Athens?”

“it’s quite as dangerous there.” Cait said. “But couldn’t they just have taken their coin? Why kill them all?”

“No one to put the law on you.” Jake said. “Easier if there aren’t any witnesses, right?”

Cait regarded the bodies, which were hacked and cut to really a horrid degree, and one man’s head had been bashed to bits. She took a step back and turned slowly in a circle, watching the dried branches move at the edge of the dell.

This was not right. She suddenly felt sure. Not right at all.

**

Gabrielle ducked into the inn kitchen, a sack hanging over her shoulder. “Hey mom.”

Cyrene turned from the hearth. “Hey there kiddo.” She motioned Gabrielle forward. “Want some hot wine?”

“We’ve got some up the hill, thanks.” The bard came over. “I need to borrow some herbs. I promised Xe something special tonight.”

“Help yourself.” Cyrene chuckled indulgently. “What’s the occasion?”

“Nothing really.” Gabrielle had stepped down into the pantry and was selecting some herbs. “I do this thick soup with venison dumplings she likes and it needs juniper which I’m out of right now.” She stepped back up into the kitchen. “It’s good weather for soup anyway.”

“It is.” Her mother in law agreed. “I’ve got a root and chicken pot going here myself. Glad we’ve got a smaller crowd tonight I was getting tired of that stew.”

“Well we’re going to enjoy the comforts while we can.” The bard said. “Though at least we’re going to be traveling in company this time.”

“And damned good for that.”

Cyrene had been filled in, of course, on everything. Though she’d spent quite some time throwing her hands into the air, she’d eventually agreed ignoring the trouble would only mean even more trouble. She hadn’t liked it though.

“Yes, I’m glad we’ll be with the army. I get chills thinking about that last mess we were in.” The bard admitted. “It’ll be more comfortable all around traveling this time.”

“Well, with any luck at all, you two can find those missing… “ Cyrene paused. “You know, and get things put right without anyone getting hurt.”

Gabrielle lifted her hand and crossed her fingers.

Cyrene mimicked the motion.

‘Yeah, and by the way, thanks for finding space for our injured Amazon.” Gabrielle added a loaf of bread to her sack and leaned against the table. “I appreciate it. Xe said she was getting nervous down in the barracks with all the men.”

“Natural.” Cyrene said, in a sympathetic tone. “We’ll keep an eye on her. She’s had a lot of the attitude kicked out of her, I noticed.”

Gabrielle hadn’t noticed that at all, but, she acknowledged she might be biased. “Let’s hope she doesn’t have other complications.” She sighed. “Let me get going. My soup needs a good long while to simmer.”

“If there’s any left over, send a bit down here.” Cyrene winked. “I’m always open to learn a new recipe.”

“You got it.”

Gabrielle left the warmth of the kitchen and gathered her cloak around her as she walked along the path leading to the back gates. Halfway to them she paused, then turned and retraced her steps, passing by the inn and turning down the route to the barracks.

Why? No reason really. Gabrielle thought she might want to have a word with Alana, before they shifted the woman up to the inn. Or maybe she just wanted to pick up the staff she’d left there earlier.

She could hear the sound of a melee going on in the barracks courtyard and smiled with wry self knowledge.

Oh yeah, her staff.

Right.

She pushed through the gates into the inner square and the sounds got louder and more vivid, the ring of steel and the heavy thunk of maces against armor and as she cleared the corner of the barracks she paused to lean against the wall and watch.

A big group of Xena's soldiers were all fighting in a group, and in a group, they were facing off against their general.

Xena was in the middle of a forest of swords and pikes, her back to the practice post in the center of the square thoroughly engaged in beating off all comers a look of positive glee on her face.

Gabrielle had to smile herself on seeing it. She could feel the surge of almost lighthearted joy coming from her partner as she bounced around the post, blocking a downstroke here, kicking a mace out of someone's hand there, headbutting someone so careless as to get in range and knocking them right back on their ass.

All motion smooth and easy, the hops and jumps and somersaults without effort as she got between four men in a wrestling ball and broke them up without them realizing what had hit them.

Then Xena engaged two of the bigger swordsmen, and was alternating between them, her blade moving so quickly it was a literal blur.

She realized, somewhat belatedly, that Alana was there, bundled in furs and seated in one of the big chairs on the edge of the open space, watching the sparring. She took a few steps closer and sat down next to her, remaining silent as everyone's attention focused on Xena and her opponents.

In a blaze of motion Xena disarmed one, and then turned and booted him back, clearing space and blocking a swipe from the other, then going toe to toe with him in a noisy exchange of bladework.

Then Xena uncoiled from the ground and tumbled in mid air, catching his sword against hers and using the rotating motion to send it flying across the ground to clatter and thump against the stone ground.

Prudently the man dropped to the ground and covered his head with his arms, making his compatriots laugh as Xena landed next to him, bouncing a little as she reached down to tousle his hair.

The soldiers gathered around her as she started an impromptu lecture, listening attentively to her as she went over some of the tactics.

"I have never seen anyone fight like that." Alana said. "I had heard many stories of her prowess. I thought them just exaggerations."

"Mm. No. Xena always exceeds expectations." Gabrielle said, watching the sunlight glisten off her partner's sweating skin. "Shes amazing."

"Naturally you think so." Snarky, but Alana's tone was actually quite mild.

"Naturally I do, but so does everyone else." Gabrielle smiled briefly at her. "So few people in the world live up to their reputations. " She studied her partner fondly. "Xena does. She's a master of weaponry, as you saw, but she's also a very sharp tactician. As a war leader, she's earned the respect of pretty much everyone who's ever faced her."

Alana watched Xena leaned casually against the sparring post, sword resting on her shoulder as she talked about the sparring to the troops surrounding her. "Does she belong to you, or to them? " She asked. "To be the focus of so much admiration must be a distraction."

Gabrielle smiled again., as she watched her soulmate look up and across the square to meet her gaze with a solid thump of emotion that made her breathing hitch a little, as that knowing, sexy grin appeared on the warrior's face in return.

The sword lifted and touched Xena's head, then moved in her direction before dropping casually back to her shoulder, the twinkle in her baby blue eyes very visible.

"She's mine." Gabrielle made a thumbs up gesture twice, then touched her fingertips to her lips and made a throwaway gesture towards her. "We've been down a long road together."

"So I heard around your campfire in the village." Alana murmured. "So she is your champion?"

Gabrielle leaned against the wooden post at the edge of the seat Alana was sitting on. "She is. But sometimes, I'm hers. Depends on what end of the sword we're on at the moment."

"In our tribe, the queen's consort is often a matter of political advantage." Alana said. "A strong consort gives one the advantage. But you must know that."

The bard chuckled. "Xe gave me that advantage before she was my consort. Hades, before we were more than friends. But I don't care."

"Don't you?"

"No, really." Gabrielle turned her head and met Alana's eyes. "If all we had was each other and Dori, I'd consider myself wealthier than the gods."

Alana looked skeptical.

"Yeah, sounds corny. I know." The bard said. "But we traveled together for years, just on what Xe could hunt and what I found, and on coin I earned telling stories on the road."

Alana looked even more skeptical.

"We know what it is not to have anything but each other. We worked hard for what we've got here." Gabrielle said. "That's why we didn't take kindly to you and your group showing up here demanding we hand over part of it."

"No matter now." The other Amazon said. "If I had known at the beginning what I now understand, we would have never left the plains. I risked, and lost." She stared past Gabrielle's shoulder, then looked at her directly. "It was kind of the innkeeper to find space for me. If you had a part of it, I thank you."

"Cyrene's my mother in law. Xe's mom." Gabrielle felt herself relax, sensing an easing of the woman's hostility. "Alana, I am sorry about what happened to you. I wish we could have first met differently."

The other woman studied her, bruises still plain across her face. "You mean that."

"I do." Gabrielle confirmed.

"Well so do I."

The bard smiled. "We'll work on it." She said. "And now let me go and keep my promise. Enjoy the show." She lifted a hand and then turned to leave the sparring area, getting a few steps towards the door before a soft whistle made her stop.

She turned and waited, as Xena jogged in her direction, hitching a hand on the strap of her carrybag as the warrior came up next to her. "Didn't want to interrupt your fun."

"You weren't." The warrior leaned an arm on her shoulder. "Make any progress with our friend?" She inclined her head just a trifle in Alana's direction. "I was surprised she asked to be taken in here."

Gabrielle took a half step back and ran her eyes over her partner from head to foot, then back up again. "Really?"

"Gabrielle."

The bard chuckled at the tone of sweet exasperation. "Did you stop me for a reason? I've got dumplings to make." She tangled her fingers into the straps on the front of the practice shirt Xena had on.

“Yes I did.” Xena leaned over and kissed her soundly. Then she backed off and headed over to the milling soldiers, who had started to break up and face off against each other again, not without knowing grins in her direction.

Gabrielle sniffed reflectively, and reached up to rub her face, then run her fingers through her slightly disordered hair. “Thanks hon.” She exhaled. “Always like to entertain the troops for ya.”

She studiously avoided looking over at Alana and retreated, heading back out the door and starting up the slope again towards home.

“All right.” Xena wiped off the hilt of her sword. “Let’s clear the ground and get a couple of the horses out here. I want to work on close in fighting.”

The soldiers moved off in several directions, some taking off their heavy armor and heading for the chests that held the more flexible scale armor they wore on horseback.

A group went towards the stables.

Xena remained in the center of the sparring area, picking up a sharpening stone and swiping it casually across her blade. There was sound all around her, as her troops exchanged weapons and took a break for water, but she was conscious too of the quiet in her immediate presence.

She picked up her own waterskin and tipped her head back, taking a long swallow of the clear, sweet water dipped from the spring above their cabin, then she briefly squirted a handful of it over her head to clear the sweat.

A shake sent droplets scattering everywhere, and one of the camp boys alertly trotted over to her with a bit of linen. “General?” He piped, holding it up. “Face wipe for ya?”

“Thanks.” Xena took the cloth and dried her skin. “Did you ask your ma if you could come with us, Jerr?”

He nodded. Twelve years old and well grown, he was one of a handful of older kids who had gone apprentice to her forces, their parents proud of them getting a spot where they would learn skills and possibly a trade. “Ma said yeah. She’s got my brother and two sister at home, we’re outta space.”

“Good.” Xena smiled at him. “I was about your age when I started learning to fight.”

“Whoa.” He goggled at her. “Yeah?”

“Amazing at it seems, yeah.” The warrior chuckled, handing him back the cloth. “Give them a hand with the horses. I hear them kicking the walls.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Jerr took the cloth and bolted off towards the stables, his leather boots kicking up tiny puffs of dust from the sparring ground.

Xena wiped down her blade, then seated it in the leather sheath on her back. Then she turned and fished a harvest apple from a sack hanging at her waist and took a bite out of it, hitching herself up on a nearby barrel.

She felt satisfied with the afternoon’s work so far. She’d gotten a good workout, and she could see signs that her troops were starting to work as a solid team together, learning that elusive understanding of who you could trust at your back and when.

Two of the men had wandered back out into the open area, and were facing off with dual swords. Xena shifted a little to keep them in view, and watched as they did a slow exercise with the weapons, showing some experience with them.

Xena crunched on her apple, chewing thoughtfully as she studied the technique, wondering where the men had picked it up. She’d learned about them in Persia, but the two men looked like local cowherds.

Interesting. She got up and walked over to where they were sparring, gaining their attention immediately. “Hey boys.”

They stopped and broke apart, giving her a little salute with the left sword that rang a bell of familiarity with her. “Haven’t seen that technique in a while.”

“Do you know it then, genr’l?” The nearer one asked. “We don’t see it much in these parts.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Xena agreed. “Where’d you pick it up?”

The other man, younger and with bristly ginger hair, smiled bashfully. “You’ll take a jab at us for it, but me and Jor here mixed ourselves up with a circus a ways back. Got us out from home, like. Learned it there from an old guy.”

“Circus.” Xena glanced up as they started leading the first of a half dozen horses into the sparring area. “Huh.”

“Foolish.” Jor smiled. “We were kids. Didn’t want to herd sheep. My family and his lived just north of Potadeia.”

“That seems to be a common theme in those parts.” Xena’s eyes twinkled a little. “Gabrielle didn’t want to herd sheep either – she might have had an easier time if she’d gone the circus route.”

“But not met yourself.” Jor protested.

“Eventually I bet she would have. You did.” The warrior said. “But I’m glad she went the tough route and we didn’t have to wait.”

The horse in the lead swerved and ambled in Xena’s direction, nostrils delicately flaring to catch the scent of the apple half eaten in her hand. She handed the treat over and patted the animal’s broad cheek. “So you learned doubles in the circus. Learn anything else?”

“Bit of juggling, some card tricks. That sort of thing.” Jor said. “Could make a bit with that on the road, but all in all, I likes being a soldier better.”

Hm. Xena stuck that in the back of her head, and dusted her hands off, checking the horses tack before she vaulted into the saddle, settling her knees and turning the animal in a circle before backing her up a few steps as she waited for the rest of troops to reassemble.

“Xena.”

She turned hearing her name, and guided the horse over to where Alana was still sitting, wrapped up against some straw stuffed cushions. “Yes?”

“I wished to compliment you on your skill at battle.” Alana said. “I was tired of the walls of my chamber and they offered to bring me in here for entertainment. I was most thoroughly entertained.”

“Thanks.” Xena relaxed her body. “They’re going to move you up to a room at the inn tonight. It’s still four walls but it’s more private.”

“So they said.” Alana eyed her warily. “Is there a reason why?”

Xena regarded her for a moment in silence. “My healer’s tell me you were asking for weapons. I don’t want any trouble in my barracks.”

“Ah.”

“And don’t make any up at the inn if you know what’s good for you. My mother wields a mean skillet.”

“You do me no service, Xena. If you were in a strange place, would you not want your weapons around you?” Alana frowned. “I asked as any other warrior would… unless you consider me a prisoner. Do you?”

“No. You’re free to leave whenever you want.” The warrior answered, slowly. “My men told me they thought you were worried about them attacking you. If so you did them no service.” She side stepped the horse over a few paces. “That’s why I thought moving up to the inn would be better for everyone.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

“If you want to give them both a skip and be taken up to the Amazon village, work that out with Gabrielle.” Xena turned the horses head and started back towards the center of the open space, where the rest of the horses and troops were gathered.

“Don’t you command them as well, Xena?” Alana called out. “And their queen?”

Xena paused and looked over her shoulder. “You’ll have to ask her that.” She put the horse into a trot and left the benches behind, loosening her sword as she prepared to join the melee again.

Alana remained silent, her eyes fastened on the tall figure who now took the center of attention again. Xena rode as a natural, she’d seen enough of them in Athen’s army and the warrior’s rangy lean body was apparent in its long history of fighting.

Perhaps the Amazon village wouldn’t be the worst place to go after all.

**

Gabrielle unrolled a little more of her parchment, reading down the length of it as she lay sprawled on the low couch in their cabin.

To her right, on the hearth, a hammered iron pot was gently simmering, a savory steam rising from it and dusting the air inside with the smell of it’s contents, and on the nearby table was a basket with fresh bread and a wrapped up nutcake.

The low table near her held a mug of tea, and she reached over and took a sip of it, wiggling her toes a little as a wash of warmth from the fire toasted her skin gently.

It was late afternoon, moving to evening, and she was happy to be relaxing here for a while as she waited for dinner to cook, Dori playing down in town with her cousins until Xena picked her up.

Here in their cabin, because it was easier for her to cook more complicated stuff up here, and because she’d just felt like a quiet, private night – perhaps because she was aware that the number of those might soon become limited.

She was glad they were going with an army. There was much less chance for Xena to indulge in potentially injurious hijinks when she had her image to burnish but it also meant they’d be the absolute center of attention all the time.

So a quiet night here seemed like a good idea.

And even if that all hadn’t been true, the fact was the furniture in their home was more comfortable than in the queen’s quarters and after running around all day she’d wanted that. She stretched her body out along the soft surface of the couch and relaxed again with a sigh of satisfaction.

Her.. no, their quarters in the village weren’t uncomfortable, by Amazon standards at least. But their cabin had been built for them, pretty much by their own hands and from the private bathing room with warmed water to the goose down filled mattress on the bed it was as plush a place as you could expect to find in the raw wild hinterlands of Greece.

Hedonistic, a little. Gabrielle grinned to herself.

A few hours of hedonism wouldn’t kill either of them. Xena would drive herself nonstop as she always did when they were on the march so if she had a chance to spoil her a little, that was all good too.

She propped her elbow on the couch and hiked up one knee, draping the parchment over it. The scroll held a draft of a new story of hers, and she picked up a quill and dipped it into a pot of ink on he table, scribbling a note in the margin.

Then she put the quill down and picked her mug up, taking a sip as she continued to read.

After a while she rolled up the parchment and set it down then folded her hands over her stomach and let her eyes drift shut. The late sun was flooding through the window and bathing her, and she constructed a moment of perfect contentment to enjoy.

It was quiet. Only the soft pops and crackles of the fire were sounding inside the cabin, and outside she could hear the wind in the branches but it was muted and calm and she let the calmness drape over her.

She felt her breathing slow, and between one breath and the next, sleep took her.

Xena opened the door quietly, having peeked inside the window and seen the figure sprawled on the couch. She eased inside and shut the door behind her, moving noiselessly across the floor over to where Gabrielle was sound asleep.

She sat down on the low table and simply watched her soulmate in silence, as the sunset brought out the highlights in her fair hair and winked softly against the ring around her finger.

Gabrielle's breathing was deep and slow, her body completely relaxed against the soft, leather covered surface of the couch and she was sorely tempted to just let her stay asleep.

After a moment though she reached over and put her hand on Gabrielle's arm, squeezing it gently.

Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open and she turned her head, smiling when her eyes met Xenas. "Hey."

"Hey." Xena repeated. "The kids were playing in the barn and they begged me for a little more time." She said. "So thought I'd come up here and see what you were doing."

"And caught me napping." Gabrielle stretched and resettled herself, regarding her soulmate with sleepy pleasure. "I miss our afternoon naps, Xe. But it's too cold down in the dell this time of year."

"It is." The warrior agreed. "Let me get changed and go back down and get our child." She got up and hung up her cloak, revealing a damp padded shirt that went along with the slicked back wet hair. "I took a dunk in the trough."

"Oh burr." Gabrielle grimaced. "You're going to catch a cold even before we leave."

Xena ruffled her hair dry and got out of her shirt. "Yeah but I was sweating like a pig." She went into the bathing room and dried herself off, returning to put on a dry long sleeved tunic she belted around herself. "Enjoy your time out?"

"I did." Gabrielle had closed her eyes again, and folded her hands over her middle. "It was nice to just sit here and make dumplings for you and chill out for a while. I knew up here I wasn't going to get any knocks on the door."

"Mm." Xena had investigated the pot. "That smells good."

Gabrielle smiled, opening her eyes to regard her partner. 'Tell you what. Why don't you relax since you actually worked your butt off all afternoon and I'll go down and get Dori." She sat up and swung her feet off the couch. "Park it, WP."

Xena didn't argue. She dropped into the chair near the fire and extended her long legs out, picking up her sword and removing it from it's sheath. "Deal, mama." She wiped down the blade, then applied a sharpening stone to it. "By the way, don't be surprised if our Amazon guest asks you to come up here."

Gabrielle paused in the act of putting on her cloak. "Oh really?"

"Mm."

"Do I want to know why?"

Xena thoughtfully examined her blade, then glanced past it at Gabrielle. "She might be thinking she doesn't have much to go home to."

"Hmm… yeah." Gabrielle pulled her hood up. "We'll see. Be back up shortly." She paused long enough to retrieve her staff and went out the door with it, blinking as the cold wind woke her thoroughly up. "Oh burr." She repeated. "Someone remind me to pack the double furs when the time comes."

She snugged her hood closer to her throat and started down the path, glad she got between the trees after the first few minutes and they cut the force of the wind. The shadows were lengthening as the sun dropped behind the hills and she saw a flare of torchlight as the watch station of the village came into view.

Solari was standing next to it with Pony and they both lifted a hand and waved as they spotted her. "Hey there." Gabrielle slowed to join them. "Everything okay?"

"Sure." Solari said. "Now that you agreed to take us hunting? It's all cool." She grinned at Gabrielle. "Haven't seen this bunch of crones this happy since we piped that hot water into the bathing room."

Pony nodded. "S'true." She said. "They're all in the gathering hall making arrows and getting all their travel gear aired out."

"Some of that stuff should be junked. It stinks." Solari commented.

"That's great." Gabrielle said. "I'm glad they're excited. I know the guys down the hill are too, even though we're going out in winter."

"You heading down to the inn?" Solari asked.

"No, the barn to get my kid." The queen admitted. "If I'm lucky, I'll get out of there without having to take her and the pony up to my place."

"Mind if we go with you?" Pony asked. "I need to get a sack of oats for those goats we brought up."

"Absolutely not." Gabrielle waved them on and they all went down the lower path heading for the town. "Was it hard to get that herd up here?"

"Nah." Solari said. "I think they're mountain goats. They liked the path."

"Figures. Everyone up there been around goats or do I have to go up and give milking lessons?" The queen asked. "Been a while since I saw livestock in the village."

"You know how to milk goats?" Pony hazarded. "I thought Potadeia had sheep."

"I know how to milk pretty much everything." Gabrielle responded. "Did I not tell you how much Xena likes milk?"

Pony started snickering.

"Ask her about the short enough to milk a sheep joke."

**

As it happened they didn't make town that night. Cait finished setting up her hammock and inspected the secluded grove they were camping in, not really sure what she was looking for but aware of a faint unease nonetheless.

Nothing really specific, just a feeling as though someone was watching her that made her shoulderblades itch.

She circled the camp, hearing nothing but low voices, and the sounds of splashing as people cleaned the road dust off themselves.

In the center of the glade Bennu and a few others had built a small, efficient fire, and everyone had contributed whatever road food they had into a common soup pot that was starting to bubble. They would have that, plus the trail bread they all carried and water from the spring behind the glade.

Cait considered that, then had to privately admit that Gabrielle's whole idea of teaching people how to cook things was actually quite good. No one really wanted to make a big deal about it, but the stuff they'd been serving in the big hall had gotten quite tasty really and it had ended up a bit of a relief.

But this wasn't for long after all. She finished her tour around the camp and went back to her hammock, sitting down in it and leaning back.

Mid day tomorrow, the Philiipi men said, they'd be at their town. They hadn't seen anyone on the road since they'd found the dead merchants, but the reason they'd ended up so late on the road was that everyone seemed a bit nervous and they'd stopped a lot to just have a look around.

Nala emerged from the thicket next to the spring, carrying her waterskin and wiping her lips with the back of her hand. "I think there's foxes across the way there." She pointed with one elbow behind her. "I hear them rustling around in the bushes"

"Foxes." Cait said, thoughtfully.

"Foxes, or maybe small wildcats." Nala agreed. "Probably aren't as skittish as they are around us, with all those wolves and dogs around our place."

"Hm." Cait got up off her hammock and strolled off, circling the camp again and then ending up near the spring. She knelt at the edge of it and cupped her hands, dipping them in the water and blinking a little at the bone deep chill of it. "Now that'll be ice soon enough."

She lifted her hands and took a drink, keeping her ears cocked.

After a moment she heard the rustle. She kept drinking, droplets coming off her fingertips into the water. A long breathe in brought a faint, musky scent to her, and she focused her peripheral vision on where the sounds were coming from.

She heard another rustle, and she let her hands lower, resting them on her thighs and then pushing herself up to her feet. "Hello?"

The noise stopped. Then it started again, this time a little more loudly. Cait walked around the spring and went over to the thick underbrush, warily moving forward with one hand clasped on the hilt of her sword.

She could see leaves moving and she drew her sword, stepping around sideways and moving through the brush to the thicker bushes beyond.

The sound got louder. Cait let out a low whistle, then she jumped through the leaves, raising her blade up over her head and pushing hard through the thick branches and staring down at the ground.

Hard to say who was more surprised, her, or the woman who was tied up and gagged behind the bush. "Hello!" Cait called out. "Over here!"

Everyone started coming through the trees as she sheathed her sword and knelt, pulling the gag out of the woman's mouth. "My gosh!"

The woman spat weakly. "bigods."

Bennu and Carolous knelt next to her. "Easy there." Bennu had his dagger out and he was cutting her bonds. "Get ya loose here."

"Where are you from?" Carolous asked. "What happened?"

"Hang on you lot." Nala handed Cait her waterskin. "Give her a drink, she's had a wad o cloth in her mouth who knows how long."

The woman gave Nala a grateful look as Bennu gripped her arms and lifted her to a seated position while Cait offered her the waterskin. "Bless." She finally said. "Thank the gods ye found me."

She was a rangy, angular woman about Nala's age dressed in the stout tunic and leggings of the area, and she had light brown hair and a spread of freckles over her nose.

"What happened?" Carolous repeated. "We're from Philippi.. are you?"

"No." The woman took more water. "M'name's Soshi. Live in a village up the river aint even got no name." She exhaled. "Fella came through, and brought a merry group with im. I was a cook. Next thing I knew they had me tied up and on a wagon."

"Kidnapped you?" Carolous asked.

“Something like.” Soshi agreed. “Said they were going to sell us where they were going.”

“And where was that?” Nala asked.

“Dunno.” Soshi shook her head. “Was me, two lads, two crazy women, and two men a carpenter and a shepherd. They were moving along and I fell out the wagon and rolled down the ridge there.” She indicated a nearby slope. “Guessed they never missed me.”

“How long ago was that?” Cait asked.

“Day maybe.” The woman looked at them. “Who’re you lot?”

“I am Carolous. Provost of Philppi.” Carolous said. “I have a squad of my men with me, and these others are from Amphipolis.”

The woman’s eyes widened “Amphipolis?” She said. “Heard them what took me talk about that place.”

“I’m sure.” Cait said. “Nala and I are Amazons. We live near there. This is Bennu and his men, they’re soldiers in Xena’s army.”

The woman nodded. “I heard of Xena.” She said. “Two crazy women heard of her too. “ She added thoughtfully as she watched them. “Them that took us was careful to steer clear of the place.”

“How about we bring you by the fire.” Bennu said. “Warm there, and has got some soup.”

“I’d be grateful.” Soshi said. “Thought I would die there, tied up. I heard y’voices, figured if ye found me and ye were the villains again at least you’d let me up.”

Bennu and Jax lifted her to her feet and carefully guided her towards the fire. Cait and Nala followed, leaving Carolous and his men to scour the area, and search the top of the ridge.

“Crazy women.” Nala said, thoughtfully. “Who know big X.”

“Mm.”

“You thinking what I am?”

“Could be two other crazy women.” Cait said. “But let’s chat a bit with her, see what we can find out. “ She glanced around as they reached the fire. “Hello, where’s that annoying fellow now I wonder?”

“Jake?”

They looked around the camp, but Jake was nowhere to be seen. “Maybe he went with those guys.” Nala pointed to the ridge.

“Maybe.” Cait said, thoughtfully. “But I bet not.”

**

Gabrielle heard the kids playing before she reached the barn, the giggles and shouts audible through the wooden walls. “Sounds like they’re still crazy.”

She pushed the door open and went inside, with Pony and Solari behind her.

The barn was in disarray, hay bales plopped everywhere with at least a half dozen small bodies scooting around between them. In the stalls the horses were standing and watching the action, chewing their hay.

“What’s going on in here?” Gabrielle asked, curling one hand around her staff and putting the other on her hip. “Oh my gosh what a mess you kids made.”

“Mama!”

Dori’s voice came from above her head, and Gabrielle turned and tossed her staff to Solari as she spotted the dark head up in the hayloft. “What are you doing up there young lady?”

“Dis!” Dori chucked something at her, which her mother dodged.

“Hey!” Gabrielle jumped for the edge of the loft, catching onto it with her hands and pulling herself up. “Dori, that’s not nice.”

“You said that again.” Pony had inspected the missile. “It’s a ball of poop.”

“Dori.”

Dori giggled, squirming over to where her mother was now perched. “Mama we’re having fuuuuuun!”

Gabrielle gave her an exasperated look, then she looked around beneath the loft. “How did you get up here, honey?”

“Like Boo do.” Dori informed her. “Go fly.”

Gabrielle looked at the ground, then at the watching Amazons, then back at her daughter. “I see. Well how about we all go get washed off, and you come up to our house for dinner.”

“Kin they come too?” Dori asked, pointing at her friends. “Mama they’re hungry.”

The kids had gathered around the base of the support for the loft, and were looking up at them with hopeful eyes. Toris’ boys, little Cari, the weaver’s son, and one of the other girls from the tribe. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes!” The kids chorused, starting to jump up and down.

“Well, then let’s go see what grandma has, then, because we don’t have enough for everyone by us.” Gabrielle turned to take hold of Dori, but she had already squirmed away and was at the other end of the loft, swinging over and starting to climb down. “Dori!”

The child swung from her arms and dropped, landing on the straw with a little hop, then running over to her friends. “Let’s go to gramma!”

Gabrielle exchanged looks with her Amazons then she sighed and swung down from the loft herself, landing with far less grace. “No question on this earth who she takes after.” She said. “Everyone wash their hands over there in the trough before we go to the inn.”

“Eph was right.” Pony got out of the way as the mini herd ran for the water trough. “Glad I’m going to be retired by the time she’s old enough to spar.”

“Got that right.” Solari said, as they went over to help the washing.

“I told Xe she better eat all her vegetables now so she can keep up with this kid. I sure won’t be able to.” Gabrielle mock sighed. ‘I kinda sympathize with Cyrene, you know? What she must have gone through.”

“And she had two other ones.” Solari said. “She’s earned her feathers, that woman has.”

“Do me a favor, Sol?” Gabrielle said. “Run up and tell Xe I’m going to get these kids some food down here.”

“Sure.” Solari agreed instantly. “Be right back.” She skirted the kids and slipped out the door.

Pony stolidly bore the splashing, as she helped Gabrielle get the kids hands clean. “You figure out what you’re going to do with her?”

“When we go?” Gabrielle answered softly. “Not yet. She’s getting to be such a handful I don’t know what the best thing to do with her is going to be.”

“Getting to be?”

“Hold still, Dor.” The queen got her hands clean. “Be good for mama, okay?”

“Hungry!” Dori protested. “Mama, it’s good!”

“Okay all you kids, let’s go.” Gabrielle retrieved her staff and they chased the horde out the door, leaving the placidly chewing horses behind. “Let’s go to grandma’s.”

**

“I think I lucked out.” Solari said, tearing off a piece of fresh bread and dipping it into the stew in her bowl. “Pony’s gonna whack me.”

Xena was seated across from her busy with her own dinner. “Not gonna waste this on the dogs.” She said. “Gab doesn’t make it that often.”

“It’s good.” Solari agreed. “Now that I sorta know the difference between stuff that is and stuff that isn’t.”

Xena ate one of the dumplings, a smile crossing her face as she remembered the first time her partner had tried them, an experiment when they’d been holed up in a damp cave during a three day rainstorm.

It was a little tricky, and you needed to have both the flour handy, and the venison, and the spices and they didn’t usually have all of them at the same time in the same place. But it had become an instant favorite then, and still was today.

‘Everyone’s jazzed about riding out.” Solari said. ‘But you figured that, huh?”

“I did. Tribe lost a lot of the older ones who fought the last war with us.” Xena said. “Kids want to get their swords blooded.”

“You think we’ll get that chance?”

Xena chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed. “Really hard to say at this point. Depends on what weight my reputation’s going to have with this pirate.”

“You mean, like the whole thing with Therma and the Spartans?”

Xena nodded.

“That was actually pretty cool.” Solari concluded. “I heard those Spartans talking. That captain was saying he had to get them all out of there before they decided to join up with you.”

Xena smiled, then chuckled softly. “They bought the whole game Gab and I were playing.” She said, resting an elbow on the table and propping her chin up on her fist. “I was glad they did. Everyone pretty much got out of that with a whole skin.”

“Until the wave stuff.”

The warrior nodded as she chewed.

“You think it was the gods, that thing?” Solari asked. “That they were mad?”

Xena considered that for a while as she chewed. Then she swallowed and took a drink from her mug to wash the mouthful down. “Don’t really know. Could have been Poseidon pissed off, but I doubt it. Might just have been one of those things.”

Solari looked skeptical.

“Animals knew something was coming.” Xena clarified. “They don’t much care about the gods.” She leaned back in her chair. “And I saw Ares that night. He would have warned me.”

Solari blinked. Then she went back to her bowl. “All rightie then.”

Xena chuckled again “I’d just done him a favor.”

“That is kinda weird with you guys. Eph said she saw Gabrielle talking to Aphrodite and it’s just weird even SAYING that.” Solari remarked. “I mean they’re the gods, you know?”

“I know.” Xena sipped at her cider. “Eph tell you I had my chance at hanging out with them?”

Solari nodded. "We all figured it wasn't' much of a choice for ya." She said, after a moment. "I mean, y'know Xena we sorta got it after Dori, even the old crones in the village figured out it just wasn't worth messing with you. You know?"

"Mm."

"I mean, you and Toris don't look that much alike. That kid looks like you. Not like him." Solari clarified.

"We're half sibs." Xena admitted. "There's a family resemblance but yeah." She hitched one knee up and rested her hand on it. "Mom and I had a long talk about it after we got back last time."

"Weird?" Solari ventured.

"Yeah." Xena smiled ruefully. "Really weird."

"I can't even freaking imagine." Solari shook her head. "I'm glad all my relatives are just people."

"They're shades of gray just like everyone down here is." The warrior said. "Now with two of them stuck here as mortals, they're the ones with a big problem."

Now it was Solari's turn to chew thoughtfully while she watched the pale eyes and angular profile across from her. "You figuring to help them out?"

"Yes."

"You think those two are in that port place?"

"Yes."

"You figure to keel over from the friggen irony of you taking an army from here to go get them?"

Xena started laughing, lifting a hand and letting it drop, then cutting off the sound abruptly and standing, reaching over to draw her sword from it's sheath as she moved past where Solari was sitting and headed for the door.

"Oh boy." The Amazon hastily got up and grabbed her own weapon, turning as Xena yanked the iron handle and threw the door open, letting a blast of cold air in.

A tall figure stood there and after a moment of absolute stillness, lurched forward and fell inside.

**

"Thanks mom." Gabrielle leaned against the counter watching the kids scarf down their dinner. "I just knew I didn't make enough for this horde."

"And I'm sure you didn't want them overrunning the place up there either. "Cyrene nudged her. "No trouble, my dear. This is an inn, after all."

"True." She picked up her piece of bread and dunked it in the soup next to her. "They made a mess of the barn. Straw bales everywhere."

"It's a barn." Her mother in law said, in a tolerant tone.

"I know, but still." Gabrielle said. "And Dori's figured out how to climb up into the hayloft."

"Uh oh." Cyrene covered her eyes.

The bard sighed, shaking her head while she chewed. "Wait till Xe hears. Especially when asked, my kid tells me she does it like Boo do."

They both looked up as the inside door opened, and one of the watch captains entered. "Gabrielle, glad you're here." He said without preamble. "Someone's riding hard for the lower gates and being chased."

“Okay.” Gabrielle abandoned her soup. “Get a squad together and go out to meet them. Lets get the rider in if they’re so determined to get here.” She looked over at Cyrene who waved her out. “I’ll go with you.”

She slipped from behind the counter and got her cloak on, grabbing her staff as she followed the captain out through the kitchen. “Any idea who the rider is?”

“No, ma’am.” The captain shook his head “Too far out to see clear, and it’s dark.” He headed down the path to the barracks at a trot, lifting a whistle into the air. “Just know they’re going like hades.”

The front of the barracks was already open by the time they got there, and armored bodies were pouring out. “Need a dozen riders.” Gabrielle called out. “We’ve got someone headed here someone wants to stop.”

“Got it.” One of the men said. “Jarus, get your squad going.”

“Lets get another dozen or so at the gates, just in case.” The bard ordered. “And a healer. “

Hoofbeats sounded, and the doors of the cavalry barn swung open, torches fluttering and outlining the big, solid bodies moving out. The soldiers mounted and started towards the gates, brief red highlights flashing off armor and weapons.

Gabrielle took the footpath and broke into a run, aiming for the lower gates, where torches were flaring also into life and someone was feeding the firepit nearby.

It was cold, and she blinked into the chill as she felt it hit her eyeballs, drawing in a breath of air already tinged with woodsmoke.

A motion startled her, and she almost swerved on the path before she recognized Ares furry body as he joined her and loped alongside. “Hey boy.”

“Groou.” The wolf yodeled a little, keeping pace with her.

Gabrielle didn’t stop to question it. She got her breath and crossed the bridge, then headed downslope to the market area tucked safely behind the stout wooden barricade, as she heard the thunder of horses coming down the main road behind her.

The watch was already thick at the gates when she got there, and they turned as she slowed so as not to plow into them, hearing her name on more than one set of lips. “Okay, how close are they?”

“Here, look.” One of them stepped back from a tiny hatch in the gates. “Not far, maybe quarter candlemark.”

Gabrielle took a look, then glanced behind her where the squad of cavalry were thundering up. “Gates clear on either side?” She could see one figure heading their way, with a bunch behind it, all yelling.”

“Clear, aye.”

“Open the gates.” The bard called out in a loud voice. “Let the troops through.”

Without hesitation, without question, the men obeyed her, loosing the hatches and shoving the gates open. “Go!” Gabrielle swept her staff in a forward motion, and the troops went from standing to a gallop in a breath, barreling past her and heading up the road.

“Figure that’s a friendly?” The gatekeeper asked Gabrielle, pointing at the lone rider.

“Well.” Gabrielle grounded her staff and wrapped her hand around it. “They want badly to get here. Bad guys usually don’t.”

“Not if they know Xena, for sure. “ The man agreed.

The oncoming horse was laboring, she could now see, from the light of the moon that came out from behind the thick clouds. The figure on it’s back was tall, and had a cloak on, but she couldn’t see any visible weapons.

All good. The troops were almost on him, and now, she could see the chasers starting to pull shy on seeing the force coming out to meet them. Xena's men drew their weapons as they flashed past the single rider and let out battle yells.

"See em. Turning tail." The gateman said, in a satisfied tone. "Get back from the entry, let this traveler in."

Two of the healers from the barracks had arrived and ran to one side of the gate, putting down their kits.

All of them in leather overtunics, all with Xena's hawkshead symbol on them. Gabrielle took a moment to acknowledge the wry pride in that, at this group of soldiers who answered to her as readily as they did her partner.

Then she went around the edge of the gate to see the oncoming rider, and a gust of wind blew his hood back off his face and revealed someone she most surely knew. '"Hercules!" She let out a yell, as he let his mount slow at last, his eyes finding hers as he passed through the gates to safety.

Oh boy. The bard raced to his side, glancing out the gates to see the chasers now chased, and hearing the ring of steel and the thunk of arrows as they were cut down. "Grab his horse! Get some water!"

He tumbled off, but onto his feet as she reached him, putting a hand on her staff to steady himself. "Where's Xena?"

"Up the hill." She handed him a waterskin as they led his exhausted horse away. "You all right?"

He shook his head, drinking in silence. Then he swallowed. "Gotta talk to her." He said. "Thanks for the rescue."

Gabrielle turned, taking a breath, then relaxed. "She's coming" She said. "Come over here and sit down."

"Damn good idea."

**

They gathered in Cyrene's kitchen, away from the curious eyes in the outer room. Hercules was pathetically glad to slump on a bench at the kitchen table while Cyrene bustled around getting a bowl of food put together for him.

Xena took the opposite seat, stepping around behind Gabrielle and putting both hands on her shoulders as she leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

She felt the bard's body stiffen and tense under her grip, as she turned to look up at Xena with widened, startled eyes.

Xena's face twitched into wry agreement, but she sat down without further comment, picking up the mug of ale her partner had been drinking and took a long swallow of it.

"We are in some deep crap." Hercules said, as he put down his own mug. "You can't wait any longer, Xena. We've got to go get them."

"Uh huh." Xena propped her head up on her hand. "Iolaus said you were trapped up there."

"They lost the ability to hold me." Hercules said, bluntly. "Everything's falling apart faster than they realized. I know it's hard to believe."

"Not really. Your brother's up at my place lying on my couch being guarded by freaked out Amazons." Xena responded. "I figured something happened."

Everyone went quiet, Cyrene stopping with the bowl in her hands on the way to the table as she stared at her daughter.

"Ares?" Hercules watched her nod. "Crap. Can't say I'm surprised though."

Gabrielle had her hand covering her eyes. She removed it and leaned back. “So we’ve got to move out.”

“Yes.” Hercules said. “If we don’t recover my sisters before they’re uncovered this is going to go past my father’s ability to fix it.”

Another long silence, broken by Cyrene putting the bowl down and handing Hercules a spoon. Then the innkeeper sat down and studied all of them. “So let me ask you.” She finally said. “If they fix this, will they finally get left alone?”

Hercules took a breath but Xena spoke before he could. “It doesn’t matter.” She said. “Gabrielle and I talked about that. It’s the right thing to do so we’re going to do it.”

Gabrielle nodded.

“That’s silly.” Cyrene said. “At what point will the two of you think of yourselves and your daughter instead of everyone else?”

“Probably never.” Gabrielle readily admitted. “So let me go head up the hill and fill my tribe in on what’s going on.” She stood up. “Xe, you figure leaving at dawn?”

“Sooner if we can.” Xena exhaled. “I sent Solari down to the barracks before I came over here.”

Hercules looked relieved, obviously having expected an argument. “Thanks guys.” He said simply.

Xena waved a hand in dismissal. “Iolaus knew. Wish he’d talked to us before he left – we might have gone with him.” She said. “His note said he just felt like he needed to get started.”

“My fault.” The demigod admitted.

“Water under the bridge.” Gabrielle sighed, as she got up. “Let me take the kids home too.” She pulled her cloak on. “So much for a nice relaxing night.” She headed out the door to the main room, where childish giggling could be heard.

Cyrene shook her head, and got to her feet. “Let me get things ready for dinner. Place’ll be packed in a half candlemark once word gets out.” She glanced at Xena. “I”ll watch Dori for you?”

Xena returned the look. “I’m going to leave her with Jess.” She said. “I don’t want to expose either you or Amphipolis to anyone who thinks it might be a good idea to get some leverage on me with her.”

Cyrene paused and regarded her thoughtfully. “Aren’t you going to go out to hunt them?” She asked. ‘Why would they come here?”

Her daughter smiled. “Maybe I just don’t want to inflect HER on either Amphipolis or the Amazons” She countered. “I got a message back today from Jess that he and his bunch’ll take care of her, and the valley is more or less on the way. So she’ll get ot come with us, and, when we get there, she’s got good reason to stay.”

“Those little furry kids?”

Xena nodded.

“Eh.” Cyrene smiled finally. “You might have a point there.” She pushed through the door and let it swing shut behind her, leaving Hercules and Xena alone in the kitchen.

They regarded each other in silence as Hercules inhaled the stew in the bowl Cyrene had given him, the sounds of the cookfire popping gently in the background. Xena waited, sipping on the ale Gabrielle had left behind.

He finally put his spoon down. “So what did Ares tell you?”

“Not a lot.” Xena answered promptly. “ He was half frozen. Left him to thaw next to the fire. Something about this being the end of everything.”

“Mm.” Hercules picked up his mug and took a swallow. “All I can tell you is, one minute I was up there, stuck in a cloud the next thing I knew I was rolling down a hillside, right into a bunch of

bandits. Jumped me before I could get my wits together and I just managed to get past them by diving in the river."

"The river? Our river out there?" Xena pointed over her shoulder.

"Climbed out and found four horses tied to a tree." He confirmed. "I grabbed one of them, and took off. Turns out there were more than four and that's what was chasing me into town."

"They chased you for stealing the horse?"

Hercules nodded. "For once. I'm guilty as charged. I did steal the horse." He agreed. "I just didn't have time to explain to those guys why I needed to."

"Huh. Remind me to tell the council in case those guys come back and want their pound of flesh." Xena said. "Any idea who they were?"

He shook his head. "Too dark, too desperate me."

"Tch tch." Xena gave him a wry smile. "I think we better head up to my place. Ares must have thawed out by now and maybe he can tell us the rest of the story."

Hercules made a face, but drained his mug and set it down, pushing himself to his feet and unwrapping the square of linen Cyrene had given him to dry himself off. "You really ready to head out?"

"Ready as we can be." Xena also stood up. "You got anything warmer than that to wear on the road?"

Hercules glanced down at the light, white fabric draping his body. "Not so much."

"We'll stop by Toris' place first. He's about your size."

**

"Honey, we need to get packed." Gabrielle called into the back room, where Dori had run into. "Bring mama out the stuff you want to take okay?"

"Mama." Dori came out with her little bag and a toy clutched in one hand. "Where we go now?"

Gabrielle sighed internally. "We're going to see our friends the forest people. You remember them, right? Your buddies Butterbean and Gaby and Warin?"

Dori perked up a little. "Yes mama! I have fun with them." She agreed. "But can we take my friends from here too? And Wusty?"

Gabrielle sat down in the chair in her quarters and faced her daughter. "Absolutely we can take Rusty, honey. You have to be able to go fast with us, right?"

Dori grinned.

"But I think your friends have to stay here, because .. " The bard paused. "Well, because our friends the forest people don't know about them."

Dori pouted, her lower lip jutting out.

"Aw." Gabrielle hugged her. "I'm sorry, honey. I know you like your friends here, and you have fun with them." She paused again and studied her child. "Xena and I have to go do something, and that's why were taking you to the forest people, so you can be safe while we do that."

Dori looked uncertainly at her. "You go?"

"We have to." The bard said, in a serious tone. "But we want you to have as much fun as you can while we go do this thing, so we thought you would like to go visit your friends in the valley. Would you rather stay here, with Auntie Eff and Pony?"

Dori put her doll on the table. "I go with you mama?" She asked, plaintively.

“This time you can’t, sweetheart.” Gabrielle answered gently. “You can come with us to the valley, but after that, we have to go very fast, and it will be dangerous, so you can’t.”

“Wusty go fast.”

“He does, but not as fast as Argo and Io. This isn’t like the other trips we took with you, Dori. We can’t stop and have fun, and find fishes.”

“No fun?”

“No, no fun for us this time. It will be like when you were with me when we were trying to get to Boo in the city, you remember that? How hard that was?”

Dori frowned, then looked at her mother. “With all the bad mens going after us?”

“Yeah, remember that? It wasn’t any fun.”

“Den why you and Boo have to do that, mama?” Dori asked, with obvious to her logic. “You stay with the pipples too and we all have fun.”

Gabrielle studied her quietly. “Doriana.” She finally said. “I’m glad you’re really too young to understand why we can’t.” She smoothed Dori’s hair back. “Sometimes, I wish I were a little girl like you again, and everything was so much simpler.”

“You come!” Dori insisted.

Gabrielle rested her elbows on her knees. “Well, sorry abou that. We can’t.” She said. “So – tell me. What would you rather do? You want to go spend time with the forest people and your friends there, or stay with your friends here? You can have fun either way.”

Dori edged closer. “Go with mama.”

“Aw.” The bard said, again, circling her with both arms. “Sorry about that, Dor. You can come with us until we get to the forest people’s place, okay? Then Boo and I have to go do something and we’ll be back soon to get you.”

Dor was briefly silent. Then she tugged at her mother’s hand. “Mama, but can’t we bring my friends? They’d like the fuzzy people too.”

“Honey I..” Then Gabrielle paused. “I don’t know if we can take them all, honey… but how would you like it if we took your friend Cari with us? Would you like that?”

Dori perked up at once. “Yes, mama!” She agreed. “And Lolo?”

Her mother eyed her. “Honey, you know I think I know what you inherited from your mama. No you can’t have all your friends, but I’ll ask Boo if we can take Cari too. That’s going to have to satisfy you, little lady.”

Dori pouted at her again, but Gabrielle pouted right back and they both ended up laughing. “Now get the rest of your stuff, okay?” The bard gave her a pat on the behind. “Need to get us buttoned up and then get some rest.”

“Okay mama.” Dori was apparently now resigned to the plan. She pattered back into the sleeping room, where she had her toys and started sorting them.

Gabrielle got up and shook her head, then she went back to her carrybag and continued her own packing. She opened the pair of saddle bags resting on her work table and slid her diary into one of them, walking over to the clothing press to remove a stack of shirts.

“So.” Ephiny’s voice sounded at the door. “Things are going to Hades faster than we thought.”

“They are.” Gabrielle waved her in. “There’s hot water on.”

Her regent crossed the room and went to the fireplace, setting up two cups and pouring herbs into them. “You’ve got the whole tribe in a tiz. The group going with you is so excited they’re running around like chickens with no heads packing.”

“Eh, that’ll last for a day or two.” Gabrielle predicted, as she tucked her cooking gear into a bag. “Until they realize how damned uncomfortable all that marching is.”

“Says the woman who writes poems to the rocks under Xena’s pillow.”

The bard chuckled.

“Gab?”

Gabrielle turned her head towards her friend. “Eph?”

“It’s really serious, isn’t it?” Ephiny said, as she poured the water over the herbs, pushing her curly hair back behind one ear as she regarded Gabrielle soberly. “This thing with the gods?”

“They brought it on themselves.” Her queen responded. “But of course they don’t look at it that way. Yeah, I think it is serious, for them.”

“So.” Ephiny stirred the cups. “What does that mean for Xena?” She asked. “I mean, well, I guess it doesn’t really mean that much because of that last whole thing right?”

Hm. Good question. “I don’t know.” She answered slowly. “I haven’t really thought about it.. I don’t think Xe has either.”

“So maybe if we pull this off, they’ll finally cut you some slack?” Ephiny suggested. “I mean, they could you know?”

“They could.” Her queen agreed. ‘I think the best I could hope for is that we just get left alone.” She tucked two spare sets of Xena’s leathers in her saddle bag and then went to the press for a double handful of socks.

They both turned at a knock on the door. “C’mon in.” Gabrielle called out.

It opened, and Paladia stuck her head in. “Hi.”

“Hi.” The queen responded cordially. “Xe get back up to the cabin?”

“Yeah.” Paladia agreed. “I’ve done a lot of freaky things around you guys, that was the freakiest.” She stated. “”Anyway. I can go with the rest of these crazy women right?”

“Sure.”

“Good.” Paladia said. “Is he going too?” She jerked her head in the direction of the cabin.

“That’s Xena’s decision.”

“Phoo.” Paladia disappeared and shut the door behind her.

“You think she’ll leave him here?” Ephiny asked. “Hera’s breastplate, Gabrielle. Maybe I’ll go to the valley with the fuzzies too.”

“Mm.”

**

Cait circled the camp, her eyes flicking amongst the shadows. Near the fire, the men from Phillipi and Xena’s troops were talking to their rescued prisoner, who was repaying her rescue by demonstrating her cooking skills.

That was good. Cait appreciated that. But it didn’t change the fact that Jake was missing and her vague distrust of him was solidifying into an absolute suspicion.

She spotted Nala coming around from the other direction, the older Amazon wringing her hair out as she reached where Cait was standing. “Anything that way?”

“Nothing.” Nala looked around. “Maybe he decided to go hunt for a mate somewhere else? I mean, good riddance, you know?”

‘No, I know. “ Cait walked with her over to the small glade theyd set up their hammocks in and sat down on hers. It was the Phillipis turn to watch, and so they could relax if they wanted to but Cait felt keyed up, and the wind kept bringing her ears faint signals.

Small animals, yes. But also, right on the fringes, a brush of leaves against larger bodies that made her think of soldiers, in wait, just making those small motions men do when they’re on watch.

“Cait. “ Bennu pushed his way through the hedges and came over to her. “What do you say? We should send work back to the genrl.”

Cait looked past him to where the Phillipi men were gathering, some donning cloaks for their night watch. “I think we should turn back, and go home.” She said. “Something’s not right, and I can’t pin what it is.”

“Don’t think we can do that, lass.” Bennu said, reluctantly. “Them folks expect us to form up with em, and she said we needed to see what was up.”

No need to wonder who the she was. Cait folded her arms and exhaled. For Bennu there was only one ‘she’. “It’s no good, Bennu. There’s something quite rot around here. If we keep on, there’s trouble coming.”

“Trouble coming anyway.” Nala said pragmatically. “But I think we should send someone back. I got a bad feeling in my guts, same as Cait.”

“Before someone jumps on us.” Cait added, darkly.

“You still hunting that missing lad?” Bennu asked. “Figgure he just got bored with himself and ran off.” He started to turn, then went still, his ears visibly twitching. “Psh”

Cait had heard it. “Someone’s coming!” She said, loudly, pulling her sword from its sheath. “Ware!”

Everyone scrambled.

**

Xena hoisted Argo’s saddle up and over her back, settling it in place over the thick, worn saddle pad. “Sorry about this girl.” She reached under the horse to grab the girthstrap and got it threaded into the double ring holder.

Argo kept chewing on her hay net, sparing the occasional look at her rider as she finished getting her tack in place.

“But we’ve got you nice and rugged up. “ Xena concluded, straightening the woven wool blanket that covered the mare from her neck to her tail, all in black with yellow trimmings. “So that should be a little more comfortable for ya.”

Io was watching her from the next stall with an expectant look on his face. His saddle and bridle were still hung over the partition, waiting for Xena’s attention in it’s turn.

Down at the barracks, her cavalry were getting ready in much larger numbers. The grooms there would have, of course, been glad to gear up her animals too, but everyone knew her preferences in that realm and so no one had even asked.

Xena gave Argo a pat, draping her bridle over her neck but leaving it unfastened as she moved over to Iolaus’ stall.

Across from them Rusty was already tacked up, his head over the rope at the front of his stall, ears forward in anticipation.

“You ready for another adventure, little man?” Xena asked, as she circled around Io. “I’m sure you’d all rather be staying here instead of going out in that weather, but that’s life.”

The door opened, and Toris came in. “Hey sis.”

“Hey.” Xena got Io’s saddle settled. “I’m going to get these guys ready and then move them down to the barracks stables. Supply wagons are almost set.”

“I saw.” Toris came over and let his arms rest on the stall divider. “Rumors are flying. What do you want us to tell the rest of the town?”

“About?”

“Where the army’s going? Why the army’s going?” Her brother asked. “You want to stick with the port city story?”

Xena rested her hands on Io’s saddle and regarded her brother. “Hm.”

“Yeah.” Toris agreed wryly. “I assume you’re going to tell the army what the deal is once they get out of here and heading to the pass.”

Xena pondered that. “They’ll know. Just not sure when.” She said. “We should tell the council what the real story is, but yeah, keep it simple to everyone else.”

Toris nodded. “Telling everyone the truth – usually I’m all for that but this time? Not so much.” He said. “I’m hoping you make things all better and we can just move along.”

Xena smiled briefly. “I’ll do my best.”

“The boys are going to miss their cousin.” Her brother changed the subject. “Solon was complaining that Dori gets to go do all the fun stuff and they have to stay here.”

“Yeah.” His sister sighed. “Gabrielle caved and agreed to take her little friend with us.” She said. “I was torn between leaving her here or by Jess, but you know – there’s really no safe place if I’m honest.”

“No.” Toris agreed. “But if it gets bad here, for any reason, I told Gran we’ll take the kids and go join her in the valley. It’s the most defendable place in the area.”

“You’ll be all right here I’m leaving half the army, and half the Amazons.” Xena said, as she finished her work. “No sense in my taking more. It’s going to be a race as it is.” She dropped the rope at the front of the stall. “Want to grab the pony and walk down with me?”

“Sure.” Toris went to Rusty’s stall and unhooked the rope there. “I’ll have plenty of time to sleep after you leave.”

“Rub it in.”

“Hey, you’re the answer to everyone’s prayers around here. Suck it up, sis.”

**

Gabrielle sat down in one of the leather chairs in her cabin and regarded the tall figure on the couch opposite her. “Feeling better?”

Ares eyed her grumpily. “Yuck it up, blondie.”

“I’m not laughing.” The bard replied. “I don’t’ think this is even remotely funny.”

He scowled. “This is just one big mess.” He said. “Stupid women.”

“Be fair, Ares. It wasn’t your sisters who made themselves mortal.” Gabrielle said. “I’m sure no one wanted things to end up this way.” She got up and went to the fireplace, scooping herself a bowl of soup from the pot hanging over the fire.

“Old lady said you clued her.” Ares said, as she sat back down across from him.

“Me?” Gabrielle’s pale brows lifted. “When did I do .. oh.” She remembered a moment by the sea. “You mean when I told her I was going to convince people not to believe you all?”

The tall god nodded. “Freak city.” He said. “She came back and told us all to leave you alone.”

“Should have tried that a lot time ago.” Gabrielle sipped from her bowl, watching him over the rim. “She got me pissed off, after all that, and everything we did.”

Ares picked up his own bowl that had been sitting on the table and took a sip from it. “She’s a traditionalist. Doesn’t like us mixing with mortals.”

“So she let Zeus make your sisters that way?”

He shrugged. “I stay out of those fights.” He glanced at Gabrielle. “The only ones I stay out of so don’t get any ideas.’

Gabrielle leaned back and balanced her bowl between her fingers. Ares was in his standard black leather outfit, but he had a thick blanket wrapped around his shoulders and was barefoot, his boots drying near the fire. “So what happened?”

“Damned if I know. I was up in my room, trying to get a little war going over in the north and then next thing I knew I was falling through some clouds into some lake.” Ares said, his eyes flicking to hers. “Never felt cold before.”

“Ah.”

“Freaky.”

“Are you..” Gabrielle paused. “Sort of mortal again?’

Ares snapped his fingers, and blue fire happened. Then he lifted his hand and waggled it, and went back to his soup. “But I think I’m stuck down here.” He said. “No way to get back upstairs, dig?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “That’s sort of what happened to Hercules. He was trapped one minute, tumbling down a hill here the next.”

Ares snorted. “Goody two shoes. All I heard him talking about was his little friend and how unfair it all was.”

“Why was he being kept up there, Ares? Wouldn’t it have been better to let him stay where he was, he was trying to help your sisters.” Gabrielle wondered. “It all seems so crazy.”

Ares drained his bowl and set it down, regarding it with mild surprise. “No idea what that is, but it wasn’t bad.” He said. “The deal was, they figured if they kept Porkules out of the picture, the grunts down here wouldn’t put two and two together and figure out who the girls were.”

“Ah. But didn’t they realize they’d be in danger?”

“No. We’re gods.” Ares said, bluntly. “No one thinks dirtgrubbers are dangerous.”

Both of Gabrielle’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yeah, I know. Shut up.” Ares reclined back on the couch. “Where’s Xena?”

“Getting the army ready to go.” Gabrielle shook her head slightly. “And speaking of that, we should find you something warm to wear if you’re going with us.” She paused. “You are going with us, right?”

Ares wiggled his toes, and regarded the ceiling. “Hm.. now that you mention it this isn’t so bad for a dirtgrubber’s hut.” He looked around, with a faint smirk. “I could get used to this.”

“Ares.”

Unexpectedly he chuckled. “Lighten up, blondie. I’m not going to take over your pad. If I can horn in on this gig, and get the chicks out of trouble, I win big with daddy. Catch my drift?”

‘Of course. Altruistic as always.”

“Hey. Be nice.”

**

Cait found herself back to back with Bennu, as they became the center of a rush of attackers. They were both on foot and horseback, and she got a sense that there were a lot of them. "Bother."

"Yah." Bennu grunted, as he deflected a mace and then ducked, turning and backhanding his sword to chop at the neck of the horseman going past. There was a crunching sound and in the shadows the man fell off the horse, who bucked in reaction and stumbled into another attacker.

There were knots of bodies everywhere around them, and Cait was both more than glad to be by Bennu and worried about Nala and the horse Shadow she'd left grazing nearby. She concentrated on the flash of the flickering firelight against a sword as it came at her, and she dodged a half armored body wielding it.

She turned as he came past and plunged her sword into his side, feeling the crunch and twitch of bones cracking as he swerved and the blade tore through him.

With a gasp he fell, slamming into a tree. Cait yanked her sword back and turned it point backwards, then pulled a long, thin dagger from her boot and whipped it across his throat.

Blood flew and she felt the heat of it spattering against her hands, as she turned and left the body behind, sure it could do them no more damage.

Bennu was fighting with two men, both hammering at him with heavy two handed broadswords. Cait slid sideways and buried her dagger into the gut of one of them, too busy with his attack to see her approach. She kicked him off the blade and then ducked and turned again, sensing a presence at her back.

That, Xena had taught her. That claiming of the space you were in that made the warrior seem like she had eyes in the back of her head. Cait didn't have the fine skill with it that her mentor did yet, but she'd come to trust it and now, the trust drew her to one side rapidly, escaping a crossbow bolt that smacked into a tree trunk right next to her head.

She aimed and released the dagger where the arrow had come from and saw a shadowy figure stumble as another bolt was released and buried itself into the ground. She brought her sword back around and engaged the next rushing body, aware of a horse thundering by riderless.

Xena would have probably jumped onto it's back. Cait wasn't nearly that good a rider and so she remained on the ground, stepping up onto the now still archer's back to swing her blade at a passing raider, chopping hard at the hand holding his sword.

Hoofbeats again, and she was turning to see a rider heading right at her. Quickly she jumped off the dead raider and dodged behind a tree, coming around the other side to see the rider hauling up frantically to keep from crashing into the trunk she was behind.

Too late, he realized Bennu was coming up behind him and couldn't turn fast enough to bring his sword around to block the soldier's. It split his arm open and the smell and sound made the horse spook and plunge off in the other direction, the rider falling over to one side and off to the ground.

A hoarse yell came from the darkness, then the sound of a horn.

Cait saw the retreat, fights breaking up and men in half armor turning and running, horses bolting, and then the sharp whistles that were Xena's soldiers regrouping.

She saw no more attacks headed her way, and so she wiped down and then sheathed her sword, then went over to the body near the tree to retrieve her dagger.

Again, the sense saved her. She was on a knee, removing the knife from the dead man's gut when she felt that prickle between the shoulderblades and she dove to one side, rolling over and getting back up to her feet with the dagger forward, her other hand reaching out to grab.

It was a big man, on a horse, leaning to one side, aiming to grab her back. Cait could see his face, and the look in his eyes and she dove for the ground and rolled under the horses hooves as the animal leaped in startlement to avoid her.

Bennu was at her side and lifted her up, moving back towards a rapidly growing circle of Amphipolitans around the firepit.

Jax emerged from the darkness, with several sets of reins clasped in one big hand. He was bleeding from a cut across his cheekbone, but he waved reassuringly at them as he stopped to tie the following horses up. "Left six behind."

"Get a watch out." Bennu said, turning in a slow circle and counting. "We all here right?"

"All here." Jax said. "Lost a few of the others though."

Nala shoved her way through the branches, wiping blood off her face, exchanging nods with Cait as she joined them. "They missed our horses." She said. "They're all right in the glade there."

"Who were they?" Jax asked. "Just road thieves?"

"Not at all, sir." Their rescued cook slowly peered out from behind a tree. "Those were the men who had me. Must have come back to find me maybe?"

Bennu sheathed his sword. "A score of them?" He eyed the straggling in Phillipans. "More like they were out for more than that, lass."

"Led here by that bad lot of a boy." Cait spoke up. "If I had to guess."

"That kid?" Carolous came over, pressing a hand over a deep cut on his arm. "He said he was looking to rescue someone from them, didn't he? Seemed harmless to me."

Cait reserved her opinion. She went back to where they'd set up their hammocks and took out her sharpening stone, removing her sword and dagger, and starting the process of putting back the finest edge on them.

**

Xena decided, after all, that they would leave at dawn. She ordered the troops to get as much rest as they could, and tasked the soldiers being left behind to finish the preparations. So the new moon was just marking midnight when she headed back up from the barracks, aiming for the Amazon village where she knew Gabrielle was waiting.

Leaving in darkness made no sense. It was snowing again, and the wind had picked up, and if she started at dawn they would make better time to the valley. Xena trudged up the slope to the town, exchanging waves with the watch as they headed in the opposite direction.

Pain in the ass gods.

She was blinking snowflakes from her eyelashes by the time she was at the entrance to the village, and she let a whistle out so the watch there wouldn't have to come rushing out to find out who was approaching.

"Thanks Xena!" They called out from the gatehouse. "Want some mulled wine? Just got hot."

The difference in attitude made her smile, and she swerved from her path and came over to the shelter, where there was a fire in the stone fireplace and a pot swinging over it. "Sure." She accepted a wooden cup whose surface was warm under her fingertips and took a sip from it. "Better now with this up, huh?"

"The gate? For sure." The Amazon agreed. "Not like hanging in the trees. In this weather? That was crazy."

"Tradition." Xena regarded the woman, one of the youngsters who had just recently become full warriors, a member of that group that had supported Gabrielle in the last little dust up. "But a tradition that started in lowlands that didn't have snow."

The woman, Aron, nodded. "Had to change, we knew it. For a while it was like, lets do everything the old way and just put up with it but that was crazy. Those other changes the queen made, loosened everyone up."

The shelter was built three sided, to block the wind coming down from the pass into the village, and the weather drifting down from where Xena and Gabrielle's cabin was. It made a cozy spot for the guard, and rather than being the punishment that it used to be, now the rotation for the watch was almost looked forward to.

Another drastic attitude change. Xena watched the second guard sitting near the fire, working on arrowtips on a small, portable anvil and a contented expression. "Nice angle." She complimented the woman, who looked up with an unfeigned smile. "I like the flange there."

"Thanks Xena." The armorer responded. "We decided that the flare? " She got up and came over, the arrowhead clamped in a pair of tongs. "We, I mean, the other hammerers and I thought we could make that kind of a standard for the tribe, you know?"

Xena regarded the shape. "I like it." She leaned closer, noting the evenly hammered metal. "You could start exporting those."

"Let's make sure we're not gonna need em first." Aron smiled. "But yeah, Benny said he liked em too." She exhaled in satisfaction. "Things are really getting good here. I just wish I'd drawn straws to go with you guys."

"Yeah, but at least it'll be cooler here this time with Eph and Pony around." The other Amazon went back to her anvil and started pounding again. "We'll go next time."

Xena sipped on the mulled wine in silence for a few minutes, the other two easy and relaxed in her presence, and pondered that.

Pondered an Amazon tribe that considered her part of them, that accepted Gabrielle's leadership, that was thriving, who accepted her teachings and the changes that had altered them beyond belief over the last season.

How much of that, she wondered, would be left when they came back? If they came back, after working to fix a problem in no way theirs, and which might in being fixed, alter life here once again for the worse?

Would the restoral of the gods make that difference?

Or were the changes something else, and natural, and just a part of the flow of the future?

"Thanks for the drink." Xena went over and set the cup down. "Let me go find out what kind of trouble my family's gotten into."

The two Amazons chuckled easily. "Have a good night, Xena. See you outbound in the morning." Aron said, moving over a bit to get a better view of the path leading down to town. "Hope the weather gets better for ya."

Xena left the shelter and entered the narrow pass into the village. She could see torches still lit in the gathering hall and in the dorms, and she passed silently by them heading up the track to the queen's quarters.

It would be what it would be, in the end.

**

Gabrielle pushed her hood back as she entered the children's quarters, where things were still more active than she would have thought at this hour. "Hey."

"Your majesty." The minder came over to her. "Is there something wrong?"

"No." Gabrielle glanced around, spotting Cari on her little bed in one corner. "I need to talk to one of the kids."

The woman looked concerned. "Did something happen again?" She asked, unhappily. "I didn't see anything today.. I thought Dori was down in town most of the day."

“She was.” The queen lowered her voice. “We’re taking Dori with us, and leaving her with the forest people while the army’s away. Xe figures if she’s here, she might end up a target.”

The woman nodded, with an expression of relief.

“So, Dori asked me if she could take a friend with her.” Gabrielle explained. “I thought I would ask Cari.”

The minder blinked a little in surprise, then she nodded again. “Cari said to me earlier that she was really sad Dori was going away.” She said. “She’s really a shy kid.”

“Well, let me go ask her.” The queen said. “I think it might be good for her, the forest people have really active kids. Maybe it’ll bring her out of her shell a little.”

“And a perk for her.” The woman said. “She gets teased a lot.”

Mm. Gabrielle made her way across the room, aware of the little heads coming off pillows as they recognized who was passing.

Some of the older girls were sitting up in bed and they shifted to watch her as she went to the furthest corner and knelt down next to Cari’s bed. “Hey, little one.”

Cari sat up and rubbed her eyes, gazing up at Gabrielle a little uncertainly. “Hi.”

Gabrielle sat down so her head was at Cari’s level. “Hey there. You know that we’re going to go away for a while, Cari, and Dori’s going with us.”

Cari nodded. “I sad. Going to miss Dodo.”

“Well, Dori said she would miss you too, and she wanted me to ask you if you wanted to come with us.” Gabrielle said, in a gentle tone. “She’s going to visit some of her friends in the valley and she thinks you’d like to play with them too.”

Cari’s eyes opened wide. “I go?” She said, with a little gasp.

“If you want to yes.” The queen smiled at her, as the child rapidly nodded her head. “Okay, so, here’s what we’re going to do. Let’s get your stuff together, and you can stay over with us tonight so we’re ready to go in the morning. That okay?”

“I”ll help.” The minder was at her back. “We can fold up your blanket, Cari. I know you like that one.”

Cari didn’t have much to gather, Gabrielle realized. Just the blanket, and a small bag that had a few shirts in it, a mismatched overtunic that looked too big and a pair of worn booties. She stowed them all in her carry bag and took the child by the hand. “Ready?”

“I go, I go.” Cari whispered softly, pattering her feet in their boots on the floor. “So good!”

It hit Gabrielle unexpectedly in the gut. She bit the inside of her lip and stood up, leading the way to the door as she felt the envious eyes of the rest of the group on her.

No matter how they felt about Dori, she realized, all of them wanted the attention. They wanted the queen to take them by the hand, and make them special. Raise them up. Give them rank and status.

She remembered, suddenly, an image of herself, in a crowd of villagers in some out of the way village at the end of a long and dusty day on the road, and being ignored by all of them until they all made way for a tall, dark haired woman in armor who came over, and draped a casual arm on her shoulder.

“This is my friend, Gabrielle.”

And that had made her special, just like her taking Cari’s hand made Cari special in the eyes of those around her. “Say goodbye for a while, Cari. You’ll have lots of fun with us, right?”

“Bye!” Cari waved at the room, as they got to the door and went through it, the child not looking back even once.

Well, Gabrielle smiled wryly. The gods only knew she hadn’t either.

They walked across the ground and up the path to the queen's quarters, arriving there just in time to see a tall figure in a cloak at the door, leaning on it, waiting for them. "Hey hon." The bard greeted her.

"Hey." Xena held the door for them and came in behind them "You ready to come on a ride with us, Cari?"

"Yes." Cari said, in a whisper, looking shyly up at Xena.

Dori heard them and came pattering out of the sleeping room. "Car!" She squealed in delight, coming over to greet her friend. "You come! Mama said!"

Gabrielle released Cari's hand and the two children ran off into the bedroom together. "Aw."

Xena gave her an indulgent look, then put her arms around the bard and hugged her. "It's a good idea." She concluded. "Dori's getting old enough to where a 'mama says so' doesn't cut it."

Gabrielle chuckled wryly. "She figured that out a lot faster than I did." She leaned against her partner, savoring the warmth. 'But I'm glad we're taking Cari. " She added. "Everything ready to go down the hill?"

"Just finishing the wagon loading." Xena confirmed. "Solari just brought down the Amazon's kit with the gang that's going. They're going to bunk out in the barracks."

"She said." The queen nodded. "All our stuff's ready, all the army's stuff's ready, all the Amazon's stuff's ready. We've got a god and a demigod wrapped up in warm cloaks and mom said she'd put a breakfast on before sunrise."

"So that's that."

"Mm."

They both stood quietly together for a few minutes, listening to the girlish chatter from the bedroom, and the wind outside lashing the branches of the trees.

"Let's get some rest." Xena finally said, giving Gabrielle a rub on the back. "it's going to be a long, cold march tomorrow though at least we're bringing shelter with us."

"Tents?"

"Yup. One advantage to traveling with an army." Xena removed her sword and sheath from her armor and set it down on the table, then hung her cloak up on the peg to one side of the fire. "There's room for some comforts."

"No sleeping on the ground. Hot sheep tails." Gabrielle did a little dance in the center of the floor. "Okay let me get the kids all settled, and then we can get some sleep."

Xena watched her dance off into the bedroom, then she went over to the fire and sat down in the chair near it, stretching her legs out and sparing a moment just to sit and relax.

Her mental checklists were done, all the detail checked and double checked. Everything was packed and ready to go.

She tipped her head back and regarded the ceiling, reflecting on the fact that this was the first time in a very long time she'd be riding out leading what was, in fact, an invading force from Amphipolis.

Amazing how little emotional charge she got from that. Maybe it was mission they were undertaking, or the weather, but she could sit here and honestly tell herself that what she was doing was all right.

She was going to take the army out and pursue the raiders, help the captives, find the made mortal gods and rescue them, and possibly run pirates out of the port city.

She was going to do that, and nothing else.

She was the defender of Amphipolis. General of the army who protected her home.

“Xe?”

“Mm?”

“I got you some new socks.”

Xena smiled, lifting her head and looking over at her partner. Gabrielle had her carry bag out and she came over, holding up several pairs of woven, warm looking foot coverings. “I love you.”

“Someone has to take care of you.” Gabrielle perched on the arm of the chair. “I’m going to throw in some extra old clothes of Dori’s for her little friend. She didn’t have a lot.” She removed the shirts and the overtunic. “That’s it.”

“Mm.” Xena reached over to touch the shirt. “Just what the tribe had available I guess.”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle folded the worn linen. “Well, after all, I had less when I took off, right?”

The warrior studied her face, resting her wrist on Gabrielle’s thigh. “You brought everything that mattered.” She responded, in a quiet voice. “Body heart and soul – what else did you need?”

Gabrielle glanced up, then smiled, a gentle twinkle coming into her eyes. “Then I hope Cari’s as lucky as I was. That she finds a place and a home that cradles all three of them in a loving feather’s touch.”

Xena’s eyes widened a trifle.

“Hey, I’m a bard.” Her partner stated. “C’mon, partner – let’s sack out for a while.” She got up and offered Xena her hand and then pulled her to her feet. “One last warm comfortable night before we head on out.”

Xena followed her with no complaint, hoping the morning would bring dry weather, and fast progress.

But willing to deal with whatever came.

**

Xena sat on Argo’s back, hands resting on her saddle pommel. She was out on the market square, watching her troops move out in orderly fashion in the at least briefly clear air.

She had her heavy cloak on, and thick quilted undergarments under her armor, with woven wool leggings on tucked into her boots. The cloak was lined with sheep fleece, and the hood was as well, all dyed charcoal black.

The snow had stopped about a candlemark previously, though the heavy skies promised more. Behind the clouds the sun was just thinking about appearing and there was a faint gray light filtering through them that outlined the moving bodies.

Scouts in front, already fanning out and heading up the road. The supply wagons had just crossed the river and were turning up, and the rest of the troops were behind them along with Gabrielle and her Amazons.

And of course, Dori on Rusty. Cari was riding with the queen, ahead of her on her saddle, with one of the bard’s arms tucked around her for safety.

Kinda ridiculous, in an army, but what the Hades. Xena’s eyes found the two tall figures in borrowed cloaks riding along towards her, and she gathered up her reins and prepared to join them as they fell in at the rear.

“Do you mortals have to do everything the hard way?” Ares asked as he closed in on her.

“You could just go to the port city and save us the trouble.” Hercules eyed him in irritation. “Do your own dirty work for a change.”

“And I so want to spend time with you.” The god of war rolled his eyes. “Much as I would love to snap in and out of here, you know better than anyone why I can’t.”

Xena looked from one to the other. “Want to share?” She asked, after a period of ill natured silence.

“No.” Hercules muttered.

Ares chuckled humorlessly.

“Nice.” Xena settled her knees on either side of Argo’s sides. “My troops know you’er here, Herc.” She said. “But they’ve only heard rumors about you. “ She eyed Ares. “And they think we’re going to deal with the pirates not rescue your sisters.”

“You gonna tell em?” Ares asked. “Those chicks already know.”

“Because you stumbled into my house half frozen yeah.” The warrior stated flatly. “I’ll tell them after we drop the kids off.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve heard yet. Bringing kids.”

“No, it makes sense.” Hercules disagreed. “I wish I’d thought of that way back in the day.”

Ares rolled his eyes.

“Besides, we’ll pick up some troops there.” Xena ignored both of them. “I thought it would be a good idea to bring along some true believers.”

It was Hercules turn to chuckle dryly.

Ares was briefly silent then he chuckled as well. “That’s really not a bad idea.” He admitted. “Might up the kickass factor too. Those fuzzies can fight.”

The gray light was slowly increasing, and by the time they cleared sight of Amphipolis it was as bright as it was going to get, casting a silver hue on the dark, dead branches of the trees that lined the road.

Xena took a deep breath of the damp air and checked her saddle bags one last time, convinced in the back of her mind she’d forgotten something from them.

It had been a hectic morning, since she’d woken a little later than she’d expected to, and then they’d spent some time gathering some supplies for Cari as well as giving the Amazons and the townsfolk some last minute instructions.

So she was sure she’d forgotten something. Not something obvious, like her sword or any part of her martial gear, but something.

Hercules guided his horse closer to hers. “I might slip ahead and go look for Iolaus.” He said, watching her nod in agreement. “I wasn’t able to make contact with him after he left Amphipolis.”

Xena looked at him. “Any idea why?”

“Wasn’t able to contact him before he got to Amphipolis.” The demigod informed her dryly. “Maybe it’s the water.”

“Hm.”

“Maybe it was some place he felt safe.” Hercules said. “Some place he could let his mind relax enough to hear me.”

“That makes sense.”

“Hope he didn’t get into any trouble.” He sighed. “I was so pissed off I didn’t get a chance to talk to him before they yanked me up to Mount Olympus.”

“Mm.”

“He probably thought I just left him.”

Xena regarded the reins in her right hand, the worn leather resting between the fingers of her lined gloves. “We told him you didn’t.” She said. “Who knows better than Gabrielle and I how little choice you have with the gods involved?”

“Hm.”

“Talking smack already?” Ares came up on her other side, looking relatively relaxed on his big dark coated mount. “Gonna be a long ride.”

**

Gabrielle found herself enjoying the ride, despite the weather. She was warm in her cloak, and the travel had been smooth so far, her time occupied in pointing out things to Cari who was amazed at everything.

Dori had of course traveled extensively with them, and was more interested in talking to her pony than watching the trees go by. But her little friend had been a baby when the tribe had moved to the plateau and she’s only seen the village since then.

So the army, and animals, and the tall pine trees were all a revelation. Gabrielle found it funny, but she also had to wonder if the incessant questions weren’t a little bit of revenge for her own younger self. “That’s right Cari, you see that? It’s a fox.”

“Foxes!” Dori was riding next to her and pointed at the fast moving animal.

“I see, Dor.” Her mother said. “Don’t go chasing after him.”

“He go fast.” Cari observed. “Gots big tail.”

‘They do have big bushy tails.” Gabrielle agreed. “Sometimes we see foxes like that up by our cabin, right Dori?”

“Yes, mama.” Dori nodded. “Guff chases.”

“Guff is the doggie.” Cari ventured. “He’s nice.”

“He’s a wolf, actually. But he is nice to his friends.” The bard told her. “He doesn’t like animals or people who want to be mean to us.” She shifted a little on Iolaus’ back, taking a firmer hold of the reins when the stallion arched his neck to look back at her.

It was past noon, and they were almost at the point where they would need to turn off to go down to the valley. The pace so far had been reserved, but the sense was it would pick up after their stop and Gabrielle was looking forward to getting off her horse and stretching her back out before that happened.

It was getting colder. She could feel the sting of the air against her cheeks, and she reached down to pull up Dori’s hood around her head. “Keep that up, it’s cold here.”

A low whistle sounded from behind her, carrying over the sound of the moving army without effort, the tone and clarity identifying it’s issuer with equal ease.

Gabrielle turned and looked for Xena, only to find her partner right behind her, catching up fast. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Xena came even with her. “Going to stop up ahead near the bend and have them take a break while we go down to Jessan’s.” She said. “Herc might go ahead and look for Iolaus.”

“Sounds good.” Gabrielle said. “Everything okay back there?”

“Eh.” The warrior grunted, shifting her gloved hands on her reins. “Last thing I needed on this trip was moody gods.”

Gabrielle reached over and patted her knee comfortingly. “Given what our goal is, comes with the territory hon.”

“I know. Let’s get this done, and then I’m going to let the troops in on the deal.” Xena shifted Argo with her knees, then sidestepped the mare out of line and up the road.

“Dori, don’t go running off honey. We’re almost at your friend’s house.” Gabrielle called out just in case her daughter decided to go after her partner. “Let’s go down that way, okay?”

“We go play?” Cari asked, softly. ‘With the fuzzy people?”

“Yep, you’ll get to play with Dori and her friends in the valley. “ Gabrielle agreed, slowing Iolaus’ progress as she heard Xena sending out whistles of command to the rest of the troops. “I know you’re going to have a good time there, Cari. They have lots of toys and things to play with.”

“Gots boats.” Dori piped up. “We can go find the fishes.”

Gabrielle glanced up at the cold sky and winced. “Maybe you can catch the fishes without going in the water, honey.”

Obediently the moving lines stopped, and cleared off the road, dismounting from horses and removing packets from saddlebags as the wagons pulled up to a halt behind them.

Xena let out another whistle, and two of her captains trotted over, along with Solari and Paladia. “Let’s go on down.” She indicated the half hidden path that cut through the trees, and they started for it.

The snow had held off so far, and the branches only dusted them a little as they moved through the forest towards the entrance to the valley. It was quiet between the trees, most of the animals were tucked away from the cold and the wind had died down leaving the air cold and still.

There wasn’t room to go side by side, so Gabrielle steered Iolaus ahead of his mother. “Dori, stay there behind me, okay?”

“Okay mama.” Dori was dressed in a thick woolen overshirt and leggings and she was wearing riding boots the image of Xena’s. She had a cloak on, but the hood was once again pushed back and there was a dusting of snow in her dark hair.

She looked adorable. Gabrielle gazed fondly back at her, feeling a pang in her chest knowing they’d be parting so soon. Regardless of how safe the valley seemed to them, there was always that chance, wasn’t there?

She sighed and looked up over Dori’s head, meeting Xena’s eyes as the warrior leaned lightly on her saddle bow, the wry smile on her face echoing the thoughts in Gabrielle’s head precisely.

Their life’s choices were just never easy, were they?

Halfway down the path Xena realized Ares had joined them, his horse falling in behind hers, then coming up next to them as the path widened. “Not sure I want to freak out Jessans people so fast.” She commented softly.

“Meh.” Ares pulled his cloak hood a bit closer to his face. “They won’t see me. I’m just bored with all this riding riding riding.”

“We’ve only been at it five candlemarks.” Xena remarked. “It’s going to take us days to get to the port city.”

“Ugh.”

They continue deeper into the forest, halting suddenly when a buck plunged across the path.

“Boo! Look!” Dori stood up in her stirrups . “Pretty!”

Solari had raised her crossbow in an easy arc, but halted when Xena let out a low whistle, and looked behind her in question.

“Not in front of the kid.” Xena said. “I don’t want to start that up again.”

“Ah.” Solari nodded. “I forgot about that. Sorry.” She let the crossbow rest, not without a wistful look at the buck. “That’s a lot of meat.”

The big deer stopped inside the fringe of the trees, breath streaming from his nostrils as he stared arrogantly at them. Then he whirled and dodged between the branches, heading down towards the gorge.

“Mama!” Dori started after him, but was pulled up when Gabrielle made a grab at her bridle. “Want to see the aminal!”

“We can go see him later, sweetheart. We need to go see our friends now.” The bard hauled the pony’s head around and they started forward again. “Let’s go.”

A quarter candlemark more and they became aware of motion ahead of them on the path, and Xena’s two captains cantered ahead to meet it. Xena herself stood up in her stirrups, then dropped back down into her seat.

“Fuzzies?” Ares asked.

“Yes, a bunch of them.” The warrior agreed. “They’re expecting us.” She settled her boots and then pressed her knees into Argo’s sides and urged the mare up next to Gabrielle. “Is that.. yeah. Jess!” She lifted her voice.

The first ranks of the forest people were now visible, paused and clustered around the two captains. The one in the lead turned his head and looked out over them, lifting a fur covered arm and waving.

Everyone seemed relaxed. There was no other problem waiting for them, Xena reasoned, relaxing a little. “Looks quiet.”

“Mm.” Ares rumbled under his breath.

They all moved forward together past the trees, and the forest dwellers turned and spread out in the open beyond, letting Xena and her little crew forward into the clearing.

Jessan half turned in his saddle and looked at his friends, a grin appearing as they came closer. He angled his mount over to greet them. “Hey guys.”

“Hey.” Gabrielle returned the cheerful words. “Thanks for taking in my little refugees.” She looked down at Cari, who was staring at the seven foot tall furry guy with wide open eyes. “Cari, this is our friend Jessan.”

“Hi there, Cari.” Jessan greeted her. “You going to come have fun with my kids for a while too?” He glanced at Gabrielle in question.

“She’s Dori’s best friend.” The bard informed him. “Dori asked if one of her buddies could come with her and so here Cari is.”

“Hey cool. The more the merrier.” Jessan waggled his fingers at the child.

“Is big!” Cari said, looking up at Gabrielle. “What is?”

“That’s our friend Jessan.” Gabrielle informed her. “He’s just like us.”

“Except bigger and hairier.” Jessan winked. “And lots better looking.”

“Boo Boo Boo.” Dori was bouncing in her saddle. “Kin we go?”

Jessan chuckled. “Let’s head down to the gates. “ He waved everyone forward with a furry arm and they started forward again. “Glad to see you guys.”

“Likewise.” Gabrielle agreed. “We’ve got the other side of the story to tell you.” She added, with a wry look in his direction. “As usual.”

“Uh oh.” The forest dweller uttered. “I could have guessed.”

“You could have.”

Xena glanced casually around as they rode down the slope to the entrance to the valley. Snow was piled deeply already between the trees, and the horses were knee deep in it by the time they were in front of the gates.

She was aware of Ares coming along behind her, his dark coated mount stepping in the track already plowed by the other animals, a stream of fog issuing from his nostrils.

He was a big animal, with a bit of a red glint in his eye and Xena found herself wondering if he were entirely natural.

Entirely mortal. Or something Ares had picked up and brought with him on his way down from Olympus.

Argo seemed a bit suspicious of him, anyway. Xena patted her mare's neck, keeping an eye on Dori on her pony, and her friends chatting ahead of her.

"You going to stick around here long?" Ares asked suddenly.

Xena slowed, so she could answer him without drawing attention to herself. "No. Just going to drop the kids off. Why?"

"This is boring."

Xena eyed him. "What, riding?"

"It takes you for ever to get anywhere." The god groused. "How do you expect to get my sisters loose at this rate? They'll have mortal bastard kids by the time you get there."

Xena paused and half turned, staring at him. "Why not just click us to the port city then?" She asked. "Moving an army takes time, Ares. It's not my fault you got into this mess."

Ares glowered at her. "Aint' it?"

"No." Xena eyed him steadily. "It's not."

"You agreed to help." The god of war changed the subject. "This isn't getting us anywhere!"

Xena lifted her hands and let them drop. "Then feel free to click yourself there. Armies don't fly."

"They do on Olympus." Ares sighed. "Listen if I could boot your asses over there I would. I can't."

"Can't?"

"Can't."

Xena leaned on her saddle. "What do you mean by that?"

"None of your business. I just can't"

"Hey Xena."

The warrior jerked her head around, to see Solari approaching. "Yeah?"

"Fuzzies say it's gonna snow like crazy." The Amazon said, glancing at Ares, then back. "They think we should bunk here overnight."

Ares rolled his eyes. "You're never gonna get anywhere." He pulled his horses head around and started back up the trail. "I"ll have to do this myself."

Solari grimaced. "Well, scuse me."

Xena sighed. "Yeah, but he's right. We need to keep moving." She nudged Argo to go a little faster. "We're losing time and something tells me we don't have that much to spare."

"So no bunking overnight?"

"No."

**

The caverns were busy here at mid day, and Gabrielle spent quite a bit of time returning greetings from tall forms who spotted them entering.

Little Xena, Gabrielle and Warrin were waiting for them when they came in and bolted for Dori with high pitched squeals of delight, gathering around her and jumping up and down.

Cari watched in astonishment, until Dori came over and took her by the hand. "Come! We go have fun with them."

The triplets came pattering over and little Xena jumped up into Gabrielle's lap. "Auntie Gabby!" She yodeled. "Tell a story!"

Gabrielle chuckled "I will later, kids." She promised. "Right now I have to talk to your folks." She gave little Xena a hug, and set her down on the ground. "You all play for a while."

Cari looked intimidated, but she allowed herself to be tugged forward, as Gabrielle watched intently. "Be gentle, guys." She told the triplets. "Be nice to Cari. She's new."

"Its good!" Her own little namesake piped up. "Come!"

Cari looked up at Gabrielle. "Is okay?"

"It's fine, honey." Gabrielle was seated on a bench, and she leaned forward towards Cari resting her elbows on her knees. "Go on and have a good time. They'll show you all kinds of cool things, right?"

"Yes." Little Xena agreed. "Dori can we see the horsie?"

"Come." Dori took charge and pointed to where Rusty was pulling up some grass. "Let's go have fun."

The children ran off, without another backward glance. Gabrielle watched them go, smiling a little wistfully. "You know, Xe, I'm glad we decided to leave her here."

Xena sat down next to her, and Jessan followed, along with Elaini and several others. "Me too." She said. "Now, let's let our friends in here on what's going on."

"Why do I think we really are going to regret hearing what's going on?" Elaini said, with a knowing grin. "Its not enough that we've got some crazy guy causing trouble in Thrace?"

"No." Xena said. "It's about the gods."

"Uh oh."

Everyone sat down and Jessan passed Xena a mug of ale.

"Where do I start?" Gabrielle picked up the tale. "Remember our trip to Therma? With the Spartans?"

"Sure." Jessan agreed. "Not fun."

"Did I get around to telling you about us dying and going to Mount Olympus?"

Silence.

"Um… what?" Elaini said.

"I thought I did. Anyway, we did. And that's how we found out what was going on with the bet, and Athena and Artemis and all that." Gabrielle plowed on. "But at the end of all that, Artemis and Athena ended up being made mortal."

"I remember that story." Jessan said. "You did tell us."

"You never told me that story." His soulbond immediately retorted.

"Freak out factor was too much." He answered succinctly. "So, is this about that too? Are they still mortal?"

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged looks. “Yes.” Xena said. “And the thing is, if everyone finds out about it, and stops believing in them, it’s a problem.”

Silence. The forest dwellers all looked at each other, and then at the two women in their midst. “So.. where do we fit into this?” Jessan finally asked. “I thought we were going after a pirate.”

“We think they were taken there. We’re going to rescue them, and get them out of sight.” Gabrielle stated. “In that same port city.”

“Oh. So like.. two birds with one stone?”

“Sorta.”

Elani covered her eyes with one furry hand. “Why do I have a bad feeling about this?”

**

Xena walked over to the edge of the cavern and sat down on a rock, watching the kids playing nearby. They were sheltered from the weather in a long, curving arc of stone under the edge of the overhang and they were running rings around Rusty who was standing there chewing with an amused pony expression.

It was time to go. But she sat there for another moment or two, just enjoying the laughter, soaking up the sound of Dori’s piping voice as she led the chase, a stuffed ball clutched in one hand. Several more of the forest dweller children came over, and joined in the fun, one of them managing to get a hand on the ball amidst a chorus of giggles.

With a sigh, she got up and walked over to where the children were, pausing as the giddy scrambling then included her. “Hey you rugrats.” She stood still as two of the forest dwellers ducked between her legs.

“Boo, come play.” Dori took hold of her hand.

“I can’t right now.” Xena said. “Your mama and I have to go do something.”

Dori frowned. “You go?” She stopped tugging and just looked up at her parent sadly. “Boo, stay!”

Oh boy. Xena settled to the ground so they were at eye level. “We have to go for a little while.” She said. “But we wanted you to be okay with that, Dor, that’s why we brought you here to play with your favorite buddies, and we brought Cari with us too.”

Dori sat down too, studying Xena solemnly. “Boo, stay too. You have fun here?” She repeated in a wistful tone. “Please?”

Ow.

“Wish I could.” Xena smiled briefly. “But we’re going to go around in all the cold and weather, so we can help some people out. You know how that is, Dori. Mama and I have to do that.”

The other kids came over and sat down too. “Going to be campfire and stories later.” Warrin offered. “We’ll have a goooooood time.”

“Yeah, you guys are going to have a much better time than we are.” Xena admitted. “But this wont take long and then we can come back and have fun with you.”

“How long?” Dori asked.

Xena knew her daughter really didn’t have a sense of time yet. “Not long, kiddo. We’ll be back before you know it, and then you’ll be arguing with me not to go home.” She reached out and ruffled Dori’s hair. “So go over there and give your mama a hug, and then you all get back to playing.”

Dori considered the request, her eyes going to her waiting friends, and then looking back at Xena. “Okay.” She decided after a long, quiet moment. “We have fun.” She got up and ran over to where Gabrielle was putting something in a saddlebag, holding her hands up to be hugged.

“Now.” Xena addressed the rest of the little pack. “You kids have a good time, and take care of Dori, okay?”

“Daddys going too.” Warin said. “You take care, Auntie Xe?”

Xena allowed herself to be charmed. “I promise I will.” She told the tot. “And maybe your dad will bring you back some presents.”

“Oo.” Little Gabrielle gurgled.

“Okay.” Xena got up on one knee. “Be good, kids. Have fun.”

The horde closed in on her and a number of small arms reached around her to give her a hug. She returned the embrace, even getting a timid clasp on her leg from Cari. “You okay with this, little one?”

“Yes.” Cari whispered softly. “So good now. Get to be with peoples.”

Xena gave her a gentle hug. “You have fun with Dori, okay? Keep an eye on her.”

Cari just grinned.

Xena patted her on the back and stood up, as Gabrielle came over with Dori in her arms. “Ready, partner?”

“Yep.” Gabrielle bounced their daughter a little. “You going to be a good girl, Dori?”

“Yes mama.” Dori assured her. “We be good. I promise.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle let her down, with an expression of skepticism. “Go on and have fun with your friends. You kids be good!”

Dori ran over to the group and they all dashed back over to where Rusty was patiently waiting, gathering around him as he sniffed at the little forest dwellers.

“Bye guys.” The bard waved, but was mostly ignored. She exchanged a look with her partner, then they headed together back towards the valley’s entrance, where horses and their friends were waiting.

They led the animals outside and the gates closed behind them. Then they mounted up and started up the path towards where they’d left the army.

A couple steps up Gabrielle eyed her companion, and they both sighed. “Our kid’s growing up, Xe.” The bard said mournfully. “She doesn’t even miss us.”

“She will.” The warrior reassured her. “We stacked the deck this time, hon. We brought her here to her favorite buddies and brought her little friend along and she got to bring the pony.” She lifted a hand and let it fall on her thigh. “What in Hades would she want us for?”

Gabrielle chuckled dryly. “You have a point.” She shifted a little in her saddle. “And speaking of points, I’m gonna regret this ride I can just tell you now.”

Xena let a whistle out. “Let’s just get as far as we can fast as we can.” She urged Argo into a faster pace. “Get this over with and get back home.”

**

They had made good time after all. As darkness fell, Xena called a halt just short of the pass into Thrace. Snow had started falling again, and they pitched tents against it, the wagons making a windbreak and rough hide tarps gave shelter to the cookfire.

The army was too big to take shelter in caves, so they were spread out among the trees, using whatever natural wind blocks were there, and rude, three cornered hide tents to sleep in.

Xena and Gabrielle's shelter was a little more ornate, it had four walls and was tall enough for their general to stand up straight in. Xena also had a folding table she put her maps on, and a hammock big enough for two strung across one side.

Gabrielle was just coming back from the cookfire, a small pot swinging from her gloved hand as the watch came in to report to Xena.

She followed them under the flap of their shelter, and went over to put the pot down on the small brazier in the center of the tent while the men went over to the worktable. "Coming down like crazy, hon."

"Yeah." Xena was studying a hide map. "So the watch is set up here and here?" She indicated two spots on the map.

"Aye, gene'rl." The taller of the two men said. "S'only two approaches. Got a gulch here," He touched his finger to the map. "And t'river here." He indicated another line. "Got ten men on each."

"Good." Xena nodded. "Rotate new bodies in every four candlemarks and make sure they've got enough wood to keep watchfires up. I don't want anyone getting frostbite."

"Tis quiet for now." The man said. "We looked all up the road to the pass, didn't see nothing like anyone in the area, though snow's got the ground all covered."

"Yeah." Xena said again. "But go over by the river and uncover the dirt there. See if anyone's used it as a middens." She touched the map. "And look here, see if you see a sign of old campfires."

The man studied the area, then nodded. "Right you are, Xena." He said. "We'll check it out." He motioned to his companion, who had been content to let him do the talking. Both men were around Xena's height, and had the easy physicality of regular soldiers.

Not militia. Gabrielle watched them as they gathered their cloaks and left the tent, trying to remember where they'd come from.

Old soldiers of Xenas maybe? "Hey Xe?"

"Mm?" Xena leaned her elbows on the table. "Yes, oh my queen?"

Gabrielle paused, savored the moment, and smiled. "Dannan and Joh, those two. Were they your guys from before?"

"Ah, no." Xena tapped her thumbs together. "They came from Therma. After we left there. They were part of the city guard, and they decided to come out our way." She said. "Why?"

"Just curious. I knew they weren't from town." Gabrielle stood up with two plates full of travel stew and came over to put them on the worktable. "It's a lot different traveling with so many people isn't it?"

"Sure." Xena ripped a piece of travel bread in half and scooped up some of the stew with it. "We did that, in the war, a little."

"Not like this." Gabrielle poured her a mug of mulled wine and set it down at her elbow. "We were mostly on the defense then. We knew it. This is different." She took a bite of her own plate. "Should we have kept going on tonight? You seemed kinda twitchy."

Xena exhaled. "Something Ares said." She glanced around. "But honestly, you cant just drive people in this weather. No point in ending up someplace with everyone too tired and sick to fight."

"You think Ares went there ahead of us? Maybe he'll save his sisters and we can just go shopping." The bard suggested. "I'm kind of pissed off he, and Hercules took off after all that begging us to help."

"I'm not. I didn't have to explain why they were here then." Xena said, pragmatically. "I wasn't looking forward to that."

Gabrielle picked up the cup of mulled wine and took a sip, tasting the rich and fruity flavor as she considered that. “Is it fair not to tell them?”

Xena leaned on her hands, looking out past the shelter edge.

“I think you should.” The bard continued, after a period of silence. “I think this is something everyone should know they were a part of.”

Xena turned her head and regarded her. “Maybe.” She acknowledged. “You want to tell them?” She looked back out into the night, the soft fall of snow obscuring most of the view. “Or wait until the morning.”

Gabrielle scooped up a handful of stew with her bread. “Tomorrow.” She said. “Everyone’s bunking down and just getting warm. My pulling them out into the snow again isn’t going to make that story any better.”

Pragmatic. Xena straightened and went over to her, settling her arms around Gabrielle’s body. “It’ll hold.” She said. “I don’t want you standing out in the snow either.” She opened her mouth to accept a bit of bread and stew. “Hopefully the weather’ll get better as we go south in Thrace.”

Gabrielle gently pulled her head down and gave her a kiss on the lips. “I’m not worried. I’ll be warm no matter what.”

Xena’s brow lifted. “Why Gabbbriellle.”

Her partner chuckled. “C’mon, Xe. Who else can I say that too?”

“You better not be saying it to anyone else.” Xena rumbled softly, letting her chin rest against Gabrielle’s head. “You know what just occurred to me?”

“What?” Gabrielle simply enjoyed the moment, the warmth in the body behind her making her muscles relax.

“What if we’re all just assuming those women are in the port city?” Xena asked. “Even Ares and Hercules. What if it’s a scam?”

“Who’d be scamming them?”

Xena shrugged, moving them both a little. “I’m glad we’re going to Thrace, don’t get me wrong. But what if we end up there, and all that’s there is some pirate for me to harass?”

Gabrielle considered that, her fingers idly playing with the sturdy leather ties on Xena’s overtunic. “I think…” She mused. “I think that would be the place they’d be taken to if they were taken. Those guys seem to be the ones out for slaves.”

“Mmph.”

“So it makes sense you know? If they’re not there, holy sheeps Xe, that’s a lot of territory to search for them.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think they’re somewhere else?”

Xena gently blew in her ear, then nibbled the edge of it. “I think when everyone looks in one place for something, the something’s usually not in that place.”

“Xe. Sometimes a rock is just a rock, huh?”

Xena chuckled, low and almost soundless. “Eh. We’re going there so no point in arguing about it.”

“We’re not arguing. We’re just talking”

“Okay, we’re just talking.” Xena drew a breath in to continue and then paused, cocking her head to one side and falling silent.

Gabrielle looked up, seeing that sudden tensing of the skin on the side of her partner's face. She kept quiet and still, waiting.

Xena released her and went to the opening of the shelter, drawing her sword in one easy motion as she passed into the snow. Gabrielle threw her cloak on and grabbed her staff, chasing after her partner as she plunged through the drifts between the trees.

A shout lifted up, and a breath later soldiers were pouring out of their tents, torches lifted, all of them moving towards the watch station near the river.

Gabrielle caught up to Xena as they reached the edge of the trees, and they started down the slight slope to the river. She could see the watchfire burning brightly ahead of them, and as Xena arrived, everyone parted to let her through.

"Genr'l!" The watchman had his hand on a bridle, the dark mass of a horse behind him. "Just came riding in."

"Uh oh." Gabrielle muttered as she followed Xena around the soldiers and they came into the firelight. A bundle of cloth was at the horses's feet, unmoving. "I think I recognize that horse."

"Yeah me too." Xena strode over and knelt beside the bundle, sheathing her sword as she did. She rolled over the body and the cloth fell back exposing a pale, bearded face, still, with closed eyes. "Ah."

It had grown quiet around them, save the snap and pop of the fire, sparks arcing up amidst faint hisses as the snow hit the hot wood. "Ye know him, Genr'l?" The watch asked. "Might nice horse he came in on, just trotted in here like he knew us."

Xena sighed. "He does." She looked over her shoulder at her partner. "He's been shot with a crossbow."

"Ohhhh crap." Gabrielle looked around. "Okay guys get something so we can pick him up and get him under shelter. Jessan, can you get Xena's kit?"

The forest dweller, who had come to stand next to her, made a semi strange squeeking sound with his teeth. "Sure." He took a breath. "You .. uh.. want my guys to carry him?"

Xena stood up. "Yeah, I would." She turned. "Get a tarp up near the cookfire. I'm going to need some water and bandages." She paused and put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "You want to fill the troops in on who this is?"

"Not really, no, but I will." Gabrielle muttered under her breath. "Okay people, gather around." She added, as two of Jessan's soldiers gingerly lifted the still, limp figure up between them and started off around the edge of the forest. "We've got a few things to let you in on."

Xena went over to the horse, who was watching her with dour intelligence. She lifted her hand and let him snuffle it. "You can let him go." She told the soldier. "Let me just tie up his reins, let him go where he wants to."

The soldier did as she asked, taking a step back. "Good looking beast." He said. "Good eye on im."

"Yeah." Xena fastened the horse's reins up to the top of his bridle, giving him his head. "G'wan. There's fodder with the rest of the horses if you want."

The horse pushed his head into her chest, breathing out against her in evident approval. Then he moved off and ambled between the trees.

Xena followed him, angling right back towards the cookfire, as she listened to Gabrielle start to tell her men what had just dropped into their camp.

She really couldn't even say she was surprised. Xena headed over to where the forest dwellers were standing around, having set the injured god of war down on the bucktail of a wagon. They backed off as she approached, Jessan holding out her healer's kit.

With a sigh, she took it. "Okay, get me some water in that bucket too."

One of the forest dwellers trotted off.

“Xena.”

“Yeah?” She rolled open the kit and set it down, moving up against the back of the wagon, which had a hide tarp over it protecting the contents. It brushed against her head and she reached around to pull a handful of snow down, scrubbing her hands with it.

“This isn’t good is it.”

“No.” Xena responded. “I think we need to get this fixed in a hurry.” She flicked the moisture off her hands and pulled back the cloak covering Ares body. He had regained a touch of color now that he was near the warmth of the fire but the bolt sticking into the air from just below his ribcage was short, black and covered in blood.

Blood. She touched the shaft, seeing her skin take on some of the taint of it.

Gods blood. She opened her hand, palm up.

‘That’s weird.” Jessan whispered. “It’s the same color as mine.”

“Yeah.” Xena sighed. “Mine too.”

They looked at each other in silence, unspoken questions echoing in the silent chill air.

**

They clustered around the campfire, healers to one side tending to the injured. Cait stood next to Bennu, her arms folded over her chest, listening to the Phillipi scout relating what he’d found over the next ridge.

“Looks like they been through, right enough.” The man had his hood pushed back, his face rough and reddened from the cold. “Whole town’s laid to waste.”

“Laid to waste? Everyone dead?” Jax asked, sharply.

“No. No people at all, no horses, no animals – just the place torched, still can smell it under the snow. But no bodies.” The man responded. “Just like it was cleaned out, and burnt down so as no one could use it.”

“Huh.” Bennu grunted. “Group jumped us, was more than scouts. Organized.”

The Phillipi men were getting restive. “Maybe we should head right home now.” One suggested. “No telling what they’ve done.”

“I think he’s right.” Cait spoke up, in a calm tone. “Staying here is not good. We should move on, since that lot that attacked us knows we’re here.”

Carolous was already nodding. “Tis right.” He said. “Lets get packed up and move. Here we’re sitting ducks.”

Everyone split up to break camp. Cait went back with Nala to pack up their gear, shaking the snowflakes off their hammocks. “Good thing we’re going on.” Cait said. “Weather’s getting really ratty.”

“Right.” Nala agreed. “I wouldn’t have slept a wink anyhow, this place is giving me the creeps.” She got her bags fastened and hoisted them to her shoulder. “Let’s get the horses ready. Maybe we can get a cup of something while everyone else is packing.”

They went to the corral, where there were several people already moving amongst the animals who were still visibly nervous after the raid, throwing their heads up and starting away from their riders.

Cait went over to Shadow, who was sheltering against two close growing trees and patted her nose. “Hello there.” She greeted the mare, who unlike the rest of the horses had remained calm and placid. “Are you ready to start walking again? Sorry about that.”

Shadow bumped her with her nose.

“How close are we to Philippi you think?” Nala asked, as she got her mount’s gear settled. “They said we’d be there tomorrow anyway.”

“Yes.” Cait pulled herself up on Shadow’s back. “Hope they’re right.”

“Me too.”

The whole camp was packed and out in under a quarter candlemark. Bennu and the Amphipolis militia allowed the Phillippi men take the lead and they fell in behind, with the Amazons in the middle of them.

One of the Phillipi men had their rescued woman up behind him, and two of the injured soldiers were riding double as well. The bodies of the attackers they left behind, lined up near the deadened fire, stripped of their weapons and gear.

They rode quickly through the forest, coming up over the ridge and descending into the destroyed village. The small houses were burned out and collapsed, and what had once been a fenced area for livestock was broken and laying under the snow.

Cait watched the ground as they rode through, sweeping her eyes from side to side. Everything was stripped clean, she noted. Not a pot or basket was lying anywhere, and as they passed the well, still intact, even the bucket that would have been lowered into it was gone, rope frozen stiffly to the stone.

The Phillippi men were now visibly nervous. “Wondering what they’ll find at home.” Nala muttered to Cait. “This wasn’t any casual raid.”

“No.”

Bennu heard them. He slowed his horse a little and they came up on either side. “Gotta stink to it.” He said. “Seems like she should know.”

No one had to ask who she was. “Right.” Cait felt a certain sense of relief shudder through her. “I’ll go.”

“We’ll go.” Nala said, firmly. “No one should be out on the road by themselves.”

Bennu nodded. “Go then. I’ll do the covering.” He said. “if we find worse, we’ll be back ourselves. Not going to risk the men with that lot.” He indicated the Phillippians. “Got a stink to them too.”

Without a sound, both Amazons nodded. They pulled up on their reins a bit, and slowed, letting the rest of the militia come around them.

“Careful, you all.” One of the soldiers said. “Be safe.”

“You as well.” Cait reached out and clasped his hand, then released it, as they all moved past and left the two Amazons behind.

They waited until the last horse moved out of sight in the darkness, and then they turned and went back up the track, passing back through the silent, dead town. Once past it, they moved down past where they’d camped, and then up out of the hollow and back into the road that would take them back to Amphipolis.

There was already a layer of snow on the path and any prints had been covered, only the bushes to either side of the road giving them any real sense of where to head.

The wind seemed a bit stronger, and they were moving into it. Cait pulled her cloak hood closer around her face to shield her eyes against the blowing snow, but despite the discomfort felt herself content.

This was right. Xena needed to be told.

**

They had built a tent over the wagon, to give Xena space and some warmth while she worked. A fire was crackling near the entrance behind her, and two torches had been planted into the cold ground at the edge of each end of the platform.

An iron pot of steaming water was just to one side of her, and she lifted a soaking cloth from it and squeezed it lightly before she leaned forward to wipe the last bit of blood off the bare skin exposed to her.

Just to one side of her left hand lay an arrow, it's short, thick shaft covered in a dark rust stain. She pulled a sheepskin lined cover over Are's chest, then she put the cloth down next to the arrow.

Outside, the snow was coming down steadily, making no sound as it hit the top of the cowhide roof over her head.

Xena cleaned her hands off and glanced to one side as Gabrielle joined her. "This ain't good."

"No." Gabrielle observed the body now swaddled in fleece and blankets. "You got the arrow out?"

"I did." Xena picked up the totally black shaft and displayed it. It had no markings, and the feathers were also solid black, as was the cruelly barbed head. She drew aside the bandage on Ares' chest and exchanged looks with Gabrielle.

"It's healed." The bard observed. "Just like that?"

Xena nodded. "Soon as I got the arrow out." She studied her patient, who was very slowly regaining a more for him normal color. "Not really sure what's going on." She examined the arrow, trying to decide if she was imagining the faint tingle in her fingers. "This doesn't look like any local kind of arrow."

"Been that kind of day." Gabrielle put her hand on her partners back. "Let's go finish the stew, if he'll be okay now."

Xena shrugged. "Who knows." She glanced out from under the covering protecting the back of the wagon, to find two of Jessans soldiers there on guard. "You guys come in here and keep an eye on him okay?"

The two big furry people gave her big, round eyed looks, but pulled their overcloaks closer and stepped inside the shelter, taking up stances as far away from the silent figure as they could.

"If he wakes up, come get me." Xena gave the closer one a pat on the arm. "Relax."

"Yes, ma'am." The forest dweller said meekly. "We'll keep a good eye on him, I promise."

Xena ducked out and moved from the wagon shelter back to her own, noting that hides had been fastened overhead to give them a snow free path.

She kept her hand closed around the arrow as they walked in silence back to their own tent, wondering how this latest development was going to impact her plan. Hopefully the erstwhile God of War would come to his senses sooner rather than later.

She wanted to find out about the strange arrow. Was there someone out there hunting gods?

Once inside their little haven she put the arrow down on her little table and went over to the brazier, sitting down on the folding stool next to it and holding her hands out to gather its warmth.

Behind her, Gabrielle was gathering cups and a water pot and she came over to take the stool next to her and set the pot down on the warmer. "You know, I was surprised at how well everyone took the news."

"Mm. They probably heard rumors. Either from the Amazons or Jessan's people." Xena clasped her hands together and flexed them.

"Probably." The bard agreed. "I think the general consensus was, it'll work out however it works out." She said, slowly. "I don't think… Xe, I don't think they really cared." She looked over at her partner. "Isn't that weird?"

Xena remained silent for a moment, then she gently cleared her throat. “Yeah. It is weird.” She took the cup of tea Gabrielle had just poured out and took a tiny mouthful of it. “But then – some of these guys have been around us a while. Word gets out.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle slowly sipped her honey laced tea.

They remained quiet for a bit, sipping their tea. Then Gabrielle got up to make a second cup, putting her hand casually on Xena’s back as she stepped behind her. “Know what I think, Xe?”

“I’m about to.” Xena pulled her knees up and rested her elbows on them.

“I think the army doesn’t much care about gods because they have you.” Gabrielle dumped more herbs and honey into her cup and came back over to pour hot water over them. She sat back down and looked over at her partner, who was regarding her with a dour look.

Gabrielle knew that look. It wasn’t the one Xena used when she was upset at her, it was the one she recognized as her partner just being pissed off in general, without a direction to loose her irritation off at.

She’d seen that look so many times across so many campfires. “I mean, who do they look up to? Who leads them? Protects them?” She reached over and touched Xenas hand. “I don’t mean they think of you as a god, hon. I just mean, you’re here, and in their lives every day, leading them.”

Xena made a face, then exhaled. “Yeah, I know what you meant.” She said. “Look at Amphipolis. We don’t have any temples there, or any even nearby this side of Thrace. Who’s to say the slacking off didn’t start a long time ago?”

Gabrielle straightened a little. “Huh.” She said, after a moment. “I never really thought about that. We had a .. was it just to Athena? Or maybe Hera.. two little temples back in Potaidea but after they rebuilt.. they didn’t put them back.”

They were both silent for a while. “I used to pray to the gods to make my father stop hitting me.” Gabrielle said suddenly. “But they never did.”

Xena stood up and walked around behind Gabrielle, dropping her hands to her shoulders and squeezing them.

“Should we worship them, Xe?” The bard said, in a soft voice. “What have they ever done for us? Everything I know about them is that they make us suffer for their entertainment. “

She heard Xena sigh behind her, and she leaned back against the warrior’s legs. “I know. A little late for me to be saying this now, huh?”

Xena’s fingers gently scratched her behind the ears, and then across her head, her thumbs coming to rest on the back of her neck and giving her a light massage. “We’re committed.” She agreed. “Let’s just see what happens I guess.”

“I guess.”

Soft footfalls made them both look up, as Jessan stuck his head into their enclosure. “Hey.”

“Hey.” The forest dweller said. “You’re wanted.” His muzzle twitched uncomfortably. “Over there.” He indicated over his shoulder with one thumb.

Xena exhaled. “Figures.” She headed for the flap. “C’mon, Gabrielle. I may need some backup.”

Gabrielle got to her feet hurriedly and headed out after her, bumping lightly against Jessan as they went crunching off across the newly laid snow.

They went together under the sheltering flap and found Ares half sitting up in his nest of sheepskin looking wildly around.

“Hey.” Xena held her hands out. “Relax.”

“Where is it?” Ares asked as soon as he recognized her. “Where did it go?”

Xena put her hands on her hips. “You mean the arrow?” She hazarded. “It’s in my tent. What do you want with it?”

The forest dwellers were all plastered against the hide walls looking like vertical rugs. Their eyes were wide and white, standing out in contrast against their dark fur.

Ares dropped back into the bed of the wagon. “You took it out?”

“Yes, I did.” Xena moved closer to him, and let her hands rest on the edge of the wagon. “Want to tell me about it?”

Ares looked at the forest dwellers, one eyebrow hiking up.

“Go grab a hot cup, fellas.” Xena addressed them. “I’ll spell ya.”

The two guards, and Jessan vanished without a question.

Ares then looked at Gabrielle.

Xena hiked her own eyebrow even more sharply at him.

“You sure you got it all out?” He finally said, glancing furtively around. “All of it?”

Xena sighed. “Gabrielle, can you go grab that arrow and bring it back here. I don’t remember seeing any nicks in it, but I didn’t look that closely at the head.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle said. “Ares, would you like some hot tea?” She got it out before the absurdity of the whole situation nearly got to her, leaning past Xena to give the ailing God of War a sympathetic look. “Or some hot wine?”

Ares glowered at her, then his lips twitched into a reluctant smile. “Wine would be good, thanks.”

Gabrielle ducked out of the tent and went quickly back to their own, glad enough for her errand. She caught motion inside as she entered, and grabbed her staff as she cleared the flap bringing it up and into battle position.

“Hey hey hey!” Jessan held his hands up. “Don’t hit me!”

Gabrielle exhaled. “Sorry.” She went over to the worktable and retrieved the arrow resting on it. “Ares wanted to see this.”

Jess made a face.

“I know, it’s freaky.” Gabrielle patted his arm. “Sit down and relax. I’m sure Xe’ll be right back here to let you know whatever it is he’s got on his mind.”

“Not sure I want to know.” Jessan covered his eyes.

Gabrielle patted his arm again. “Take it easy, Jess. I’m hoping he’ll decide to leave again. I don’t much like him being around either.” She picked up the pot of mulled wine on the brazier and snagged a cup, then left him to sit down near it’s warmth.

**

“I’m pretty sure I got all of it.” Xena said, dragging up a folding stool and sitting down on it. “Wound closed right up after I got it out.”

Ares glanced down at his chest in reflex, touching the spot below his ribs that the arrow had pierced. He pushed against it experimentally, then grunted. “Seems okay.”

Gabrielle re-entered with the arrow, handing it to her partner as she set the cup down and poured the hot wine into it. The rich, spicy smell filled the enclosure and she swirled it a little to let it cool.

Xena bent her head over the arrow, turning it towards the torches to examine it. The head was clean and unblemished, and she turned it in her fingers, seeing no sign of a fracture or chip. “Here.” She held it out to him. “Looks fine.”

Ares took it cautiously, and hiked himself up to look at it. After a moment he grunted and put it down on the edge of the wagon. "Lucky."

"Gee thanks."

He looked at her dourly. "It came from a crossbow hand built by my uncle."

Xena glanced at the shaft, then at him. "Hades?"

"Good guess." He widened his eyes in mock astonishment. "He decided he was going to defend his own patch, if you catch my drift."

"Isn't he a god too?" Gabrielle set the pot down and took a seat on the edge of the wagon.

"He's always been a little different." It was Xena who answered. "Sort of Zeus' reluctant ally."

Ares nodded. "Exactly, little chipper." He said. "So when all this came down, he decided he'd take the opportunity to… " he lifted a hand and dropped it. "Promote himself. See he knows regardless of what the morts here believe, they all die."

"They all come to him." Gabrielle said, quietly. "Eventually."

"You got it."

"So he's trying to kill you?" Xena said. "Is that what that is? Arrows from his hearth?"

Ares nodded. "Has his own troops. Unlimited resources, y'know? Been a lot of you morts, all dying all the time." He touched the arrow with one long finger. "And hes probably pissed off at me anyway. I stole one of his horses."

"Figured that horse came from somewhere else." Xena muttered.

"Had to find one somewhere." Ares said. "But I figured his plan is to knock us all off, then let the chicks get plundered, then let his troops out to scare everyone into believing in him."

"Ugh." Gabrielle exhaled. "Ares that sucks."

"Yeah, been that kinda day, blondie." Ares lay back down, then he plucked at the sheepskin lined covers. "You put animals on top of me?"

"You were half frozen." Xena said. "Besides, where do you think all this leather comes from? A tree?" She indicated her garb and his own. "It's cow skin."

Ares looked at her, then down at himself, then back at her. "Cows?" He looked around the makeshift shelter. "The more I hang out down here, the weirder it gets."

Gabrielle handed him the hot wine. "For us too. Why didn't you tell us this before?"

Ares rolled his eyes at her.

"Is that why you wanted to move faster?" Xena asked. "You should have said something."

"So will you move faster now?" He shot back.

Xena picked up the arrow and closed her fingers around it. "Maybe." She said. "After I figure out how to keep Hades minions from spitting you with more of these." She got up. "Get some rest. We will too."

Ares watched them go, then he looked around, and put his head back down on the straw stuffed pillow. He plucked at the sheepskin covering again, and just shook his head.

**

"You sweat more in summer. But boy, is it better than this." Gabrielle remarked, before she covered her lower face again with a fold of her cloak to keep the snow out of her mouth.

“No argument from me.” Xena was slightly ahead of her, doing as much as she could to intercept the blowing winds that were driving the wet substance right through them.

They were through the pass and heading downslope to the hilly midlands where months before the Spartans had marched on their way to Athens.

No sign of their passage, of course. The ground was covered in snow and the trees bore thick blankets of it, which shed over anyone who was as ill advised as to come too close to them.

Xena and Gabrielle were in the vanguard, the mounted troops were in columns behind them and then the wagons came after with a rear guard last.

Ares had allowed himself to be coaxed into staying in the wagon, tucked into the straw with a thick hide over the top of it to keep him out of the weather. His horse had stuck with the army spares and was trotting along with them, content to swing his head from side to side watching the world go by.

Xena had checked her map carefully, and she directed the scouts to continue up the long road once made by Romans that led eventually to the port city. She could have taken a meandering route through the forest – and if she’d been alone with Gabrielle she would have.

But an army, though very handy to have was not much for small hunting trails.

There were thick stands of trees on either side of the road, and the outriders were skirting through them, occasionally letting out a shrill whistle that echoed softly across the frosty ground.

Gabrielle glanced at the sky, but the clouds were so thick and gray it was impossible to even guess where the sun was. “Is it past noon, Xe?”

“Yes.” Xena reached into her saddlebag and pulled out a packet, handing it across to her partner. “Want some meat pie?”

“How’d you know I was hungry?”

“Oh, Gabrielle, please.” The warrior rolled her head to one side and gave her a look of mock exasperation. “As if I’ve never traveled with you before.”

Gabrielle chuckled and unwrapped a pie, then handed the package back over. “Thanks.” She bit into the pastry and munched it, appreciating the spiced meat inside and tasting the familiar spices of Cyrene’s kitchen.

She watched the scouts ahead of them, seeing the incessant sweeping of heads side to side as they kept watch on the path ahead, self consciously alert in the knowledge that their general was watching them from behind.

Xena, of course, was just as aware of their surroundings, as she relaxed there in her saddle, apparently lost in thought, to all intents and purposes leaving the guarding to the guards.

But.

As Gabrielle watched her from the corner of one eye, she saw Xena’s head lift, and one hand come up to push her hood back and expose her ears to the wind, and a moment later the tall body straightened in the saddle.

She put her fingers into her mouth and let out two short, sharp whistles, then swung her hand over and pointed at the right hand side of the trail as heads turned her way.

Three of the scouts turned and headed in that direction and after a moment more, Xena joined them with Gabrielle trotting at her heels.

“What is it?” She asked the warrior as she came up next to her.

“Two men, walking horses, trying to keep hidden.” Xena supplied placidly. “With crossbows.”

“Black boots or brown?”

Xena chuckled. She slowed Argo's pace , the mare shaking her head in irritation to move the snow out of her eyes. They got to the edge of the trees as the scouts came out from between them, with two figures ahead of them with their hands up.

They stumbled on the frosty ground as they came up in front of them, blinking through the falling snow.

"Found these two, genr'l." The older scout said, a tall man with a thick russet beard.

"Thanks Tak." Xena leaned on her saddlebow. "Hi."

The men looked at her uncertainly. "You ain't gonna shoot us?"

"Do you want me to?" Xena asked in a very mild tone. "I don't mind shooting people, especially if they ask nicely, but I'd rather do it if they really deserved it."

The man shaded his eyes and looked up at her. "Who are ya?"

"Since I have the sword, and the guys with the arrows maybe I get to ask that first." The warrior replied. "Who are you, and where are you heading?"

The army had paused, and two of the cavalry squads had come up and now surrounded them in a tight, disciplined circle.

The two strangers looked around them then the first one shrugged. ""Our town was burned out. We got free of the bastards who did it." He said. "Heading out to where them kind don't run."

"We're brothers." The other one offered. "Denas and I'm Tulen."

"Hm." Xena regarded them. "Who did it?"

"Pinu's men. All had his flag." Denas said. "Took everyone they got their hands on and left nothing but burned out wrecks. We were hunting." He indicated his companion. "So we just took off."

"Not go after them?" Xena asked. "Just let them take your family?"

Denas shook his head. "Not like that. We didn't have no one but us, we just came there, moon or so back." He didn't seem either embarrassed or ashamed of having run. "We brought our hunting there, traded for stuff."

True? Xena studied the two of them intently. They had the rough hide clothing of hunters, and she could see at least one of them had a trap hanging from his belt. They were of the same height, and neither had Thracian accents. "Pass is two days walk that way." She indicated the road behind them.

Denas touched his head in acknowledgement. "Ah thank ye." He said, then paused. "I can ask you your name now, ma'am?"

Gabrielle chuckled, and gave her soulmate a poke.

"Sure." The warrior said. "My name is Xena." She half turned. "This is my partner, Gabrielle."

She turned back, to find both men staring at her open mouthed. In pure, human reflex, she glanced down at herself, but nothing seemed awry, so she looked back at the men. "What?"

"You're Xena?" Denas got out. "The famous one?"

Xena turned and looked at her partner, who had her cloak up covering her face ostensibly against the snow – though the intense sparkling of her eyes and the faint shaking of her shoulders gave lie to that.

She cleared her throat. "Yes." She responded. "That's me."

"He's got a price on you." Tulen spoke up at last. "Pinu does. Said anyone brought you in he'd give ten thousand dinar to."

Both of Xena's eyebrows shot up. "Huh." She said. "Maybe I should go turn myself in. That's a lot of coin."

"But live, mind ya." Denas nodded. "Wants to sell ya, I think." He looked around. "Don't think he knows you bring a army with ya."

"Xena's full of little surprises like that." Gabrielle said. "Is he collecting slaves? We heard that."

The man nodded. "Port city's spreading out. Taking over towns round those parts, and putting the people to work for im. Or sell em. Specially women."

"Nice." Xena grunted.

"Weather's hard. Least they get them fed." Tulen told her. "Been hard times these parts. Lot of kids dying off. Old people. Now this?" He indicated the snow. "Some went to the port without being taken."

Well. Gabrielle exhaled. They had a point, in a twisted, hard, graceless kind of way. She remembered, both in her childhood and in her travels with Xena times when she'd gotten just so tired, and so hungry that the thought of just not having to struggle on had been enticing.

"So some considered them rescuers?" Xena asked, leaning forward a little

"Some like." Tulen agreed. "Those like us, who live off the catch, we just move on."

Able to provision themselves. Gabrielle nodded in understanding. It was how she and Xena had lived, sometimes. Just on what they could catch or gather, but it was a skill. Her ability to find herbs and mushrooms and tubers was a skill.

Xena's trapping was a skill, and not everyone could do it. "I get it." Gabrielle said. "You'll be glad to know things are a little better west of here. You can stop in Amphipolis if you want, the inn's always looking to trade or buy catch."

"Amphipolis." Denas said. "Was a small town last time I been through the pass."

"It's grown." The bard told him, with a faint smile. "Kind of like the port city has. Only we don't collect people to sell off."

Denas touched his head. "Thanks for the word." He said. "Be careful now. Don't get yourselfs in trouble with Pinu. He's a rough bit o work."

"Thanks." Xena said. "I've been known to be a little rough bit of work on occasion myself." She straightened up in the saddle. "Good travel." She guided Argo around them and started back for the trail, with Gabrielle moving beside her. "Eh."

"Eh." The bard mirrored the grunt. "Well, hon, at least they want you alive."

"You could turn me over, collect the bounty, then get out of the way while I kill them all." Her partner mused thoughtfully. "Havne't we tried that before?"

"A couple times." Gabrielle agreed. "I got a sack of gold nuggets for you that one time. But we gave them all to that sheep farming family who'd just lost their flock, remember?"

"Yeah."

"I don't want to hand you over anyway this time it'll freak out the army."

Xena chuckled wryly. "I used that when I got those Amazons out during the war. When they were holding them as bait for me?" She let out a whistle and the army was moving, leaving the two scavengers behind. "Hope they don't follow us."

Gabrielle looked behind her, watching the two men walking stolidly through the snow in the other direction. They showed no further interest in the army, and appeared to be moving relatively quickly away.

But you never knew, with people. The thought of all those dinars, after all could overrun good sense sometimes.

She faced forward. "Me too. We don't need any more complications."

**

Cait put her back to the tree they were sheltered behind and wrapped her cloak more tightly around her. "Bother."

Nala was busy making a small fire, sitting crosslegged next to her in front of a piece of cleared, cold earth with a mound of dried sticks on it. "We can heat up some water at least."

"Yes, I've got some herbs." Cait agreed. "And a packet of dried meat." She fished a hammered metal cup out of her gear and filled it with snow, then set it aside to wait as she went back for the venison.

It was early dusk. The dense grove was a close as they could find to shelter, and she'd rigged up a roof for them out of their hammocks to keep the still falling snow off their heads.

The flakes, though, had gone from soft and a little wet, to frosty and crystal and Cait could feel the temperature dropping. Her breath was now readily visible as she sat there sorting the jerky out as the fire caught and the light turned from a burnished silver gray to copper.

The trees blocked the wind, though, and the makeshift roof trapped the warmth and as the fire caught the sting of the cold eased. Cait rubbed her hands together and studied their dinner, reaching up to scratch the bridge of her nose. "I'd be glad to go out and get a rabbit or something."

Nala eyed her. "You know how to cook it?"

"I know how to skin it." Cait grinned briefly. "And we can probably put bits of it on some sticks and whatnot. I don't think this venison's going to be enough."

"Let me see what I got." Nala sat back and pulled her pack over, untying it and opening the top. "It's a lot easier to be out in the wild when it's warm."

"Yes." Cait said. "There's usually stuff around then, nuts and berries and so on. In this cold.." She glanced around. "Not even sure I can find a rabbit."

"Everything's undercover." Nala pulled out a wrapped packet. "I have some travel bread." She opened the packet and handed Cait two pieces of the flat substance. "And two hunks of cheese."

"That'll do." Cait took one of the pieces and handed over half the jerky. "By tomorrow we'll be back near the river, and if it hasn't frozen all up we can get some fish."

"Yep." Nala got out her own metal cup and they set the snow filled mugs up against the fire to melt the snow to water and heat it. She settled back to wait, wrapping a bit of her bread around some cheese and jerky and biting into it.

Cait did likewise, her head slowly turning from side to side as she watched the area around them, and let her ears cup the cold air. There was nothing stirring that she could detect, one positive of the cold being the clarity it brought to sound.

It was almost dark, and as the light faded completely the snow tapered off and overhead the sky cleared a little, tiny patches of stars emerging briefly to view.

Cait felt, in her heart, a sense of deep relief to be heading back. She was already casting her mind ahead, measuring the distance they could make once it was light again and how long it would be before they arrived back in Amphipolis.

Xena would, she was sure, head out at once to take care of this nasty bit of goods. She reached over to pour a handful of herbs in each cup and as she drew her hand back she caught a sound on the breeze that made her sit up straight. "Hello."

"What?" Nala's hand went to her knife. "Something coming?"

“Yes.” Cait put her food down and stood up, drawing her sword out and stepping to one side of the fire to clear it’s glare from her eyes. “Stop.” She called out. “Stay where you are.”

Nala got up and lifted up her crossbow, cocking it and slipping a bolt into place. She moved to the other side of the fire and brought it to bear, blinking quickly to get her vision to clear. “Do what she says.”

Slowly the shadows resolved into a moving figure, who paused just at the edge of the firelight, hands held up. “I mean no harm.” It’s voice echoed softly, low and male, and with a slight harshness that grated on the ear.

He took another step forward, and they could see him more clearly. “Just another traveler looking for some company.” He said. “And news of the road.”

Cait let her sword rest on her shoulder. The man was of medium height, with gray hair and gray eyes and dark clothing and cloak. He, too, had a crossbow but it was slung over his shoulder, unstrung.

Her ears told her he was alone. “All right then.” Cait said. “What’s your name?”

“And where are you bound?” Nala added.

“Brunius.” The man came forward, letting his hands fall to his side. “And where I’m bound? That all depends.”

**

“It’s clearing.” Gabrielle said as she ducked under the rigged roof of their shelter. “I think the weather’s going to stop for a while.”

“Good.” Xena was standing near the folding worktable, inhaling the contents of a bowl of stew. “Glad we waited to stop as late as we did.”

Gabrielle gave her a pat on the side as she moved past and retrieved her own bowl. “Glad you found this slope we could camp on that meant we didn’t have to dig out snow up to our hips.”

The stew was good. Gabrielle spooned up a mouthful of it. Prepared before they’d left Amphipolis, a carefully dehydrated base with dried meats and tubers, and some fruits, packed in a sack that would be emptied into a pot and water added.

That and travel bread, and some toasted, boiled grains and it was a hot and filling meal to men and women who had been marching in cold weather all day. It would be put on to warm as soon as camp was broken, and if the hunters were lucky their catch added to it.

They had a moon’s worth with them. It would be stretched with any catch, and Gabrielle also knew if they happened upon a free running river, she would also be treated to fish once in a while.

Not so different from what she and Xena had lived on when they’d traveled. She’d had her share of nuts and baked tubers, and the chewy, tough smoked venison that was one of her beloved partners few culinary specialties.

That and the travel bars. Gabrielle chewed the soup plumped version of this in her stew in some contentment. She stood next to Xena in silence, both of them just sharing the small protected space together as they ate, both of them still fully dressed and in their cloaks in deference to the chill air.

Xena set her bowl down and went to the space she’d cleared for a fire, taking the stack of wood some of the army had left there for them and arranging it to her satisfaction. She’d just gotten moss stuffed in the center of it when boots crunching on the snow outside made them both look up.

Redder stopped and ducked his head before he came just inside the makeshift roof. “Xena, scouts came back. They found a village nearby, burned out.”

“Raiders?” Gabrielle guessed.

“Hard t’say.” Redder said. “Nothing left of it, but scouts said they ddn’t see no bones or suchlike. Seems abandoned.”’

Xena finished striking sparks into the moss and blew gently to get the fire started. Then she stood up and tucked her flint and steel back in her belt pouch. "Abandoned."

"Seems like." The troop captain agreed.

"Let me go take a look." The warrior pulled her gloves back on. "Be right back." She motioned the soldier to precede her then they disappeared into the darkness outside.

Gabrielle dragged one of the folding stools that comprised the sparse furniture over to the fire and sat down on it, combining warming herself with a tidying of the wood as she built up the fire securely, stacking it so it would last the night.

The warmth felt good against her skin and she stretched her boots out towards it, watching the drying moisture glisten a little on the waterproof hide.

It had been a long day, but she felt fine after it, even the riding hadn't caused her the usual backache. Now that they had stopped, and she had a fire going, and a bowl of stew, she was ready to let the stresses of the ride ease and get some rest.

It felt different, now that they were in Thrace. She herself had never been this far into the neighboring lands so there was that little tingle of the unknown, where every step took her further into a place she'd never seen before.

There was something deep in her that still responded to that. That internal wanderer who had been sleeping for a good long while now, waking up to the knowledge of every step being a new experience.

It made her shed her Amazon role. Gabrielle felt lighter for that. She'd left the running of the group of Amazons to Solari, as she felt the long hours of traveling allowing her the silence of her own mind to start exploring again.

That's where the stories lived, after all. In that silence. When she had the time to let images and ideas start to bubble up as she endured the candlemark after candlemark of travel.

She folded her hands and looked into the flames, already feeling that little buzz of what ifs, and it made her smile.

Another set of crunching boots, and she looked up to see Solari approaching. "Hey." She waved the Amazon forward. "C'mon in."

"Boh." Solari entered and took a seat on the other folding stool. "We're trading off with the fuzzys watching .. uh…"

"Ares?" Gabrielle suggested. "It's okay to use his name."

"Yeah." Solari agreed. "It freaks the fuzzies out a little so we just kinda talk around that. Anyway, we shared out what we had for dinner, and gave him a wineskin."

"Good." Gabrielle said. "I'll go over and make sure he's okay in a bit. Xe just went out to look at a burned out village they found."

"We heard." Solari said. "We found some old hunters campfires up the ridge there. Probably part of it." She rubbed her hands in the warmth. "We made good time today huh?"

"We did." Her queen confirmed. "Xe figures we'll be coming past Philippi tomorrow night or early morning. We'll catch up with Bennu and Cait and then head for the port city."

Solari nodded. "We heard about the price on Big X's head. Freaky."

"Weird." Gabrielle said. "It's as if that guy doesn't realize just how much trouble he'll be in if someone actually delivers Xena to him. We halfway wondered if that wasn't a reasonable plan, but we've done that gig before and frankly I'd rather use the army and not put her in a trap if I don't have to."

They were both briefly silent, then Gabrielle stood up. "Let's go see what they found." She picked up her staff and pulled her hood up over her head. "You never know."

“Could be trouble.” Solari agreed, wrapping her cloak around her as she followed her queen out. “Happens sometimes with you all yeah?”

“Oh yeah.”

**

Xena motioned the two torchbearers forward and she walked carefully in a circle, surveying the rough, icy ground. The snow was draped over what was left of several collapsed huts and she lifted one up to look underneath.

The burned out ruin was crumbling to pieces. She broke off a bit of the charred wood and stepped closer to the torch, studying its structure. “Been like this a while.”

Redder nodded. “Seems like a season, maybe. Four moons or so.” He held up a few bits of leather. “Just scraps left over there, what’s left of fence, nothing else. Not even no buckets or nothing.”

“So they took everything with them.” Xena kicked over a few more bits of wood. “They evacuated, they weren’t burned out.” She roamed around what was left of the town, sorting through the debris.

There had been a barn, badly made but still partially intact. Xena pushed the door open and stuck her head inside, blinking a little to adjust her eyes to the gloom. Against one wall was the remains of a stall, and there was still a bit of soggy, dirty hay on the ground.

Obeying some internal instinct, Xena went inside, pausing and going quiet, listening to the sounds in the air around her.

She could still smell, a little, the scent of the animals that had been housed here, goats and sheep, mostly, but a bit of horse lingered as well.

She walked over to the back corner, feeling her skin prickle. “Redder.” She called. “Bring the torch in here willya?”

A breath later, the soldier came inside, the torch throwing immediate, orange highlights over everything. “Genr’l?”

“Bring it here.” Xena looked down between her boots, and as he came over, the light spilled over her shoulder to disclose a set of dusty, sooty bones, scattered among the stalks of dirty straw.

“Ah.” Redder said. “So there was some left? A goat maybe.”

“No.” Xena knelt and put her gloved hand down, sorting through the debris. Her long fingers curled around something and lifted it into the light, a round skull that just fit in her grip. “No goat.”

“Oh.” The soldier exhaled. “A little one, is it?”

“Toddler, barely.” Xena looked around. “Get me a sack or something. We’ll give her a burial.”

Redder lodged his torch in a corner of the wrecked stall and went outside, leaving Xena there with the straw and the bones.

The little head made her feel sad. Here was a child who was left behind, for unknown reasons. Were it’s parents dead?

Or did they just leave it, not wanting to take care of a small child on the road?

She sorted through the straw, gathering the bones together. They were relatively intact, so at least the child hadn’t suffered the ravages of some animal. Probably had just died in it’s sleep, in the cold.

Or of hunger.

Xena’s fingers touched something that wasn’t straw and wasn’t human remains. She pulled on it, and wiggled it a little, shifting her boots when she found she was standing on an end. A moment later and she was moving a piece of parchment into the light, just in time for her to look up and find Gabrielle entering and looking back at her.

“Redder told me what you found.” Gabrielle said, without preamble. She held up a bit of sack from the provision wagons and came over to where her partner was standing. “He said it was a baby?”

Xena lifted her other hand with the skull in it and handed it over. “Two year old, probably.” She turned her attention to the parchment. “Found this too.”

“Poor little thing.” Gabrielle said, her tone deep with regret. “All alone here?”

“Yeah.” Xena touched her arm. “Listen to this.” She tilted the parchment closer to the torch. “They said we go to a better life.” She said. “But I think they lying. Want us for slaves, better to leave my little one here, to the fates.”

“Ugh.” Gabrielle exhaled. “How could she think that, Xena? That it.. “ She paused and stopped talking, taking the parchment and reading the rest of it.

Xena remained quiet, taking the bag and collecting the bones in silence.

The echoes of the past between them were loud enough.

Gabrielle rolled up the parchment and leaned over, giving her partner a kiss on the head. “Let’s go give her a place.” She waited for Xena to stand, then removed the torch and carried it with her as they left the barn.

The soldiers were standing outside waiting for them standing respectfully as the two walked over and joined them. “Nothing else much here, genr’l.” Redder said.

“No. Found a note in there, looks like we were right about them leaving voluntarily.” Xena said, briefly. “But not all of them were fooled by an offer of a better life.”

They walked back to their camp and when there they split up to different shelters. Xena and Gabrielle kept walking though until they got to the top of the ridge. They walked along until they found a small break in the trees, where a cold, fresh wind blew through and they could look out over the land and see the patchy stars.

Then Xena knelt and picked up a long, narrow rock, and started patiently digging in the cold ground with it.

Gabrielle leaned back against the nearest tree and studied the ground ahead of them. The slope went down to the road, just barely seen as a faint irregularity in the coating of snow. The air held a frigid touch now and she blinked a few times, as the cold bothered her eyes.

Then she turned her head and watched Xena working at the earth. “We both understand that choice she made.” She said, after a moment.

“We do.” Xena agreed in quiet tone. “But right now my guts hurt on that kid’s behalf.”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle murmured. “Me too.”

The ground was hard, and cold, but not totally frozen yet and Xena was able to gouge out a reasonable hollow fairly quickly. “Okay.”

Gabrielle came over and gently put the bag into the hollow, then she helped Xena fill it in, covering the bag and it’s sad contents completely.

They were so absorbed they only barely heard the bootsteps coming up behind them, turning at the last minute to find Ares there, swathed in his cloak.

“What are you doing?” The God of War asked, with an actual note of curiousity in his tone.

“Giving some bones we found a decent burial.” Gabrielle said, standing up and dusting her gloved hands off

Ares looked at her, then at the ground, where Xena was wrestling a large stone into place over the spot. “Why?”

“Just a show of respect.” Xena regarded her handiwork then stood up. “We found a little baby who died in the village over there. Only thing left.”

Ares folded his arms over his chest. “Did you know them?”

“No.” Xena brushed her gloves off. “Let’s get back to camp.”

“So you found some bones someplace and you decided to bury them to show respect to some dead thing you didn’t know?” Ares said, in a tone of disbelief.

“Yes.” Gabrielle said.

“You morts are weird.” The God of War shook his head as they walked past him and back into the tree line. “Why would you do that?”

“Because we’re mortals.” Gabrielle answered, as she tucked her hand inside Xena’s elbow. “We value life, and we both know what it’s like to lose it.”

Xena covered her hand with her own, a quietly pensive look on her face.

“Well la te dah.” Ares followed them, still shaking his head.

**

Brunius settled down opposite them next to the fire and laid his crossbow and quiver of bolts down. “I’m looking for someone.” He told them, without being prompted. “Someone who’s done a powerful lot of damage.”

Cait handed him a cup of herbal tea. He accepted it, and handed over a packet of smoked fish and travel bread. “Who is the someone, can we ask” She said. “I’ve been around long enough to know damage can depend on whos’ talking about it.”

Brunius took a sip of the tea, then toasted her with the cup. “Tis true.” He said. “But though I can’t reveal who my target is, be at ease. It’s surely no one that you know.”

“Mm.” Cait made a non committal sound.

“You’d be surprised.” Nala told him with a wry smile. “We live in the mountains above Amphipolis.”

He didn’t react to that. “Do you?” He said. “I have heard that is a good place, with a strong defense.” He responded. “My friends who have been there like it.”

“They’re good neighbors.” Nala said. “Our tribe moved there a season ago.”

Brunius nodded. “Then you know, of course, Xena.”

“Of course.” Nala said. “She’s not your target, is she?”

“Because if she is, I’m afraid we’re not going to get along.” Cait added.

But he was already shaking his head. “For sure not. I have the best of respect for Xena of Amphipolis. We have many goals in common, though we are not acquainted.”

Cait let out a soundless sigh of relief. “Glad to hear that. “

“Yeah, it’s too cold to fight right now.” Nala agreed. “Xena’s partner, Gabrielle is our queen.”

“The great bard.” Now Brunius smiled easily. “You know, I was fortunate enough to see her telling stories in the most unusual of places. She is a brave woman.”

Now both Amazons relaxed. “She’s got a pile of guts. No doubt.” Nala handed over some of her jerky to him. “Are you headed in that direction?”

“No.” Brunius said. “My work takes me south. And you?”

“North, then west. We’re going home.” Cait said. “But it’s nice to share a fire with someone even if you’re going different ways.”

Brunius smiled at her. He had curiously flat, black tinged eyes and an ageless face. "It has been one of my greatest pleasures on this journey, meeting fellow travelers." He toasted her again with his tea. "Especially those who have good crushed mint with them, and know how to brew a good cup."

Cait and Nala lifted their cups in return, and they fell silent, settling down to share their conjoined supplies, as the fire warmed them.

**

For the moment the weather was holding. The army was moving faster, as the snow packed down and turned to powder in the cold air and they were already deep inside Thrace.

Ares had abandoned his nest in the cart and was riding at Xena's side, invisible to everyone but her and Gabrielle, who was on her partner's other side.

'This is boring."

Xena eyed her somewhat unwelcome companion. "It's tough to be mortal sometimes. We can't just snap our fingers and go somewhere."

"I'm starting to realize that." Ares said.

"Sorry about that. It's a little too cold for me to be talking for candlemarks." Gabrielle spoke up. "Or I'd entertain you both with a story."

Xena reached over and patted her soulmate's knee. "Want a honeyball?"

"Yes. You have some??"

The warrior fished in her saddlebag and handed over a small sack. "They had them at the market. I got a couple bags."

Gabrielle fished one out and handed the sack back, popping it into her mouth, glad of the moisture it generated against the cold, dry air she'd been sucking in.

"What is that?" Ares asked.

Xena handed him the sack. "Help yourself."

The God of War curiously stuck his hand in and drew out one of the candies. He sniffed it gingerly then put it in his mouth, sucking at it a moment. "Okay." He said. "What is it?" He handed Xena back the bag. "It's sweet."

"It's made from honey." Xena told him. "Which is something that bees create to feed their babies."

"Ah huh." Ares mouthed the candy. "So how do you get it?"

"We steal it."

"Nice."

"We don't have the option to have slaves from Elysia bring us ambrosia." Gabrielle commented. "So we have to just do what we can to feed ourselves."

Ares pondered that for a few minutes. "You could have slaves." He finally said. "I saw those rocks up at your pad."

"Not really our style." Xena responded shortly. "I'll settle for troops who obey me because I know what the Hades I'm doing and because I pay and support them."

Gabrielle nodded. "It's taken me seasons and seasons to get used to the Amazons wanting to bring my pots and pans up to my quarters."

"They must think you're a crackpot." Ares responded, though in a relatively mild tone.

The bard smiled. "Yeah, some of them do. But they offer anyway."

They came up over a windswept ridge and started down the other side. “So.” Ares said, after a while of silence. “The old lady told me you said you were going to tell everyone not to believe in us.” He looked at Gabrielle. “Did ja?”

“No.” Gabrielle answered. “I told her I’d do that if she laid a finger on either Xena or our little girl. She didn’t.”

Ares eyed her. “She really doesn’t like mortals.”

“She doesn’t like mortals sleeping with her family.” Xena said, dryly. “I don’t think she cares one way or another about mortals as long as enough of them stick around in Elysia to draw her bath and bring the platters in.”

“Don’t knock it till ya try it, blue eyes.” The God of War advised her. “And you had your chance.”

Xena heard a whistle from the scouts. She half stood in her stirrups, seeing one of them riding back to meet her. “Don’t want another chance thanks.” She squeezed her knees into Argo’s sides. “C’mon girl. Let’s go see what’s going on.”

“Did she just call me a girl?” Ares asked Gabrielle.

“No she was talking to Argo.” The bard responded. “Her horse.”

They watched the scout pull up next to Xena and talk to her, pointing over his shoulder. Xena lifted both hands up then let them fall, then she waved the army on before she trotted back over to where they were waiting.

“Trouble?”

“River ford.” Xena replied. “Not quite frozen, so we’re gonna get wet.”

“Ugh.”

Xena shrugged again. “Is what it is.” She pulled up her cloak and tucked it around her shoulders. “Hopefully it’s not too deep.”

It was deep, and the horses ended up swimming through chunks of ice and black, chill water that penetrated their clothes and sent their legs numb almost immediately. Gabrielle grimaced as a slushy piece of ice bumped her knee, and she felt Iolaus struggling under her.

Ares horse was swimming along side her, and the God of War seemed a little disconcerted about the wet, the cold and the water now coming up over his boot tops. “Major suckage here.”

“Yeah, surprised they didn’t bridge this.” Gabrielle agreed. “Oh, wait, maybe they did.” She pointed at a long, low rock base just upstream, crumbled into the water. “Looks like it was destroyed.”

There wasn’t much current, the ice was blocking a good portion of it, and Gabrielle felt Iolaus lurch then angle forward as his hooves found purchase. “Ah, here we go.”

“You okay, Gab?” Xena called over from the other side of her.

“Yeah, hit the slope.” Her partner answered, as the vanguard came up out of the river, slipping and sliding on the icy ground. “Watch out.”

Xena did better. She was off Argo’s back in an instant, and she grabbed both her reins and Iolaus’s as they approached the shore, ignoring the ice cold water as it drenched her, surging through the churning liquid as she started up the slope.

“Thanks honey.” Gabrielle looked fondly at her. “You’re going to end up with one whopper of a cold though. I just know it.”

“Yeah yeah.” Xena plowed stolidly forward, guiding the horses up the easiest part of the bank and onto sure footing. “Better than then you ending up on your ass in the mud under that damn stallion.”

Ares and his horse followed Iolaus without comment, the animal having no problem negotiating the ice with faintly blue tinged flares around his hooves.

They had just cleared the edge of the river when the sound of hoofbeats heading their way made the steady slog turn into a more vigorous motion. Xena vaulted up onto Argos back as the mare shook herself vigorously, stamping her hooves to rid them of mud.

The vanguard formed up and moved through the trees back up to the road, and when they got to the edge of it they could see a wagon barreling towards them, with a team of four ahead of it.

Three of the soldiers immediately headed towards it, and two others split to either side of the road to try and get an angle on the horses.

"No driver." Xena commented. "Something must have scared those horses."

They moved out towards the road just as the soldiers got to the wagon, turning to run along side the terrified animals. The nearest man got up in his stirrups and reached out, grabbing for the lead horses's traces.

A scream came from the right hand side of the road. Xena turned around in her saddle and looked, then sent Argo galloping towards the sound, and a moment later Gabrielle followed as they spotted a woman running out of the tree line.

"Well well. Maybe things are getting a little more interesting." Ares said, as he sent his horse after her. "Maybe I'll even get lucky and get out of this stinking cold mud pit."

The soldiers got the wagon to a stop as the woman saw the riders heading her way and reversed course. She was in a cloak, but was barefoot and only got a short way before Argo caught up with her.

"Hold on." Xena surged past her then pulled Argo to a halt and held a hand up. "No one's gonna hurt you."

The woman jerked to a halt and stared at her, panting. "Who are you!?" She yelped, after a moment. "Who? You're a woman!"

Gabrielle arrived as she said it, and jumped off Iolaus. "Take it easy." She said. "This is Xena, and my name is Gabrielle. We won't hurt you." She moved towards the woman slowly, her hands outstretched. "Its okay."

Xena also dismounted. The woman looked from one to the other, and relaxed a little, then she looked back at the wagon. "There's children in there."

"Aye, genr'l." One of the scouts confirmed. "Three little ones."

"Yours?" Xena asked.

"No." The woman answered, catching her breath. "The gods must have led me to you. We were taken captive by some men. They were taking us to be sold." She was tall, almost as tall as Xena, and had a brown hair and eyes. She looked bedraggled, and she was rubbing her wrists, which were red and bleeding. "I got away. Something got them all het up. They ran off to find something, then came and took everyone and bolted. I was behind a tree."

"Kent. Break the army for some food and rest." Xena told the captain that had come up next to her. "We'll need to send escorts with the wagon."

"Genr'l." The man touched his head and started back towards the river, letting out whistles.

"Where did you come from?" Gabrielle asked gently. "From Thrace? Or further away?" She indicated the group. "We're from Amphipolis."

The woman nodded. "Realized that when you said who you were." She said. "Two of the women with us, they knew you."

"Ah hah." Ares said, getting down. "Ask her what they looked like."

Gabrielle rolled her head to one side and looked at him then she looked back at the woman, but to her surprise found the woman looking right at the God of War. "Um."

Ares realized it at the same moment, and his lips twitched.

“They were from far off.” The woman answered. “They had red hair, one straight, and one a little curly.. or at least it was. They cut it off her.”

“Huh.” Xena grunted under her breath. “What else?”

The woman’s attention switched to her. “They were tall, as I am. They had very white skin, it was strange, since they said they came from the country.” She turned back and started a little. “Where did that man go?”

Ares was standing there, glowering, a distinct, annoyed crease in the skin of his forehead. Xena made a sign with her fingers and dropped Argo’s reins, ducking past the mare and heading for the milling troops.

“He went to get something.” Gabrielle distracted the woman. “What’s your name?”

“Clarabell.” The woman answered at once. “My home was in Tharosa. It’s a small town really small.” She said. “Its just the other side of the mountain pass to the west.”

“Yes we’ve been there.” Gabrielle murmured. “So they just came in and took you?”

Clarabell looked, momentarily, abashed. “Not.. well.” She glanced around. “Its been hard, this year.” She admitted. “So these people came, and wanted to know if we had anything to sell or trade. Said they were from Thrace.”

“And all you had was people?”

“They said they’d teach us a trade, you see.” Clarabell said. “I have none. I can’t even sew. I thought it maybe would give me a chance – there are no men of marrying age in the village no more.”

Well. “It’s hard.” Gabrielle murmured.

“Then we were took to their camp and I saw the children and I knew.” The woman said. “And the others. They put some herbs or something in them, so’s they didn’t care.”

“And you?”

“And me.” Clarabell agreed, simply. “But they ran low, got more than they thought they would so they gave the herbs to the men, who would have fought them.”

Xena came back over. “I’m sending some squads out to search the area. Let’s see if we can find these guys.” She said. “You stay with that wagon. Some of my men’ll get you back across the pass and home. “ She paused to study the woman. “Or if you want, they’ll take you to Amphipolis.”

“I can take care of those children.” Clarabell said, immediately. “Maybe get some work there.”

Gabrielle took her arm. “Let’s go get you settled.” She headed off towards the captured wagon, leaving Xena and Ares behind.

Xena looked at him.

“Things are getting crazy.” Ares answered the unspoken question. “We gotta move. Get to them before someone else figures it out.

“Yeah.” Xena exhaled. “You think that was them?”

Ares shrugged and lifted his hands. “I wish I knew.” He said, in an uncommonly serious tone. “When we dropped out of Mount Olympus we lost.. “He paused. “A lot.”

“But youre not mortal.” Xena glanced past him, as she saw three different squads ride off in a search pattern. “Right?”

“Right.” Ares said. “As in, if you poke me with that thing on your back it wont do a damn thing this time.”

Xena took hold of Argo's reins. "But those arrows can."

He nodded. "And I can't.. affect anything." He made snapping motions of his fingers "It's fading. That woman could see me, and I didn't want her to."

They stared at each other intently. "Would they reveal themselves, Ares? How would they figure it out if they didn't?"

His face twitched. "Remember what I said about them after that whole mortality thing? After daddy sent them downstairs?"

Xena's eyes shifted off him and went a little unfocused. "You said a lot of things." She said, then paused. "You said you wanted to see them get raped." She looked up at him. "Is that it?"

"It's.. " Ares looked uncomfortable. "Like those Hestian weirdos."

Xena felt an equally uncomfortable stab of enlightenment. "They're virgins."

"Told you they were idiots." Ares tried for a little bravado.

A gust of wind rattled past, stirring the drying ends of Xena's hair and blowing her wet clothing against her body, but she scarcely felt it as her mind tumbled over a suddenly new level of understanding.

She let a long, aggrieved breath. "So they think you brought this down on them?"

He shrugged.

"Is that why women are becoming targets?" Xena asked suddenly. "As slaves, rapes, all that?"

Ares shrugged again.

The warrior exhaled again and put her hands on her hips. "Then we're gonna have to do this the hard way. My reputation's not worth a leaf to those guys, and it makes sense why they put a price on my head."

Ares blinked at her.

"Gabrielle wondered, why they'd poke me. It's because they don't care." Xena clarified for him. "That's what Athena and Artemis being mortal has done."

"Sure, maybe." Ares said. "But that doesn't change what you are, sweetcakes. Just because they don't remember it." He glanced around. "You're not tied into all of this. You got a free ride."

Xena really had no idea what he meant by that. But she wasn't sure it mattered. She pulled herself up on Argos back and pulled her gloves on, the cold making her hands almost painful. "Lets find them." She concluded. "Take it from there."

Gabrielle was jogging back towards a bundle of something stuffed under one arm. With a wry look, Xena got back down off her horse and pulled her gloves back off.

"Now what?" Ares had gotten back on his large, dark beast, who had been nibbling at the dried, dead branches.

Xena just unfastened her cloak and draped it over her saddle, yanking at the ties on the overtunic she was wearing over her leathers.

"Here." Gabrielle handed over the dry clothes to her. "You can bitch at me later. I'd really rather not have you in a raving fever tonight." She took hold of Iolaus' reins and scrambled onto his back. "They were even drugging those kids, Xe. They're all in a fog."

Jessan rode up. "Hey guys." He glanced over his shoulder at the wagon. "Our place is closer. Should we take them there? Those bitty kids don't' look so good."

Xena removed her armor and then got her leathers off, ignoring the stares around her. She put the dry stuff on, almost closing her eyes against the animal comfort as the cloth warmed her skin. "Yeah." She said, as she pulled a fresh set of leathers on and laced them. "That's a good idea, Jess. Thanks."

"Shouldn't these guys be out hunting for those missing chicks?" Ares asked, pointedly.

'They will be." Xena swung back up onto Argo's back. "We all will be."

Far off, and on the wind, they suddenly heard yelling.

"Or maybe we won't." Gabrielle said, as they started towards the sound.

**

The first of Xena's soldiers thundered up and over the ridge, starting down the opposite side as a large melee came into view. There was a thick patch of forest and in between the trees a crowd of people were fighting each other, the ring of swords audible on the chill air.

The vast majority of them were soldiers, dressed in half armor and wearing leather overlays with a half moon bisected with a dagger on them.

They were attacking and surrounding a smaller group of men, with their backs to the trees, armed with crossbows and spears fighting them off.

Xena threaded her way through the galloping horses, moving up into the lead group as they powered towards the battle. She drew her sword from it's sheath and gripped her knees a bit tighter, smiling a little as one of the attackers spotted them coming.

There were probably two score of the attackers, and Xena's vanguard had a similar number, except hers included a dozen forest dwellers and a handful of Amazons as well as herself, and Gabrielle and, at her right elbow, the God of War.

It made a pretty impressive force, and the liveried soldiers broke off their attack and wheeled to meet them instead, as a cheer rose from the small group they'd been pounding on.

"Stay clear!" The nearest of the attackers yelled out. "You don't know who you're riding down on!"

"Likewise!" Redder hollered back. "Better run, ya bastards, or you'll be finding out!"

Gabrielle got her staff out from it's holders and brought it around in front of her, tucking it under one arm as she kept her other hand on Iolaus's reins. She could see the enemy forming up to meet their attack and she spared herself a single, tingling moment to enjoy that singular sense of savage excitement that came with riding a charge.

Nothing else like it, really. The snorting of the horses, and the stream of warm breath rising over them. Fighters all around her getting weapons out and ready and her, with her own chosen one couched like a lance at her side.

Her Amazons let out a yell behind her, and Xena echoed it, with Jessan's roar coming a moment later.

Xena was in the lead now, and she released the reins as the other army surged into a gallop to meet them. She could see the leader and he came right at her, a mace in one hand and a curved scimitar in the other, swinging the mace at her as they closed.

She powered right through him, slamming the mace out of his hand and putting her sword right through his armor, her shoulder hitting his as she pulled him off his horse to the ground, freeing her blade as he fell.

He died with a shocked look on his face.

Then they were in battle, and it was a chaos of frothing horses and weapons with a counterpoint of arrows as the Amazons circled them and let loose, while the forest dwellers let out bass roars and started swiping soldiers out of their saddles.

Xena was right in the middle of it, making use of Argo's well trained moves and Gabrielle's watchful eye at her back as she carved her way through the enemy army. She engaged one of them, who had turned to find her next to him, and too close to get her sword into play she reversed it and slugged him with the hilts instead.

He rocked back off his saddle and fell off his horse, but recovered and came up and around, swinging his battle ax right at Xena's knees.

It was taken from his hands by Ares, who whacked him with it, smashing in the side of his head and sending him down for good. The God of War inspected the ax, then turned his big black beast around to find something else to hit with it, a look of pleased interest on his face. "This is more like it."

"Thanks." Xena called back, as she ducked a spear and then grabbed it, yanking the man holding it over ot her. "C'mere, moron."

One of the riders came at Ares and he ducked the man's sword, backhanding him with the ax and cutting his body in half through the leather armor he was wearing. The man fell sideways off his horse and on top of another fighter, who collapsed under him.

"Yeah, I like this." Ares headed over to a group of the enemy, who were surrounding two of Xena's men and had them unhorsed. He got behind one of them and whacked him in the head, then kicked the man's horse in the side and sent him plunging into his two comrades.

Xena's men let out a yell and fell on them, one of them lifting his sword in salute in Ares direction.

Ares chuckled and waved his ax at them, then he turned to find another target, when he realized one of the enemy horsemen was coming right at him.

Could see him.

He saw the man's broadsword coming around and he dropped the ax, reaching over his shoulder and clasping the hilt of the sword that had remained sheathed on his back. With an indrawn breath he drew it and met the man's blade, the impact shattering the lesser sword's metal into an explosion of shards.

The enemy soldier tried to pull up and swerve away but the next swipe of the sword of war took his head off, sending a shock wave of energy rippling through the trees.

His horse let out a raucous neigh.

The man's horse plunged off into the trees, terrified. Ares just laughed and turned his mount in a circle looking around him for another attack. To his disappointment, though, the battle was rapidly fading out.

Half the enemy were dead, and the other half started disengaging, backing off and stumbling away from the field, turning to run away through the trees, even the putative leader of the force, who bolted across the frosty ground only to be chased down by Xena.

"Heh." Ares flexed his hands in their gauntlets and inspected his sword, finding it glittering and clean. He sheathed it and then guided his horse in the direction of the now captive man, reeling in a circle with his cloak firmly gripped by Xena's hand.

Xena pulled the enemy soldier half up onto her saddle. "Who do you fight for?"

The man was panting hard, his face half obscured behind a roughly hammered helm. He was scrabbling with his hands to get at her and she kicked her boot loose of the stirrup and slammed it into his groin.

He coughed and squirmed, making a gagging noise.

Ares reached over and touched him, making him stiffen up in shocked pain. "Answer the lady." He suggested. "It'll hurt less."

"P.. pit.u." He gargled out. "Army o t' port city."

“Shocker.” Xena dropped him to the ground and looked around her. Gabrielle was calmly seated on her horse behind her, while the rest of her vanguard were chasing down their adversaries and killing them. “Let’s see what they were after.”

They sidestepped around the bodies and started for the smaller group, who were clustered in the trees, watching them approach.

A tall, bearded man stepped forward as they closed in and lifted his hand. “My thanks to you, good people.” He ventured as they dismounted. “You came upon us just in time.”

His companions were emerging from behind him, going to fallen comrades and unstringing crossbows, giving their erstwhile rescuers shy, sideways looks.

Xena still had her sword out and she wiped it clear on the edge of her cloak as she paused before the man. “Glad we got here.” She said. “Where do you folks come from?”

“Was what I was going to ask.” The man smiled briefly. “But since you’re our saviors I will answer first. My name is Marcos, and these people here and I live in Preto, just past the forest, on the border of the river.”

Three of the other men came up next to him, just watching Xena quietly.

“Why did they attack you?” Gabrielle asked.

“We were running from Pinu’s demands.” The man standing next o Marcos said. “Who are you?”

“So, they wanted tribute from you, and you decided to leave rather than pay it?” Xena said.

“Yes.” Marcos agreed. “In the wagons there, are all our possessions. The rest of the town stayed, and decided to give them what they asked for.”

Xena reviewed the group. There were perhaps a half dozen women, who were emerging slowly from behind the wagons that had been lined up to protect them. One of the oxen drawing them had been killed, and was sagged in it’s traces, and there were at least a half dozen bodies on the ground that were part of their group.

A dozen men remained, three of them injured.

“My advice.” Xena said, after a long moment. “Is for you to go home. I don’t know where you were thinking of running to, but it’s a long way past their reach from what I can see.”

Marcos looked uncomfortable.

“Unless the town won’t take you back now.” Gabrielle guessed, seeing the expressions facing them. “In this season, you’d have a hard time joining another town unless you wanted to go all the way up to Amphipolis.”

“And even then, unless you had some skills to offer, you might not find a place.” Xena added.

The group was moving closer now, gathering around them except for two men who were still kneeling next to one of their fallen comrades. “I’m not going back.” The second man stated. “Not and give up all I have, and my daughter as well.” He glanced behind them. “I’ll go on if the rest of you don’t.”

He faced Xena. “You’ll be wanting to go back where you came from as well. When Pinu finds out you fought his men, he’ll be after you quick.” He paused. “Whoever you are.”

“She’s Xena.” Gabrielle supplied. “And my name is Gabrielle.” She added. “So there’s that.”

“Ah.” Marcos nodded a little. “Thought maybe that’s who you were. “ He said. “But Jace is right. Pinu won’t care a bit about that. He’s got a big force, and not shy to use it.”

Xena smiled. “I hope so.” She agreed, as Jessan came up next to her and Solari took up a position to the right of her queen. “Hate to have gone through all this trouble and not get a fight out of it.”

“You want to fight him?” Marcos asked, in an incredulous tone.

‘Something like that, yes.” Gabrielle said. “We don’t really like people who go around taking people prisoner and steal their things.”

“Army’s coming up on the road, gen’rl.” Redder walked over, sheathing his sword. “Looks like we got them all.”

“Thanks Redder.” Xena said. “Marcos, take my advice. Weather’s getting worse. If you can take these people back, do it.” She regarded the men. “We’ll attract Pinu’s attention for ya. He’ll probably leave you alone once he has to deal with us.”

Marcos looked past them to where the army was appearing, one of the lead riders now carrying a spear with it’s butt resting in his stirrup that had a black and yellow banner on it’s top. “We don’t know if there’s anything left to go back to.” He looked back at Xena. “We’ll keep going on, what’s left of us.”

Jace nodded. “If we die in the cold, we do. Better that than in chains.”

Gabrielle looked the group over, now seeing two children peeking out from behind their mother’s knees. She exchanged glances with Xena, then motioned the Amazons back. “Let’s get mounted up and get moving.”

Xena took a step back as well. “Good luck to you then.” She said. “There’s some caves, just shy of the pass. You could get shelter there if you need it.”

Both men nodded. “We appreciate you helping us out.” Marcos said. “I just hope you know what you’re doing, provoking him.”

“We’ll find out.” Xena turned and let out a whistle, then she followed Gabrielle and the Amazons back towards the oncoming riders. “They won’t make it.” She commented under her breath to Jessan.

“Crazy.” Jessan said. “Maybe they’ll stay in those caves for a while.”

“Mm.” Xena took hold of Argo’s reins. “Let’s see if we can find this bunch’s camp, maybe it’ll tell us why everyone here is so damn afraid of this Pinu.”

“Died kinda easy.” Jessan agreed.

“Well, they’ve been beating up villagers and stealing kids. We’re neither.”

“Mm.”

Ares came up on her other side, looking pleased with himself. “That was a kick.” He admitted to Xena. “Why didn’t you tell me this was so much fun?”

Xena gave him a look.

“I may have had this whole thing all wrong.”

**

Cait held her hand up and pulled Shadow to a halt, as Nala came up behind her. They were in a cluster of thick trunked trees enjoying a respite from the cold wind but now they were on the verge of emerging back onto the road. “Hold on.”

“What is it?” Nala craned her neck. “What is that?”

“Don’t know. Looks like a big group on the move.” Cait eased over to get a better look. “Wagons, and I see spears.”

“Armor.” Nala agreed. “Three or four score. That’s a big force.”

“I wonder if that’s our slavers.” Cait got down off Shadow and handed Nala her reins. “I’m going to get a closer look.”

“Be careful.”

Cait chuckled softly. "Right." She pulled her cloak around her and slid off through the trees, working her way along the ridge line but keeping out of sight. She got to a spot that gave her a view of the road, wriggling between two silver barked trees and settling to a halt against one of them.

It was a large cavalcade. At least ten wagons, and behind them, loosely stringed, goats, sheep and cattle.

The men guarding it were obviously soldiers, all of them were in metal and leather armor and they were armed with maces, axes, and swords, with a good number of them also carrying crossbows.

Between the wagons, there were groups of people walking. Most were in ragged cloaks, some were in thicker coats, a few were just in shirts and leggings, hugging themselves as the trudged along.

Cait's eyes narrowed.

As she watched, though, a rider approached the train from behind, galloping full out. The wagons slowly started to come to a halt, and the guards turned, and a few of them broke out of line and started back towards the oncoming rider.

Cait didn't move, the only thing stirring being the gentle fog of her breath and the faint flickering of her lashes as she blinked against the cold. Even if the travellers had looked up at the ridge, they would not have seen anything that wasn't part of the landscape.

The rider came closer and Cait could see he was injured, and the horse was as well, bloody froth coming out of it's mouth and staining the snowy ground.

The horsemen from the caravan caught up with the rider and grabbed him as he fairly fell out of his saddle. He was leaning over and gasping, one hand pointing behind him

"Well gosh." Cait commented under her breath. "I'd say he found something he didn't quite like."

Nala had wormed up next to her, and was behind the tree Cait was standing next to. "Trouble?"

"Not for us." Cait observed, as the soldiers started milling around. The wagons were pulled off the road and it was obvious the group was splitting up, a good three quarters of the soldiers getting their weapons out and forming up.

"They stopping?"

"Yes, it appears." Cait responded. "Might be an excellent chance for us to look round a bit."

"Mm." Nala eased her head around the tree. "Something stirred em up." She said, as the remaining soldiers herded their captives in the square made by the wagons and the drivers got down and started easing their beasts.

"Perhaps someone finally took offense to being dragged off like that." Cait mused. "Looks like they're going off to thump something."

The rest of the soldiers rode off towards the direction the injured man had come from, and they could see the rider himself being laid down on the buckboard of a wagon with two others attending him.

The rumble of hoofbeats were fading as the armed force disappeared beyond a bend in the road, and as that did, the rustle and creak of the wagons drifted up to the two watching Amazons.

The wagon tops were opened, and after a moment, one of the men came over and started lifting children out of it, setting them onto a thrown down piece of sacking. The tots just sat there quietly, one of them sprawling over onto his side and putting his head down.

"Huh." Nala muttered.

"That doesn't look right." Cait agreed. "I've seen our lot. You don't catch them sitting still like that. " She watched the prisoners also come over and sit down quietly, and then, another wagon was open and several women were dragged out and thrown to the ground next to them.

They were all hog tied, and their hair was cut very short, and as they struggled to sit up they could see they were dressed in coarse sacking not unlike what they were sitting on.

"Hm." Nala shook her head. "More of the same like that woman we found, I guess. "

Cait edged down the line of trees, and shaded her eyes to get a better look at the women prisoners. "Oh no."

"What?"

Cait stared at one of the shorn women, who had half turned and tilted her head up towards the light. She hastily felt inside her belt pouch and drew out a piece of parchment, opening it and studying the images on it. "Bloody Hades."

Nala scooted up and peered over her shoulder. "Who's that?"

Cait looked up from it to the woman. "What we were looking for, actually." She said. "We've got to move, Nala. I need to get to Xena."

"Oh crap."

"No time for that – move!"

**

Xena studied the fork in the road they were approaching, pulling out her map to consult it and then refolding it and putting it back in her saddlebag. She lifted her hand and motioned to the left, then lifted her waterskin up and took a sip.

"Any particular reason you picked that one?" Gabrielle asked idly, as she played with a bit of Iolaus' mane.

Xena gave her a sideways glance.

Gabrielle chuckled.

"Mostly because the left hand branch angles downward and through the forest." The warrior answered. "This one skirts those ridges ahead, and gives us a view from the highlands."

"But less chance of shelter when we stop." The bard said.

"True." Xena acknowledged. "But now that we've drawn first blood, I don't want to be someplace we can easily be snuck up on or ambushed."

"Sounds good to me, partner." Gabrielle could see now that the chosen road was starting to climb, and at the same time she felt the wind shift, and she could taste moisture on it. "Going to storm again."

"Yeah." Xena sighed. "But that's another reason to take the high road. We won't get buried in snow."

The army was already moving through the crossroads and the pace picked up a little, the scouts moving ahead faster, working towards the ridge to get a sightline over it before the force behind them caught up.

There was solid experience there. No one had to be told what to do, and that left Xena free to make strategic decisions, though leading from the front wasn't something she'd lightly discard.

Gabrielle watched her soulmate from the corner of her eye, noting the relaxed, easy motion of her body shifting in sync with Argo's steady pace. The reins were looped around the top of her saddle, and she was tapping her fingers next to the in some silent, internal rhythm.

Was she singing in her head? Gabrielle wondered. "Xe?"

"Hm?" The warrior turned her head and looked over, her hands going still.

Gabrielle steered Iolaus a little closer. "How big do you think this guy's army is?"

Xena pondered that for a couple of minutes. “Based on this last group? I’d say that’s the size he sends with his raiding parties.”

“Huh.”

“So overall, it’s probably a thousand, two thousand maybe.”

Gabrielle blinked. “That’s a lot more people than we have.”

“Mmhm. I know.” Xena agreed. “But he’s got to defend a city wall with it. So a lot of those troops are going to be taken up in guarding what he’s got.”

‘But still.”

“You can only support a certain size force, Gab. The port city’s a lot bigger than Amphipolis. If we were the size of Therma, for example, we could support that size force. “ Her partner explained. “I’m not worried. Attacking is a lot different than defending.”

Gabrielle frowned over that, then her expression eased. After all, Xena had taken over Therma pretty much by herself with the help of a few seamen and the human Iolaus, and had held it against a much superior Spartan force just with attitude.

Were they going into this a little too overconfident though?

She glanced behind them, where the fork was fading into the afternoon light that was starting already to fade, and the air was filling again with a slight dusting of snow that was filling in their footsteps and putting a haze between them and the main part of the road.

Or would she just have to trust Xena, who had after all long since proven her judgment dependable.

Probably she would.

The army was in a good mood, after the brief tussle. They at least had no doubts as they pulled up their hoods and tied them, and draped the edges of their cloaks over their horses necks to keep the snow off the beasts.

Iolaus and Argo already had leather and cloth protection over them, though their ears were twitching as the snow flakes hit them. Gabrielle turned her thoughts from any doubts to the day ahead, thinking about what they would do once they stopped traveling for the day instead.

The tent, and it’s warm camp stove sure would feel good.

She sensed eyes on her and she turned her head, to find Xena watching her. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Xena responded. “Ares filled me in on a few things about his sisters. You know anything else about them?”

Gabrielle eased her horse closer. “Well.” She responded after a pause. “I guess I know what most people do about them. Potadiea didn’t much follow them. We had a temple to Demeter of course, and a little one to Dionysus, but that was kinda hidden and no one talked about it much.”

Xena chuckled.

“Hey it was a shepherding village. What did you expect?” Gabrielle smiled. “My parents were always making offerings to Demeter, for the harvest and the health of the animals. I don’t think I actually heard of Athena and Artemis until I started traveling with you.”

“We had one to Demeter too.” Her partner admitted. “But we also had one to Hermes, and of course to Ares. I never paid much attention to his sisters.”

“Hm.” Gabrielle turned and motioned to Solari, who guided her horse up between the guards to her side. “Hey Solari – what’s the history with Artemis and the Amazons? Do you know?”

Solari seemed surprised at the question, but she collected her thoughts and rose to the occasion. “It’s not so much my deal, you know? A lot of theolders were really into her, and they used to bring animals in and sacrifice them to her in the back there in that old hut, you remember?”

Did she? Gabrielle pondered. “Oh, near the purging hut.”

“Right.” Solari said. “They say they did it because she was the goddess of the hunt, so she’d bless their traps and bring in more game.” She related. “Or something like that. We used to listen to all those stories, but you know, after years and years of bad hunting we figured maybe we needed to range out and the place was just scoured.”

Xena chuckled.

“Right?” Solari also chuckled. “Anyway, we knew she was Apollo’s sister, like as in they had them same parents, and her mother, Leto was a daughter of the Titans.”

“They’re twins, aren’t they?” Gabrielle asked. “I have to admit my early knowledge of Olympus wasn’t really that broad.”

“They are.” Solari nodded. “So anyway, Artemis was kinda adopted by all the Amazon nations, because she was a chick, and she was into hunting, women, and watching over childbirth. Sorta natural for us.”

Yes, it would have been. Gabrielle mused. “You didn’t put up an altar in the new village.”

Solari’s face wrinkled up into a wry grin. “Heard them talking, the olders, about it. They thought that, if they put something up there it meant they totally accepted the new place. They weren’t into it.” She gave Gabrielle a vaguely apologetic look. “And us, and the youngers, I guess we didn’t have much time for that. I never was up to all that kill a deer and put it on an altar. I’d rather eat it.”

Xena started laughing, and reached over to give Solari a pat on the knee.

“So then we met you guys.” Solari went on, gamely. “And like, okay? What was the point after that? I would have felt like a dork if I’d been laying flowers and stuff on a fireplace for some god. What you guys taught us is we’re pretty good at making our own destiny.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle had to smile. “That’s actually what Xena taught me.” She regarded her partner. “So, this whole .. I don’t know, what do you call it?” She looked ahead of them, where the light was getting quietly dimmer. “Twilight of the Gods maybe?”

Xena half shrugged. “Maybe. “

“Started a while back.” Solari said, succinctly. “Melosa was big for Artemis. So was Velaska. Renas was Artemis’ priestess in the tribe matter of fact.”

“Really.” Her queen said. “How did Eph feel?”

Solari was quiet for a minute, her horse plodding amiably alongside Iolaus. “She hung with Melosa.” She said, finally. “But you know, I never got a feeling it was more than lip service She did it to do it, you know?”

“Eponin was an acolyte of Ares.” Xena spoke up. “We talked about it.”

“Yeah, a lot of us were.” Solari said. “Made more sense to us.”

“Someone mention my name?” Ares appeared on the other side of Xena, fading in as he rode on his coal black horse.

“We were just talking about your sisters.” Xena said briefly. “Just trying to figure it all out.”

Ares made a rude sound. “I thought they’d be around here ,when those losers showed up.” He said. “But no dice.”

“No dice.” Xena confirmed. “They must have taken them further. “ She indicated the sloping path. “That’s the other reason I wanted to take this road. We get up there, and we get a view of the surrounding area and the land heading to the port city.”

Ares peered ahead of them, through the increasing snowfall. “So you get to the top and you maybe see them.”

“Exactly.”

“And then?”

“Depends what time it is.” Xena said. “And what the weather is. But if we’re lucky and it stays somewhat clear, we head down the ridge and catch up with them.”

“I like that.” The God of War said. “We catch them, we kill them, we pick up my chicks, and we’re done.”

Gabrielle eyed him. “I never pegged you for an optimist.” She remarked as Solari clapped her hand over her mouth hastily. “Learn something new every day.”

Ares rolled his eyes at her. “Shut up.”

“Hey, be nice to my partner.” Xena told him. “We’re doing you a favor.”

He rolled his eyes again. “Can’t we go faster?” He changed the subject. “I’m over this do ta do ta do ta do” He made prancing motions with his hands. “Let’s get this over with.”

Xena examined the road, then she pursed her lips and let out a whistle, lifting her hand and making a circling motion, then moving her fist forward. The front guard returned the whistle, and then the whole column started moving faster.

“Nice.” Ares smiled at her, then he nudged his horse ahead, keeping a length past them as they all broke into a rolling canter.

“Sooner we get to the ridge, sooner we know if we can make camp or not. “ Xena lifted her voice a little, over the hissing thump of horsehooveshitting icy ground.

“Works for me.” Gabrielle said. “Hope we don’t see a blasted thing.”

**

“Cait, wait.” Nala scrambled after her. “Wait a minute!”

“There’s no time.” Cait was untying Shadow’s reins from the branch . “Honestly Nala, I’m not trying to be ratty. It’s really important.”

“I get it.” Nala said. “But what is it? Can you tell me, please?”

Cait pulled herself up on Shadow’s back., then she leaned closer to Nala. “Those women there, the ones with their hair cut off?”

“Yeah?” Nala was swinging up on her own horse. “What about them? Seemed like likely cowherds to me.”

Cait removed the parchment and showed it to her. “They’re not, really. Here, look at this.”

“Okay.” Tucked back in the trees, they were sheltered from the weather, and it was much quieter. “It’s some women.”

“It’s a drawing of Artemis and Athena.” Cait told her. “Pally did it, in Therma.”

Nala stared at it then at her. “What?”

“Really, there’s not time.” Cait stuffed the parchment back in her saddlebag. “We’ve got to tell Xena we saw them. She’s after them.”

“What?”

“Nala, come on.” Cait got Shadow turned around and started leading the way down the ridge to the road. “We’ve got to go.”

Nala urged her bay horse after her, and caught her up as the snow started failing more heavily. “But you said… did you really mean Artemis and Athena? As in..”

“Yes. Something awkward and bad happened in Therma. So Xena needs to find those two, and quickly.” They went single file through the trees, the hooves of the horses almost silent on the snow packed ground.

“Better stay off that road.” Nala said as they reached the bottom of the slope and started along the tree line. “Don’t want to run into those soldiers.”

“No, let’s go this way.” Cait pointed at a small, narrow path through the trees. “I think it goes along that same way, but they won’t be able to see us.”

They rode along it in silence for a few minutes, picking their way along the rocky path carefully. The trees kept most of the snow off them, and they made good time despite the narrowness of the track.

“Cait, are you sure?” Nala said. “Those women didn’t look like goddesses.”

Cait remained silent for a while, debating. She’d promised Xena not to reveal the goddesses mortality, but she completely understood hercompanions curiousity. “I am sure.” She finally said. “I saw them myself, you see. It’s all a bit of a muddle.”

“Oh. So, like it’s like one of those parables, right? Some kind of story?” Nala said. “Like the gods are playing a trick.”

“Something like that, yes.” Cait said, relieved. “And anyway I..” She fell silent. “Did you hear something?”

Nala listened, cocking her head, “Branches breaking, behind us.”

“Rats. That’s what I heard too.”

“Let’s get in the clear.” The bigger Amazon said. “In case we need to turn and fight.”

**

Xena got up against the treeline and shaded her eyes from the snow, peering through the thick downfall at the plateau below. She sighed, thenshook her head. “Can’t see a damn thing. Redder, take a patrol and go down to the basin, see if you see any sign of their passage.”

“Aye, Genr’l.” The soldier pointed at six more troops and they separated off, and starred down the slope.

“Get into shelter.” Xena instructred the rest of the troops, and they spread out along the top of the ridge, tucking themselves behind the trees.

As she did herself, clucking to Iolaus to follow her. Getting behind a big, dead leaved set of bushes, she pushed her hood back and turned to regard her partner. “This sucks”

“The weather?” Gabrielle was shaking the snow off her cloak. “Yeah, this could be better.” She admitted. “I’m starting to feel like I’m freezing.”

Xena edged Argo over and pulled her glove off, reaching over to touch her partner’s face. She could see the faint blue tinge on her lips, and her skin felt cold. “Want to ride with me?”

Gabrielle smiled and leaned into the touch. “Honey that’s not fair to Argo.” She said. “But I sooo appreciate the thought.”

“How about if I ride on Iolaus with you. He’s a big boy.” Xena countered. “I don’t want you to get sick, hon. That’ll end this little jaunt very quick.”

“No, I know.” Gabrielle was glad they were out of the wind, and she could feel some sensation coming back into the skin of her face. The rest of the army was coming up and gathering around, the wagons pulling off to one side and parking in a way to protect the horses. “What do you think? Are they down there ahead of us?”

“In this weather? Hard to tell. If they have a bunch of captives with them they’d probably tend to take it more slowly, and keep them in good condition.” Xena stretched her body out and then resettled her boots in her stirrups. “This keeps up it’ll be a brutal night.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle regarded the falling snow. “Crazy weather. Reminds me of the winter we got married.”

“Where half the inn got buried?” Xena smiled in memory. “Yeah.”

A signal came down the line. “Xena.” A soldier came over. “Patrol’s coming back, fast.”

“That’s never good.” Xena put her glove back on. “Got the feeling we’re going to be fighting in a minute.”

Gabrielle got a scarf she’d taken from her saddlebag wrapped around her lower face, and tucked it inside her hood, then she put her own gloves back on and released the ties on her staff. “Least we’ve got the high ground.”

The lead rider in the patrol leaned forward in his saddle as his horse came up the hill, his hoove slipping and sliding a little on the icy ground. “Genr’l.” He got up to where Xena was. “Found a big force, yeah?”

“I figured you found something.” Xena gathered her reins up. “They headed this way?”

“Aye, can see em coming upriver. “ He assented.

“Must be them.” Xena paused to consider. “Let’s go intercept them.” She let out a whistle. “Gear up.”

Gabrielle, being as geared up as she was going to get, remained still on Iolaus’ back, sparing a hand to tuck her leggings in a little better to her boots, and wish mournfully for a cup of hot tea.

A dozen soldiers rode up to where Xena was, and circled her. “Your orders, genr’l??”

Xena considered. “Keep the riders in loose lines. We’ll head down the road like we don’t know they’re coming.”

Ares shouldered his way through the trees. “What’s the scoop?”

“Found some bad guys.” Xena told him. “We’re going to go chase them down.” She added. “Ready for that?”

The God of War grinned.

They wheeled out of the tree line and started down the road, which sloped gently down to the river, the Amazons slowly moving up until they were just behind Gabrielle, Solari getting her longbow out and unfastening the long flap in her cloak that covered her quiver and sword.

Pasi was just behind her, with barely contained excitement showing on her face. This would be her first battle, and Gabrielle slowed a little to let her catch up, giving her a smile. “You ready?”

“Yes.” The youngster stated in a very positive tone. ‘This has been so great so far, even with the cold.” She had her cloak hood up, and like Gabrielle, a scarf across her face. “Sometimes in the village, it was like we would practice and practice and practice but never do anything. This is something.”

“It’s something.” Her queen agreed. “Just be careful, okay? It can get all out of control really fast, and if it does, sometimes things happen too fast to react to.”

Pasi listened closely to her, and she was nodding. “Solari said for us… if the fighting started, we should find a place, and get off our horses and shoot from behind them.”

“Right.” Gabrielle said. “Keep your head down, and keep out of the way of the heavy fighters. A lot of times they can’t always see around them in a fight.”

Pasi digested this as they got to the flats and spread out to fill the road completely, the soldiers sorting themselves out and readying their weapons. “Do you do that?”

Her queen chuckled. “Don’t go by me.” She warned. “For one thing, me standing behind my horse with a bow would scare everyone including the horse so badly we’d lose in a snap. I’ve literally got no aim at all.”

Solari laughed. “That’s true.” She said. “Remember when you sent that spear through the bathing hut scared the feathers off everyone in it.”

“I stick to this.” Gabrielle lifted her staff up. “So I can’t stay down. My job is to make sure no one whacks Xena when she isn’t looking.” She said. “So I stay close to her when she’s on the ground and I keep an eye on her when we’re both mounted.”

Pasi eyed her with respect. “Wow.”

“Wait till you see it.” Solari advised her. “I aint figured out yet how they do that without whacking each other.”

“Practice.” Gabrielle said, dryly. “Lots and lots and lots of practice.”

A line of forest dwellers came up on either side of them, fur dusted with snow, but with smiles twitching on their muzzles. Jessan dropped in next to Xena, trading high fives with her.

“Is it scary?” Pasi asked, after a moment of silence. “When you get into it?”

“Sure.” Solari said.

“No.” Gabrielle said, at the same time.

They looked at each other. Then Gabrielle cleared her throat. “I used to be scared.” She admitted. “But we’ve fought so many fights together now that I just get this.. ‘ She paused, searching for the word.

“You get fierce.” Xena had, apparently been listening from two horse lengths ahead of her in a snowstorm with wind behind them. Now she was half turned on Argo’s back, and giving her a wink.

“I do.” The bard admitted. “I just hit as hard as I can, and want it all to be over as fast as possible.”

Xena shifted around and then stood up in her stirrups. “Ware.” She let out a whistle. “I can see the first of them.”

She dropped back into her saddle and motioned Gabrielle forward. “They may surprise me and not immediately attack us. We might get to talk first.”

“Peh.” Ares made a face.

“Probably not.” Gabrielle consoled him as Iolaus nudged himself between Ares horse and his mother. “But you never can tell.”

The enemy force was just rounding the bend in the road ahead of them and as they caught sight of Xena’s army there was a hasty motion and then they slowed down and halted.

The snow was falling heavily between them, making everything seem soft and fuzzily edged, but Gabrielle could see the consternation in their front ranks and that only became clearer as they continued to move forwards.

The front guard eased to one side a bit, as their leadership moved to the fore, and the last of the army cleared the ridge and the size of their force became obvious.

“So if they turn and run, you gonna go kill em?” Ares asked, casually. He was watching the other force, his head enfolded into the hood of his thick cloak. “They’re gonna spoil your surprise if ya don’t.”

“I know.” Xena got her boots settled a bit more, and loosely looped her reins around her saddle to free her hands. Argo picked up the motion and her head lifted, breath streaming out in the cold air as she recognized the signs of impending battle.

“They’re freaking.” Jessan commented.

“If you came around the bend in a road and found us coming at you wouldn’t you?” Solari inquired. “But his nibs is right, if they take off, they’ll warn the big poobah by the port and that might not be so good.”

‘They’re gonna run.” Xena said, after a brief silence.

For a moment the enemy force held in place, then they proved Xena right and turned tail, bolting back in the direction they came as fast as they could.

Now was a decision point. “Keep your pace.” She ordered calmly. “We’ll keep on the road, let them get ahead of us.”

“What?” Ares eyed her. “C’mon, blue eyes. Let’s get killing.”

“Letting them get away might end up a bad thing.” Jessan offered his opinion.

Gabrielle was in the unusual position of agreeing with the God of War. “If you say they’ve got that big a force, hon, it could end up with us on the wrong side of it.”

“You got it, blondie.” Ares patted her on the head.

“No.” The warrior said, with a note of finality. “If they panic, they might kill any slaves they’ve picked up.” She gave them all a meaningful look. “Keep the end game in sight, people.”

There was a small silence after that, then Gabrielle reached over and patted her partner on the leg. “That’s why they pay her the big dinars.” She remarked. “Besides, they just did exactly what I did when I spotted the Spartans coming the other direction.”

The army, seeing the enemy run, were laughing. Some glancing at Xena, clearly expecting an order to chase them. The warrior held up a hand palm out, and then curled her fingers inward, and they kept up their steady pace.

Jessan cleared his throat. “Y’know, Xena…”

“Yes.” She smiled. “I think a small group should go after them too. Wanna lead it?”

“Sure!”

“We’re scouts.” Solari commented immediately, and Pasi’s ears perked up.

“Two, two and two.” Xena said. “Redder, get me two tough and quiet, bring em back over here.”

“Genr’l.” Redder looked regretful. “Don’t suppose I..”

“No. Someone has to be in charge.”

He looked at her in puzzlement. Jessan chortled softly under his breath, and Gabrielle patted her on the knee again.

**

Cait drew her sword and whirled as they reached the clear spot, blinking her eyes clear of the snow as she looked down the path they’d emerged from.

For a moment, there was nothing. Just the silence, and the sound of branches creaking under their gathering load. Nala had pulled up next to her, and was likewise armed, her crossbow resting against her left knee.

“Maybe it was just the snow?” The older Amazon suggested.

“Maybe.” Cait felt her body take on tension, as her skin prickled. “But I really don’t think so.”

Motion at the treeline made them stiffen, and Cait took a better grip on her sword hilt as moving figures emerged after them, two human and two animal. After a second, she relaxed a little. “I think we know that lot.”

“Do we?” Nala eased the business end of her weapon up a bit.

“We do.” Cait started back in the other direction as the lead figure raised a hand and waved it at them. “It’s Hercules and Iolaus.”

“That’s nothing but good news.” Nala disarmed her bow and followed. “Would only have been better if the’yd had a fuzzy with them.”

“If they’d had Xena with them.” Cait corrected her. “Hello!”

The two men were somewhat covered in snow and their beasts were as well, Iolaus’ white mare almost invisible against the weather. “Hey you guys!” He called out. “Did we catch up with you or you catch up with us?”

Cait and Nala got down off their horses as the four met in the downslope. “Bit of both, really.” She said. “We’re on our way back to Amphipolis.”

Hercules swept his hood back and ruffled the snow off his hair. “Already?”

“Yes.” Cait said. “We’ve found what we were looking for you see.” She explained. “There was a big force, and they had some captives with them.”

Hercules met her eyes intently. “Captives?”

“Yes.”

“We should go after them.” Iolaus said.

“We thought about that.” Cait said, ignoring the startled look from Nala. “But there was quite a hundred of them and I’m not Xena.” She added placidly. “So we were going to go tell her.”

The demigod put his hands on his hips and his eyes went a little unfocused. “We were heading this way as well, for the same reason. This needs a big force.”

Excellent. Cait felt reassured.

“But no need to go all the way back. The army’s on it’s way here.” Hercules continued. “I left them just the other side of the pass.” He frowned. “Let’s get under cover for a little bit and sort out what we know.”

Even better. “Well then, we could go back there and perhaps get a head start on it.” Cait suggested. “Before that big group of them come back.”

“Group?”

“Herc, listen.” Iolaus held his hands up. “Riders.”

They turned only to see a group of riders emerge into view, and they were spotted immediately. “Damn it.” Hercules growled, as he vaulted into the back of his shaggy iron colored horse.

“I knew they were still chasing us.” Iolaus said, as the rest of them mounted and got ready to fight. “Watch out, they’ve got bows.”

“Why are they chasing you?” Nala asked, as she got her weapons out.

“Long story.”

The group picked up speed and drew their weapons as they approached, letting out a howl of glee. Cait drew her sword again and Nala recockedher crossbow and they started towards their attackers, outnumbered two to one.

They came together fast. Cait found herself being attacked by a tall man in a thick fur cloak, carrying a mace. He was laughing as he came towards her, and then he laid the mace across his saddle and reached for her with his hand instead. “Here little girl!”

Cait ducked his hand and drew her boot dagger, slashing at his fingers with it before she brought her blade around to smack him in the face as Shadow carried her by. “There, little boy.”

He let out a yell of outrage and turned his horse, heading back for her and now picking the mace up again. She was already engaged with another rider by that time though, and she saw him move past her as Nala put a bolt into his leg.

She kept close to Shadow's neck, barely presenting a target to the mounted horsemen as she squirmed between them, slashing and cutting into furs and armor and skin.

Shadow bucked as a falling body rolled into her legs, but Cait somehow kept her seat and they surged through a cluster of hacking swords with Hercules in the center of them, wielding his own sword with grim mastery.

Cait saw one of his attackers go for a head shot, and she whipped the dagger in one hand through the air, getting him in the throat as he lifted himself up to take a downstroke and he tumbled back off his horse gargling blood everywhere.

His horse snorted and bucked out of the situation, sending his body flying into a tree as he slammed into a neighbor, making that man curse and shove him off.

Iolaus was struggling with another mounted rider, both of them wrestling for control over a battle ax gripped in the man's hands. Cait headed in that direction, but then stopped and laid flat over Shadows neck on hearing Nala's whistle.

She felt a crossbow bolt come past her, close enough to tug a bit of her hair.

Then she was moving past and coming up behind the man fighting Iolaus she got into a tussle with one of the enemy about to plunge a spear into his white mare's side. "No you don't!" She hastily kicked out of one stirrup and booted the spear to one side, then got her sword out.

The man pulled out his own sword and they crossed blades, half turned sideways in their saddles as the horses moved past the skirmishes on either side.

He stared at her. "Woman!" He spat out.

"Amazon." Cait corrected him, as she shoved back against his two handed swipe, and then turned Shadow on her haunches, drawing her dagger again and coming at him with a blade in each hand, feeling the rush of battle take her and bring a laugh out of her chest.

He stabbed at her with the end of his sword and she let it slide past her shoulder, across the top of it as she deliberately closed with him, going knee to knee as he yanked his arm back and she drove hers forward to bury the dagger into his gut at close range.

She saw the shock on his face, in his eyes, and the shiver in his arm as it pressed against her. "Didn't think I'd kill you, then?"

He coughed, and stared down at her arm, covered in his blood. "Just…"

Cait chuckled humorlessly. "You kill because you're paid to." She said. "I do it because I like it." She yanked her hand back with the dagger in it then slashed him across the throat, and shoved him off his horse.

Then she turned and paused, seeing the battle ended. Iolaus and Hercules were back to back, slowly sweeping the area with their eyes, swords still out and glistening with blood. Nala had just gotten off her horse and was retrieving her arrows, yanking them out of bodies with a smile.

The snow was churned up and spattered deep red, and there were eight bodies slumped into it, the enemy horses having scattered into a short distance, breathing hard and eyes rolling.

"Excellent." Cait tossed her sword and dagger into a clean patch of snow and dismounted. "How about we get under those trees there and have a cup of tea."

"And you can tell us that story." Nala added. "Because these ain't those soldiers we saw."

**

It was full dark before they stopped for the night, having found no sign of the fleeing soldiers. Xena set the guard carefully, camping the army in a half circle outcropping of granite that protected them from the weather as well as their enemies.

It was snowing so hard, really, continuing was impossible, even if they had seen signs of the others. Xena was standing with her back to the stone, arms crossed with her hands tucked against her body to warm them. "What a mess."

"Aye." Redder was kneeling by the small portable camp stove, feeding some dried wood into it. "Never seen weather this bad, this early."

"No me either." His leader agreed. "Make sure the horses are protected. We don't need them foundering."

"No." Redder stood up. "You think this is natural, Xena? All the talk about the gods and all. Maybe it ain't"

"Hard to say." Xena replied. "Sometimes the weather is just the weather."

The hides that made up her tent were stretched taut above her head, anchored in the stone and between stout trees and Xena was left to think about Redder's words as he ducked outside and went on with his tasks.

Gabrielle entered a moment later, her sturdy form covered in a thick fur cloak that she kept firmly wrapped around her as she moved closer to the fire. "Holy sheeps it's cold."

Xena pushed off from the stone wall and came over to her, stepping up behind her and wrapping her arms around her partner. "Only good thing is,this'll have them holed up as much as we are."

"True." Gabrielle leaned back against her and felt her body relax, as the warmth penetrated her skin. She had ended the ride damp and chilled, and even a change into these dry clothes hadn't really warmed her up.

Travel had gotten tough by the end of the day. There was enough snow to cause the horses to have to struggled through it, and the supply wagons had gotten stuck a handful of times and the soldiers had needed to un harness the teams and haul the big vehicles out sideways and back onto the road.

"Xe."

"Yeeeese?"

"What if its still snowing like this in the morning?"

Xena exhaled. "We'll have to see. I'm not going to risk half the horses breaking a leg in this stuff just to make time."

Gabrielle looked up at her and their eyes met.

"Yeah, I know what the stakes are." Xena said. "But killing people for it makes no sense." She gave her partner a brisk rub across her upper arms. "Think about how deep we'd be in it if we took the other road."

"Don't want to." Gabrielle turned around and put her arms around her. "Let me go get our hammocks set up. I can see cracks in those rocks there that'll work." She gave Xena a hug and then released her, feeling a little more energized as she went to retrieve their joint hanging bed.

Surprisingly, Xena came right along with her and together they sorted out the bed, stretching it out and finding cracks in the rock to anchor each end into. That left the hammock hanging near the camp stove, and far enough away from the edge of the rocks to avoid any drips coming in from the hide roof.

Gabrielle studied her work, looking forward intensely to the moment she and Xena would ease themselves down into it and she could get really warm all over. Then a hand touched her shoulder and she turned to find Xena offering her a cup of steaming mulled pear cider.

It smelled wonderful. “Thanks hon.” She sipped it, savoring the sweet and spicy taste. “Everyone’s camping in little groups. No chance for me to tell stories.”

“Don’t want you to anyway. It’s too cold.” Xena leaned her elbow on Gabrielle’s shoulder casually. “I’ve ordered the guard, and told everyone to get as much rest as they can.” She said. “That means us too.”

“Think Jess and the gang found anything?”

“Hope they found a snug place to rest.” Xena responded. “Just like us.” She leaned over and kissed Gabrielle on the lips, feeling them move slightly as the bard smiled. They broke off and studied each other, taking a breath at the same time and releasing it.

The discomforts of the day faded. Gabrielle put her cup down on the worktable and hooked her fingers into the front of Xena’s leathers to pull her closer and continue the kiss, savoring the jolt of sensual tension erupting in her guts.

The wind howled outside and fluttered the hide of their shelter, but the stout lacing kept it out, and after a moment Gabrielle was glad to feel the cloak being lifted off her shoulders and tossed to one side.

It was a mixture of heat and cold and supremely energizing. Xena casually circled her with both arms and they stood there in the torchlight enjoying a few moments of passion that lengthened and intensified quite unexpectedly.

Distracting and delicious. They paused and looked at each other knowingly, the twinkle in Xena’s eyes very visible even in the low light. “Glad we got that hammock up.”

“Now I know why you helped me do it.” The bard smiled, her fingers easing the laces loose on Xena’s leathers. “Thanks. I was feeling kinda crummy.”

“Why?” Xena laced her fingers behind her partner’s neck and leaned forward again to kiss her. “From the ride?” She gently kneaded down across her shoulders. “Your back bothering you?”

“No.” Gabrielle planted tiny kisses on her collarbone. “Just all the wet and cold.” She felt the easing across her back at that familiar touch. “It reminds me of that time we were stuck up in those highlands way up north.”

Xena pulled her closer and hugged her, rocking them back and forth a few times. “Oh I remember that.” She continued rocking, but edged towards the hammock. “I remember when we finally found that little half burned out lean to that just got us out of the wind.”

“Mmm.” Gabrielle got the last of the laces loosened. “Just big enough for the two of us to fit inside.” She eased back onto the hammock as Xena pulled her heavy overtunic off, leaving only the light underclothes on either of them.

She remembered that very well. After being so cold, and so miserable all day long, exhausted to the point where she hadn’t wanted anything except to curl up and close her eyes to have Xena casually enfold her in her arms had been so awesome.

So awesome and so beautiful if for no other reason than there had been no reason for it. “You so made my day that day.”

Xena joined her in their swinging bed, gathering her up in her arms much as she had back then. She pulled the heavy set of furs over them, rubbing the chill off of Gabrielle’s skin as she felt her let out a relieved and contented sigh.

“I remember that night too.” Xena said, after a few moments. “I remember thinking I’d better do something to get your mind off how close we were to freezing our butts off and since we dind’t have any food or any fire, that was the only thing I could think of doing was giving you a hug.”

Gabrielle chuckled, as she started the process of removing her partner’s underclothes. “Like you didn’t know what that would do for me.”

“I did, but it didn’t matter.” The warrior responded in a wry tone. “It really was all I had.”

“It really was all I needed.” Gabrielle slid closer and then was skin on skin with her. “Still is.” She nibbled Xena’s collarbone, feeling the faint, silent chuckle shake her partner’s body. “But you know what?”

“What?”

“I’m glad we brought this damn hammock.”

Xena laughed a little harder.

“To Hades with that damn hard ground and those rocks.”

“And snow.”

“And red ants.”

“Oh, I remember that, too.”

**

They found enough of a crack in the rocks to convince themselves it was a cave, and at least it was dry and out of the driving snow. They managed to find a protected place to leave their horses, and hunkered down together around a small, but fierce little fire.

“This weather’s a mess.” Iolaus said, rubbing his hands briskly together. “So as I was saying, those men were from Phillipi.”

“Eh, what?” Cait was sitting cross legged on her saddle blanket.

“Aren’t those the guys who we were going to help?” Nala added. “I mean, Bennu and them?”

“Yes.” Hercules said, grimly. “Looks like there was a change of heart there.” He was also cross legged, his muscular forearms resting on his knees. He had his usual hide breeches and vest on, but with a thickly woven shirt under it, and a heavy hide cloak lined with fur over his shoulders. “Not sure if it was before or after they visited Amphipolis.”

“Oh, well then.” Cait exhaled. “It’s a good thing Xena’s on the way because we’ve got to go warn our lot right away.”

“We stumbled into that bunch just outside a burned out village.” Iolaus said, swirling the cup he had nearby filled with melting snow around. “I figured they did it.”

“I thought so too at first, but it was too old.” Hercules interjected. “They didn’t stop to ask questions – they came right at us. Not to capture.”

“They were out for blood.”

“Did they think maybe YOU”D torched that place?” Nala asked.

Both men were quiet for a moment. “That’s a good question. Maybe.” Hercules finally said.

“They knew who we were.” Iolaus added. “They went after Herc. I heard them saying something about gods and targets.”

Hercules grimaced. “Unfortunately at this point I don’t really know what side of the coin that’s all coming from. Hera? Hades? Just random people who don’t like gods anymore?”

“They were trying to hurt you because you were.. I mean, are…” Cait paused. “But aren’t you a demigod?” She asked. “Sorry if that’s rude.”

“It’s not rude.” Hercules nodded. “Zeus is my father.” He answered simply. “A fact that hasn’t ever really done me much good, or my mortal mother.”

“But everyone knows that.” Iolaus said. “So my guess is, those guys are tied into this whole thing, Herc. Hades got to them, or something. Convinced them over to his side.”

“He’s the god of the underworld. Probably didn’t take much coaxing. Mortals only live a very short time, the rest is under his thumb.” Hercules looked uncharacteristically grim.

“Eh. That’s true.” Nala muttered.

“He and Poseidon and my father were always rivals. Brothers.” Hercules said. “Zeus took Olympus. Poseidon the Sea, Hades the afterworld. They were always jealous of each other, but the two of them mostly of my father.”

“He is the king of the gods.” Cait said.

The demigod nodded. “So now when it looks like he might be cast down off that mountain, they smell blood.”

Cait cleared her throat a bit wryly. “Sometimes, not having a family isn’t quite as rot as I always thought it was.”

Hercules laughed without much humor evident. “Its ironic. I’m not even sure what side of this I’m on.”

“They won’t let you make that choice.” Iolaus quietly commented. “You’re the one with the rep down here most people know.”

And that, Cait thought, was the truest thing she’d heard said so far. She studied the demigod from the corner of her eye, understanding that he knew that as well as any of them did and noting that in their mostly shadowed haven his squared jaw and deep set eyes reminded her of his half brother.

Ares had that same uncompromising look to him, now that she’d seen him up close too, and they both seemed to occasionally look past things and people to a reality no one else around them could see.

She tried to think if she’d seen that same cast on Xena, and after a moment’s pondering to her surprise she really hadn’t. Though Xena knew a lot about everything, and all that, she was always right there in the world with the rest of them.

That comforted her. She rather thought it comforted Xena as well.

“You think Hades will approach Xena?” Iolaus asked, apparently somewhat reading Cait’s mind. “She’ll get points with him for turning down Olympus.”

“You don’t think that’s why Ares is sticking to her like glue?” Hercules responded dryly. “I don’t think he will anyway. He hasn’t forgiven her for the last time, and he knows full well she’s got a mind of her own.”

“Points. “ Nala mused. “You know, Cait, that’s sort of the feeling I was getting from that guy we bumped into, the one with the crossbow?”

Both Hercules and Iolaus focused on her. “What guy?” Hercules asked. “Who was he?”

They took it in turn to explain and as they described their lone visitor a grim look settled on both men’s faces. Without a word, Iolaus pulled his cloak back on and got up, slipping out of the crack in the rocks they’d sheltered in back into the storm.

“He seemed all right.” Cait said, almost apologetically.

“To you he would.” Hercules responded. “And I’m glad he’s not aiming for Xena. I don’t want that on my mind on top of everything.”

“Who is he?” Nala asked. “I mean really.”

“Hade’s and Persephone’s son.” Hercules said. “The crown prince of the underworld as it were .” He picked up the cup sitting near his knee and took a sip from it. “He’s been sent out to kill Zeus’ family, since most of them are stranded here on the Earth where none of them rules.”

Cait blinked. “He’s the one that shot Ares, then?”

Hercules nodded. “He’d shoot me if he found me.” He remarked. “That’s why Io went out to see if there was anyone around. He’s got an amulet around his neck that reacts when he’s near.”

“Will he shoot Iolaus?” Nala asked, starting to get to her feet. “I’ve got a crossbow myself.”

Hercules waved his hand at her. “He won’t. Io’s as mortal as they come. He’d no more shoot him than I’d shoot you.” He reassured them. “You were perfectly safe with him that night. He has no quarrel with those who he’ll end up ruling over someday.”

“Nice.” Nala sat back down. “I think I liked it better when we were just fighting Spartans.”

Cait’s face creased into a grimace. “Too right.” She looked over at Hercules. “Have you been there, to Hade’s realm?”

He nodded.

“Xena has.”

Hercules nodded again. “She has.” He agreed. “One of the few people I know who got out not because they tricked someone, like I did, or was owed a debt, or overpowered Hade’s forces.”

“Wait.” Nala said. “She really died?” She looked at Cait. “I know they tell that story but it’s real?”

Hercules chuckled wryly. “It’s real. Gabrielle called her back, and she refused to not answer that call. Hades couldn’t stop her. Pissed him off like you would not believe.”

“That’s… really weird.” Nala said, after a long moment of silence.

“It was weird.” The demi god smiled “But for me, it made me stand in awe of the indomitable power of mortal will. To feel that deeply, and want that much… “ He shook his head a little. “There’s a card there none of the old ones understand.”

Iolaus ducked back inside, a coating of snow shedding off his cloak. “Looks clear.” He said, briefly. “Let’s just hope the snow doesn’t cover the whole damn hill.”

“Hum.” Hercules pulled his cloak over his shoulders. “Even the prince of the underworld’s undercover tonight.”

**

Xena’s eyes opened on almost complete darkness, the camp stove emitting only a faint hint of red from the wood they’d stoked before going to bed. She drew in a breath and tasted nothing but the pungency of smoke and fresh snow, then she concentrated her hearing past the walls of their tent.

Gabrielle’s fingers, curled against her arm, tightened faintly, the rest of her body remaining still where it was pressed against her partners as they were curled together in the hammock.

It was warm in their little nest, and comfortable, but there had been something that triggered her senses and she turned her head a little, cupping those ears consciously as she picked up the sound again, more a change in the motion of the air than a true sound.

Ah. “Someone’s coming.” Xena whispered. “On horseback. Running.”

Without a word Gabrielle rolled out of the hammock, holding it steady as her partner followed and then she ducked past her to stir the fire as Xena started to slide into her armor. A flood of warmth spread out from the stove, highlighting the bard’s compact form as she pulled her shirt over her head. “Brr.”

“Yeah, glad I’m wearing cloth under this damn armor.” Xena agreed, as she lifted the night cooled plates up and settled them over her. “Still snowing?”

Gabrielle ducked her head out past the front hide. “A little. Slowed down though.” She pulled the hide cover closed again. “Could whatever you heard be going somewhere else?”

“Somewhere else? Sure but they’re coming up the road right at us on the way.” Xena said, as she knelt to don her leg armor. “I can hear the horse crunching the ice on the surface.”

Gabrielle didn't bother trying to listen. She sat down and pulled her boots on. "You going to warn the watch?" She sorted and tightened the lacing with automatic motions, moving up her leg and wrapping the gut around the back of her calf twice before tying it.

"Should I have to warn the watch? Aren't they supposed to be watching?"

"Brat."

"Yeah, soon as I get my gear on." Xena muttered. "I don't want them all piling in here while I'm hopping around getting my boots on."

"You could sit down like I am."

"Where's the fun in that?"

"Brat."

Xena chuckled. "Least we got some rest."

"Some." Gabrielle got her overtunic on and belted it, then grabbed her cloak and swung it over her shoulders, stepping back out of Xena's way as her partner picked up her sword in it's sheath and lifted it up over her head to drop it into it's catches on her back.

No thought needed, really. Hadn't been needed for a long time now. Gabrielle picked up her staff as Xena seated the chakram, and then they both went towards the entrance of the shelter. "Take your cloak, hon."

Xena paused in mid step, then went back and grabbed her outer garment, putting her fingers between her teeth and letting out one short and three long whistles that cracked through the air.

It only took a few breaths before the camp stirred, bodies in the darkness moving towards them as Xena repeated the signal.

Redder skidded to a halt. "Genr'l?" He was already armed and becloacked, apparently having been out on watch. "What's the word?"

"Rider coming." Gabrielle answered him. "Up the road towards the ridge."

Four soldiers bolted towards the front of the camp, as torches lit and the company came live around them and the distinctive figures of Amazons appeared out of the shadows at Gabrielle's side, pulling up hoods and tying cloaks around them.

"Should we strike the tents?" One of the soldiers asked.

"Not yet." Gabrielle again responded. "Let's see what this is. It's only one rider." She folded her arms, her staff tucked into the crook of her elbow. "Everyone get some rest?"

"As much as possible with the weather." One of the Amazons said. "You think it's one of the group that went after those men, your Majesty?"

"We'll know in a minute."

The crisp hoofbeats slowed, and then halted, as rider was challenged by the guard, and a moment later a group was heading in their direction. "Here we go." Xena rocked up and down on her heels, her hands clasped behind her back

"Xena." It was Solari who emerged from the clump, her hood pushed back exposing her dark , snow dusted hair. "That bunch met up with a lot bigger one, and they're heading back this way." She got out. "Jess kept the rest of our bunch under cover and laid down some shot to get me off. They're coming fast too."

"Good." Xena said. "How long?"

"Two candlemarks, maybe." The Amazon said. "Snow mostly cleared for me, we got moving faster than they were."

“Good job, Soli.” Gabrielle said. “How many?”

“Twice what they were, a little more.” Solari said “Second group were mostly archers.”

Xena regarded the snowy landscape. “Gonna be a mess.” She said. “Okay, let’s get packed and set up lines, and an ambush.” She pointed at the curve in the road. “Get crossbows over there.” She shifted her glance to Gabrielle. “Put the Amazons up on that ridge.”

“Good idea.” The bard said. “Go on, get set up with as many arrows as you got. After they come past you fire back at them.”

“Right.” Pasi said. “Right down behind those rocks?”

“Exactly.” Her queen sent them off with a wave.

The camp burst into activity, men running to get the shelters pulled down as some of the support crew packed the wagons.

Grooms headed for the horses, and soldiers started gearing up.

“C”mon Sol.” Gabrielle said. “Bet you could use a nice hot cup of tea.”

“Whooo yeah.”

The bard led the way back into their shelter, which, in the crook of the rocks was the most guarded area of the camp. She set her staff against the stone and went to the stove, moving the pot they’d left near it on top to warm. “Any sign of the sisters?”

“Not one.” Solari said, promptly. “The fuzzies didn’t find a scrap. Jess was wondering if they didn’t get popped off somewhere.”

“Well.” Gabrielle set up some cups. “I don’t think so, based on what Ares was telling us… “ She paused and cocked her head. “Speaking of, wonder where he is? You’d have thought he heard the camp wake up.”

Solari eyed her.

“Yeah, I know it’s weird.” Her queen responded mildly. “I just let it go past me.”

“We just missed that army though.” Solari changed the subject. “We holed up behind this big old fallen tree, the trunk was way up taller than Big X you know?”

“Wow.”

“It was pretty good shelter, and it gave us some firewood too. Anyway, we just finished searching out that whole area they’d been in looking for any sign and were making camp when we heard a bunch of wagons going by and we followed them.” Solari accepted the cup Gabrielle handed her. “We almost got caught.”

“Did you?”

Solari nodded. “The rest of those army guys came up behind us and it was blowing so hard we didn’t hear them. Lucky the fuzzys felt them coming and we all dove into a snowbank.”

“Ah. That’s why you’re all wet.” Gabrielle observed.

“Better wet than croaked, or stuck with an arrow, you know?”

“True.” The bard agreed. “But you better get yourself dry and changed before the fighting starts.” She advised. “It’s going to be a long day.” She paused. “Any idea why that other army was out and about? You think they heard we were coming?”

Solari took a long swallow of the hot tea, clearly thinking about her answer. “They were pissed off.” She said. “And we thought we heard something about Phillippi.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle was unhooking their hammock and rolling it up. “Now I wonder how Bennu and his gang are doing. Hope they didn’t run into too much trouble.” She put the hammock into it’s carry bag and gathered their gear, tucking into saddlebags and strapping them down.

“Maybe they’re the ones that made them pissed off.” Solari suggested. “I’m going to get my stuff on.” She added. “Sokay if I hang around and keep your back?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle said. “But get dry stuff on first.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Gabrielle continued packing as she heard the outside hides being taken down and folded, the cold air blasting in at her back and ruffling the hair at the back of her neck. She glanced over her shoulder to see two tall soldiers doing the work, Xena’s tall figure just visible past them.

In a moment, they would be done, and she would have to douse the camp stove. She had round wooden covers over her cup and her partners, but there would likely be little time to get the tea down, and even less for breakfast.

Ah well. She got two pieces of travel bread and filled them with smoked venison, standing up to extend one to Xena as the warrior came over. “Solari said she heard them talking about Phillipi.”

Xena grunted, taking a bite of the sandwich and picking up her tea. “They probably kicked up while their gang was coming to visit us. Who knows what’s left by now?”

“Ugh.” Gabrielle stood up. “Where’s Ares?”

Xena paused in mid chew, and looked around, a bit of venison poking out from between her lips. She hastily swallowed her mouthful and cleared her throat. “Damn good question. Let me go look.” She took her handful of bread and meat with her as she disappeared into the darkness.

The snow muffled pocking of horse hooves made Gabrielle turn, to see Argo and Iolaus being led over to the front of where they’d sheltered. “Hey guys.”

She hoisted Xena’s saddlebags over her shoulder and went to meet them and the groom who was leading them. “Hey Caro.”

“Ma’am.” The groom held Argo still while she settled the bags over the mare’s shoulders. “Early start, eh?”

“Looks like it.” The bard went back and got her own bags. “Well, we had to confront these guys some time. Might as well be now, when they’re not backed into a corner and desperate.” She got her things arranged on Io’s back, then pulled a slightly withered apple out and offered it to him.

His golden ears pricked and he nibbled the treat off her palm, edging forward a little as Argo craned her neck around to see what was going on.

“Oh yes, madam.” The bard smiled as she saw that inquisitive nose snuffling after her. “I have one for you too.” She offered her second apple to Argo, and they stood there quietly together for a moment as the horses munched.

“Where’s mine?” Xena appeared suddenly, draping her arms over Argo’s neck. “Found our friend by the supply wagons.”

“Getting supplies?” Gabrielle’s eyebrow hiked.

“Getting supplied.” Her partner responded drolly. “He’ll be over in a minute.”

“That’s what I heard about guys.” Gabrielle’s eyes twinkled. “And here’s your pear, my love.” She handed over another piece of their hoarded late fall harvest, as Xena started to laugh silently. “Army deployed?”

Xena took the pear and bit off a chunk. “On the way to be. These guys must be idiots.” She crouched slightly and then leaped upward, getting herself up onto Argo’s back. “C’mon.”

Gabrielle got herself hoisted up on Iolaus's back and gathered her reins up, guiding the stallion after his mother as Xena made her way through the shadows to where the army was forming up.

It was growing colder again, and as Gabrielle tipped her head back she could see some of the stars peeking out from between the clouds, glad at least that it meant the snow would stop falling for now. She pulled her hood up and got her scarf in place over her nose and mouth, checking to make sure her staff was in place under her knee.

The road stretched on past them, and she could see the shadows moving as the army took up their positions against the rock walls, the riders getting spears and maces ready for a rush up onto the road and the archers settling into protected positions with a good view.

It was surprisingly quiet, with all that motion going on. The snow muffled most of the hoofbeats, and there was enough of it to mask what would be the crisp sound of steps on hardened ice.

The tents were all stowed away, the soldiers were all up and alert. One of the horsemen nearby picked up a pole with Xena's standard on it, and casually fit it to the holder on his stirrup, the wind picking up the fabric and lightly rattling it.

Xena looked up at it, close enough to Gabrielle for her to see the faint smile tugging at her lips despite the cold and the darkness.

Gabrielle reached over and gave her a pat on the leg.

They heard hoofbeats again, but a minute later, whistles sounded back identifying the oncomers as friendly. "Jess and the rest of them." Xena predicted. "I want to get hold of some of the leaders of the army coming at us. Maybe they know where the hostages are."

"Are they hostages?" Gabrielle asked, as they both moved through the snow, coming up next to a large boulder that shielded them from the road, but gave them a view of it. "I don't think anyone's going to buy them back."

Xena was silent for a moment. "Interesting thought." She lifted a hand and waved as Jessan's big form broke the crest of the road and plunged down the other side, heading in her direction. "More going on than we know probably."

"Isn't it always?"

"Mm."

**

Cait lay curled in a ball, her eyes fixed on the opening to their shelter. She could see the snow still falling and she tried to compose herself to sleep, but it was hard.

Nala was, out like a light. So was Iolaus. But she knew Hercules wasn't – he was seated next to the fire, his knees hiked up to his chin, his long arms surrounding them.

He seemed deep in thought, and to her, he seemed also kind of sad.

Finally after quite a long time of keeping her eyes closed and not feeling like sleeping, she finally sat up and settled herself next to Hercules. "Bother."

He glanced at her. "Can't sleep?"

"No." Cait admitted. "I feel like I should be doing something and we're not." She explained. "I think we should go find those people before they get off too far."

"My sisters, you mean."

"Yes."

Hercules glanced out at the snow. "Not sure we could find them in this, is the problem." He said. "Io's a good tracker, and probably you are too, but with that wind and that snow, they could be right the other side of this ridge and we'd miss them."

“No, I know that. “ Cait responded. “I didn’t say we could go, just that we should. I think if we don’t find them, at least try to, something bad could happen.”

“Huh.” Hercules exhaled. “Honestly I feel the same way. I just don’t know that we can do anything about it until it calms down outside.”

He got up and went to the entrance of the cave, putting his hands on either side of the opening and peering out. He was still for a minute then he leaned further out. “W..”

Cait jumped up and joined him. “What’s up?”

“Hear something.” He walked out into the snow, holding one arm up to shield his face and Cait followed him, pulling her cloak around her as they walked away from the cave and down the small slope to the ledge they’d climbed up and over earlier.

Cait filtered out the wind and listened, focusing past the rattling branches to a faint tinkling and crunch. “Horses.”

“Yes.. and a wagon.” Hercules turned back with sudden decisiveness. “We can’t take a chance. Let’s find out who they are.”

It was a relief. Cait knelt at Nala’s side and woke her, and they gathered their gear in tense silence as Hercules went to get the horses.

“What if it’s an army we’re about to run into?” Iolaus said scrubbing his face with both hands. “Wouldn’t that be better on a little sleep?”

“It didn’t sound like an army.” Cait said. “And anyway they could be lost. We should help them.”

“As long as they don’t have crossbows pointed at us” Nala shouldered hers and slung her back to her back. “Or funny ideas about taking us captive.”

“As if.” Cait snorted.

**

They heard the army approaching long before they saw them. Xena was seated comfortably on Argo’s back, hands resting in front of her as the approaching clatter of hooves and wheels on the road grew louder.

“Don’t care who knows they’re here, huh?” Gabrielle had her gloved hands tucked under her arms to keep them warm, and she had her cloak wrapped around her.

“They assume theyre bigger than anyone out there. Not sure they got a good look at how many troops we had.” Xena responded.

“Can’t we just go kill them?” Ares asked, from the back of his inky dark steed, who was steadfastly ignoring the weather as though it wasn’t there. “We’re wasting time.”

“Wont’ have long to wait.” Xena lifted her hand, and watched her signal sent forward, from the captain who was seated just in view, observing her like a hawk. “Here they come.”

There was an almost silent shiver of motion around them, as the army prepared themselves to move. Xena glued her eyes on the edge of the road at the horizon, and she left her hand up, fingers outstretched.

Motion at the horizon line, and then the vanguard of the opposing troops came into sight, a wedge of riders spanning the road, oblivious to the silent, waiting warriors waiting down the slope for them.

“Don’t they see us?” Ares asked, in a low tone as he leaned towards Xena.

“Snow on the road is blinding them. We’re in the shadows.” The warrior answered, in the same low tone. “That’s why I had them clear as much snow as possible from the ground.”

“Mmph.” Ares studied the ground around them, trampled into mud by many hooved feet, then he glanced back at Xena, seeing the tall body stiffen and her center of balance move forward over her knees. “Now?”

Xena watched the first mounted troops hit a slightly narrower part of the road, and she closed her fingers into a fist, then took a deep breath and let out a battle yell so loud it made Iolaus put back his ears.

They charged forward, voices picking up her call and a rising tide of noise rushed the road as Xena’s army thundered up the slope and into the enemy troops, overpowering the late reacting and suddenly turning men who suddenly found themselves at war.

Xena had her sword out and she circled to her left as Argo got to the road and she headed right into the front ranks, aware of Ares at her right and Gabrielle a horse length behind her.

It was dark. The clouds made it even darker but there was a hint of dull gray light in the east and Xena could see perfectly well anyway. She backhanded her sword at the first enemy soldier she came on and powered right through his hastily raised blade and bit deep into his shoulder.

She heard the sound of bows releasing, and fast after that, screams of horses going down.

Two men came at her, as a blaze of torchlight outlined her form and she engaged one of them, watching the other go down as he was cut in half by the Sword of War, hearing a deep, happy chuckle from Ares as he shoved the man out of his saddle and watched the bodyparts clatter down the slope.

A flash of motion came past her, and then she heard the distinctive sound of Gabrielle’s staff connecting, instinct making her pull Argo around in a tight circle only to watch an enemy body tumble out of his saddle as his horse galloped along up the road.

A brief look at Gabrielle’s face, and widened eyes made her whirl around again, ducking as a spear nearly caught her in the throat. She let the shaft of it slide over her shoulder and readied her sword as the man holding it came up against her and tried to pull it back to sweep her off Argo’s back.

Too fast for her to spit him. She quickly reversed the sword in her hand and slammed the hilt against his armored chest, adding the impact of her shoulder as they came together.

He coughed and let go of the spear, grabbing for her instead with both hands, but she was already past him and driving her backward facing blade into his spine and then wrenching it sideways as he came past.

Another solid whack and she moved on, a line of her troops shoving the enemy soldiers down the other side of the road and fighting with them as the Amazons coolly sat tight in their rocky hiding spots and carefully aimed and fired.

To their credit the enemy soldiers in the second and third ranks had hauled their horses off the far side of the road and scrambled off them, aiming back at the hidden archers on Xena’s side. They were hampered though, by the mounted men who were hauling around to head back up the road, getting away from their attackers and yelling for the wagons and support behind them to turn around.

“C’mon.” Xena pointed with her sword. “That’s the guy in charge.” She kneed Argo off the side of the road and circled the hand to hand battles, with Ares and Gabrielle tight at her heels. They circled the archers as fast as they could, ducking to avoid the arrows as the fighters turned to aim at them.

It was just too dark for them to see. The leader sensed them catching up and he turned, putting his back to the trees and raising his sword as they came at him.

Xena didn’t hesitate. She guided Argo right at him and lifted her own sword, at the last minute leaping free of her saddle and slamming into his armored form as her momentum took him out of his saddle and them both into the bushes behind him.

He grunted as they hit and rolled free, coming up to his feet and swinging at her. Xena reached up to release her cloak as it caught on the branches and felt it pull free as she intercepted his swing and drove the blade up and past her.

This close and he could see her. He took a sudden step back. “A woman?” He blurted, in a tone of disbelief.

“More of one than you can handle.” Xena replied, switching her sword from her right hand to her left and planting a roundhouse punch to the side of his face. He was thrown back in utter surprise and stumbled into the snow covered bush, flailing his arms.

Xena went after him, as he came back at her with a hastily pulled dagger, displaying a pit fighter’s skills as they closed and his arm moved with flickering speed towards her.

“Xena!”

It made Xena smile, hearing that edge to that voice. She stopped in mid motion and sent herself skyward, rolling over the captain’s head and landing on her feet as he lunged, aiming a kick at his rear and booting him forward towards Ares, who picked him up and tossed him back at her.

He rolled up to his feet and slashed at her, and she went with the motion, then she reversed course and rolled her sword over her wrist, bringing the point down to chop into the fingers he had clutched around the dagger, cutting his hand through.

His mouth opened with shock, and he stumbled back into the bushes again losing his balance and falling onto his back, his other hand fumbling and finding his sword to raise it.

Jessan was there, then, with two other forest dwellers and six of Xena’s troops, forming a circle around the bush as Xena leaped over the man’s sprawled legs and grabbed hold of his armor, hauling him upright as she kicked his sword out of his hand.

Using the momentum she shoved him against the thickest part of the bush, then drew one hand back and applied a nerve block to his neck in a rapid move. “Okay.” She said. “You’ve got thirty seconds to tell me what your mission is, and where you’re going or you’re going to die.”

The man’s face was already turning red, and his hands twitched violently. “Who are you?” He gasped out.

Ares came over and rested his elbow on Xena’s shoulder. “She’s Xena. I’d cough up the info if I were you or I’ll make you only wish you were going to die.” He smiled at the man and wiggled the fingers of one hand, which let off a distinct blue sparkle, which extended to his eyes , making the side of Xena’s face faintly glow from it.

He stared. “Who are you?”

Xena had to give him points for guts. “He’s Ares, son of Zeus. The God of War” She said in a dry tone. “If I were you I wouldn’t get him pissed off either.”

“Aw, Xena. That’s the nicest thing you ever said about me.” Ares knuckles brushed her cheek and he winked at her.

Gabrielle was standing to one side, her staff at ready, her cloak hanging back off her shoulders and her hood down. She saw the man’s expression change as he realized who Ares was and he dropped to his knees, hands grasping at his throat frantically. “I think he got it, hon.”

“I think you’re right.” Xena reached over and released him “Tell your men to put their weapons down.”

He sucked in a breath without even hesitating. “Yield!” He coughed out. “Yield! All of you! I command it!”

“Aw.” Ares sighed. “Does that mean the fight’s over?”

The sound of fighting slowly faded and Xena could hear weapons dropping to the icy ground. "Maybe." She answered Ares. "Depends on what else this guy tells us."

The sky was slowly growing lighter, and Xena's men took advantage of that in picking up the dropped weapons, and dragging bodies off the road into the ditch on the other side.

Gabrielle let out a whistle of her own, and lifted her staff, hearing the sounds of pebbles skittering down as the Amazons left their perches and headed her way, dodging around the troop captains, now unarmed, who were being hustled over to where Xena was.

Redden came over, sheathing his sword. "All accounted for, Genr'l." He said. "We'll round em all up and sit em down for ya." He gave Ares a brief look, and a polite salute, which made the God of War chuckle deep in his throat.

"Thanks." Xena said.

"What's your name?" Xena asked the captain.

He glowered at her. "Heraldas."

"All right, Heraldas." Xena went over and retrieved her cloak, thrusting her sword into the snow and then wiping it down on the cloth before she reseated the blade in her sheath. "Your shield says you're from the port city. You work for some guy called Pinu?"

"Xena, we're going to go up the road a bit." Jessan gently interrupted her. "My guys hear something."

"Go." Xena said. "Be careful."

Jessan grinned. "You too Ch… " He paused and furtively glanced at Ares. "Xena. Bye." He trotted off, motioning the rest of the forest dwellers to follow him which they immediately did.

"Now." Ares stepped closer to the man, putting his hands on his hips. "What's your scam, mortal." He said. "Your buddy there think he's something special?"

Heraldas swallowed visibly. "I don't know what you mean, oh great one." He said. "We were sent out to subdue some renegades, is all. They sent threats to our city." He added. "We were just heading back home when you attacked us."

This, he directed at Xena, who smiled at him.

"All right." Ares said. "Who cares?" He said. "So tell me something I'm really interested in. I'm looking for two chicks."

Heraldas peeked up at him furtively. "Women, great one?"

"Yeah." Ares said. "I like women, if you didn't get that from the company I keep." He said. "So I want two more. Two that some of your friends might have kidnapped."

Heraldas turned dead white. "We steal no women." He protested. "All we have come with us willingly. These are hard times, and we take them to a better place."

"Which is?" Ares said.

The man looked right and left, then up at him. "I know not, great one. I am an army captain. We don't have any contact with the.. " He paused.

"Foragers?" Gabrielle suggested.

Heraldas eyed her, then turned away dismissively. "Great one, you should go to our city. I know many there would worship you." His voice turned wheedling "Travel with my army. We are men, who understand and bend knee to you."

Ares regarded him. "Where are the closest bunch of those foragers to here?" He asked, with quiet seriousness. "I know there's some nearby."

He nodded. “Three leagues, perhaps. We passed them on our way. But they had no women.” He said. “Only some boys, and a few animals.”

“You’re lying.” Gabrielle said. “We know there were at least a few women with them.”

He didn’t even look at her this time. Gabrielle dropped her staff down to a horizontal position and whipped the end of it at him, catching him in the side of the head and splitting his ear. A splash of blood hit the white, churned and frosty ground as he fell sideways in shock.

“Good hit, your Maj.” Solari said. “Buddy, we aint gods but you better answer our Queen or you’re gonna get your man’s parts ripped off if you don’t.”

But he shook his head. “There were no women.” He said. “And thank the gods, none like you.”

Ares turned towards Gabrielle. “He’s lying?” He asked her, cocking up one eyebrow. “C’mon Gabrielle. You’ve always had a finger on the pulse. Or whatever that stupid mortal saying is.”

“He’s lying.” Gabrielle repeated. “I heard two of his men talking about how we were uppity like the ones they had nearby.”

Ares patted her cheek. Then he turned, and with a casual, throw away gesture extended his fingers towards the man and in a moment, he was twitching and then silent and still on the ground. “Let’s go find those two men, huh? Maybe they’ll have a better attitude.

**

Cait crawled up onto the ridge, carefully placing her boots on the icy surface as she got her head over the skyline and peered over it.

It was dark and snowing. Hard to say if anything was down there, but as she stood there a bit indecisive the wind shifted a little and she caught the scent of wood smoke.

Ah. She turned and motioned her companions forward, and after a moment and a curse or two Nala, Hercules and Iolaus were up next to her. “Smell their fire.” She whispered. “Over there, see? Under that rock bit.”

Hercules shaded his eyes and blinked. “No I d.. oh. A couple of sparks, yeah.” He said. “You think that’s them?”

Cait shrugged. “It’s really impossible to tell you know. It’s someone.” She prepared to edge over the ridge and go down the other side. “Let me go see.”

Hercules reached out a hand but she was already gone, wrapping her cloak around her and making her way through the drifting snow towards the dimly seen fire. “Wish she wouldn’t do that.”

“Might as well wish you were a fish.” Nala stated. “Should we go after her? If she falls into that camp hard to say who’ll it will end up worse for.”

“We should.” Iolaus said, as he pulled his hood up and went after Cait, his profile breaking the skyline briefly before he disappeared.

“Guess that’s that.” Hercules sighed. “Hope the horses’ll be okay.” He lifted his big frame over the snow covered hilltop, keeping to his feet as he made his way down with Nala right behind him. “Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Maybe we will.”

**

Cait wished, somewhat vainly, that the ground wasn’t covered with quite so much snow. She was crawling slowly closer to her target, the fire now close enough for her to hear the snaps and smell the heat of it.

Not quite close enough to feel the heat though, it was tightly made, and the wind was blowing to the side, away from where Cait was.

She paused and waited, listening intently.

Shift of skin against cloth, and a sigh.

Then, a voice. “We’re gunna have to hunt tomorra.”

“Shh.” Another voice answered. “Don’t wake them all up. Don’t want to hear em whining.”

Cait edged a bit closer.

“Cut cross country, we should. Get back to the city fast.” The first voice responded. “Get these to the block, get our money.”

“No sense trying to find more now. Too much going on.” The second said. “Damned soldiers. Coulda taken us with im.”

Cait could feel the snow melting under her, and she grimaced a little, as it soaked into the front of her shirt. Her fingers were beginning to numb, and she flexed her hands, putting her dagger down for a moment as she rubbed her fingertips together.

“Yeh, bastards.” The first one said. “We got enough water? Creek’s about frozen over. Let me get another bucket.” He got up with surprising rapidity and started out right towards Cait, a bucket swinging from one hand.

“Bother.” Cait muttered to herself, glancing to either side and then quickly moving herself over against a fallen log mostly covered in snow.

More cold, more wet. But her dark cloak hid her and he passed by without even a sideways glance, only to freeze in mid motion at a muffled sneeze not far away.

“Joh? That you?” The man turned and looked over his shoulder back at the fire. “That you just sneeze?”

“Me? No.” The other man stood up. “You hear something? Wasn’t from that lot in the wagon Ida heard em. Someone out there?”

“Let me look.” The first man came back over and picked up a wrapped torch, thrusting the end of it into the fire and waiting for it to catch.

Cait took advantage of that to slide over to the other side of the log, then move into the trees and get behind a pile of rocks opposite where the noise had come from. She figured the rest of her group was doing the same, then blinked in surprise when Iolaus simply strolled out and walked over to them, waving in the friendliest of manners. “Hoh.” She let out a grunt under her breath. “What’s he doing?”

“Evening there, gents.” Iolaus said. “I’m lost. You have any idea where the road is?”

The men had froze on seeing him, now both moved between him and the dimly seen wagon, standing shoulder to shoulder. “Who’re you?”

“My names Iolaus.” He cheerfully supplied. “I’m an itinerant storyteller. Most of the time I wander around Macedonia but I just came through the pass back there and now I’m lost.”

He had stopped just shy of the fire, and had his hands hitched in his belt, his cloak draped over his body. He had no obvious weapons showing, and just a small dagger at his belt as most men traveling would wear.

“We can’t help you.” The closer of the men said. “Be on with ya.”

Iolaus cocked his head to one side. “So you’re lost too?” He asked. “Hey, maybe we can be lost together.. “ He started forward again, until he was close enough to the fire to have it reflect off his skin. “Can you at least tell me where I am?”

Cait caught motion from the corner of her eye, and she focused on it, her eyes picking out Hercules’s tall, muscular form easing behind the rocks where the men were camped, and she nodded a little, approving of the strategy. “Right.”

Turning her head slowly, she spotted Nala behind her, tucked up against the fallen trees as she was. After a moment she carefully eased herself up onto a piece of the log she was near, getting herself up off the ground and out of the snow.

"We're in west Thrace." The man gruffly answered Iolaus. "Road's just a bit through the trees there. No space here for anyone else. Sorry."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of intruding." Iolaus smiled knowingly at them. "I can see you two are cozy there. I'll just warm my hands up a minute, then be on my way." He held his hands out while the two of them slowly turned over his words.

"Hey. What you mean there?" One said, indignantly. "What did you just say we were?"

Iolaus smiled at them, and started to back away. "Now now.. no harm done lads. I've had it said of me in the past too. It's all one under Zeus's eye."

The two men started after him, drawing swords. "I"ll teach you to say things like that." The leader said, as they circled the fire and advanced on Iolaus.

"Hey, c'mon guys!" Iolaus started moving faster. "I won't tell anyone! Honest!"

He was quite good. Cait had to admit to herself. He'd drawn the two guards away from the fire and given Hercules a chance to slip past them and climb up onto the wagon to inspect it's contents. She saw his profile briefly raise up over edge of the buckboard, then he disappeared.

Cait wasn't sure what, if anything, he expected her and Nala to do, so she decided to do nothing, just keep hidden and ready in case her sword or knife were needed.

And then it all changed, when tall, armored figures suddenly appeared around the wagon and a call rang out. "Intruder!"

"Oh bother." Cait said, getting ready to stand up. "I knew it was too good to be true."

Iolaus dodged around the two men and started for the wagon, and as they chased after him Cait and Nala jumped up and engaged with them, the silence of the night broken abruptly by the ring of steel on steel and yells of rage.

Cait had just dodged a knife at her face when she caught sight of Hercules up on top of the wagon again, and then, as the moon slid briefly out from behind the clouds she heard an arrow release and then saw him jerk in mid air.

"Herc!" Iolaus saw it to, reaching the wagon and vaulting on top of it, grabbing for his friend as torches flared and the sound of crossbows cocking rang out loud and clear across the snowy ground.

"Enemies be still or you will be spitted." A man's voice yelled. "We have you surrounded!"

Cait looked around and found it was true. Men were stepping out from the trees and they had longbows and crossbows, all of them pointed at her, and Nala, and the two men up on the wagon. She looked up and Nala looked right back at her, understanding clear in the encounter.

Cait lowered her sword.

One of the soldiers brought a torch close. "It's a woman." He said, in a tone of surprise.

"Two of them." Nala also put her sword down, edging over to get next to Cait. "Who were doing no harm to anyone."

"Consorting with gods? You do no good for anyone." The man said. "Get that one in chains." He pointed at Iolaus with his sword. "Put these chits in the wagon with the rest, and get moving. You're lucky we found you."

Nala and Cait exchanged glances, as Cait shifted her grip on her sword and felt her body tense up.

What should she do?

What would Xena do?

Cait had no question in her mind what her idol would do, and it would involve quite a lot of blood and various bits and pieces of the soldiers around her being scattered about the snow staining it crimson. There was no way…

The soldiers moved towards her and Nala, ignoring the fact they were armed, leering at them a bit. Cait drew in a breath and sheathed her blade, remembering an image once of her holding a rope and Xena being led by it, hands bound.

"C'mon ya bit of a thing." She didn't resist when one of the men poked her with the end of his spear. "Into the wagon with ya. Any luck and they'll feed ya some in there."

Nala was watching her closely. Cait met her eyes, and very briefly, winked, getting a rapid eye roll back, as the other Amazon meekly submitted to the shove herself towards the wagon.

On top, two men were grabbing hold of Iolaus, whose whole focus was on the limp form of Hercules lying across the back of the wagon, legs draped over the edge of it.

"Good thing that'un left us them dark arrows." The captain of the troops stated, with a sense of satisfaction. "Got that Hercules right off. We'll get good money for him at the gates, that's for sure."

**

Xena stood quietly, arms folded, as she watched the dawn light outline a landscape in black and silver and white, a stiff wind starting to pick up and blow branches against each other and dump snow on the ground underneath them.

The army was getting ready to move, their wagons already up on the road. The enemy soldiers were seated on the ground, stripped of their weapons and apparently completely cowed by Ares nearby presence.

"What's wrong?" Gabrielle asked.

"What makes you think something is?" Her partner eyed her, the faintest of smiles appearing on her face.

"Oh, Xena please. Like I've never traveled with you before and don't know that look on your face." The bard retorted. "Is it the fact they surrendered before you got a really good fight in?"

Xena put her hands on her hips as she half turned to face Gabrielle.

The bard's eyes twinkled at her. After a moment of that, Xena poked the tip of her tongue out and then turned all the way around and scanned the horizon again. "I wish I knew what was wrong." She admitted. "I feel like eyeballs are glued to my back."

"Ah." Gabrielle got serious, since that was nothing to make jokes about. Xena's odd, weird, sometimes mystical and occasionally completely self made up feelings more often than not ended them up into trouble and always had.

Sometimes, she just knew. Other times, she convinced herself that she just knew, but in the end it didn't matter because it was what it was. "These guys seemed to give up pretty easy." She remarked. "Even with Ares here."

"Yeah." Xena said. "Get behind me, willya?"

Gabrielle did, bringing her staff up crossways across her body as she took up position between Xena and the nearest tree, having the tree at her back, and her watching Xena's. Watching her partner she could see the muscles of the side of her face twitching and the edges of her ears moving and she knew if she could see her profile her nostrils would be flaring out to catch the wind blowing in both their faces.

Now she could smell the wax coating of Xena's cloak and the wool, and as the warrior turned slightly she moved also seeing the fabric shift as Xena straightened up and her body stiffened.

The area looked normal. The army was moving about their various tasks, and they were stowing the bundles of arrows taken from the enemy into wagons as two of the wagon leaders loaded on waterskins from the nearby creek they'd cut ice on that morning.

There was nothing that seemed out of place, and yet, Xena's hand had lifted and shifted her cloak to clear the hilt of her sword, and she could see the curve of her hand as it rested on the chakram at her belt.

Ares appeared from just past the fire, spotting Xena and angling his steps towards her.

Gabrielle could see the warrior's eyes focus on him, then slip past and then she heard the sudden intake of breath as Xena let out a yell of warning and lunged into motion.

Gabrielle waited just a split second until she saw Xena's hand come down from her sword and start to reach out and she looked at her angle and pointed into the trees beyond the creek. "There!" She let out a yell of her own as the army started to react. "We're being attacked!"

Instantly, Solari was at her side, bow out, arrow nocked. She drew her arm back and without hesitation let fly in the direction Gabrielle was pointing just as a wave of enemy soldiers swept out of the trees and arrows came flying back in the other direction.

One larger than the rest, and heading right at Ares who had stopped in reaction to Xena's motion and turned towards her.

He seemed a perfect target, all in black, outlined against the silver and white. The arrow was straight and true and the length of the head of it away from the God of War's chest when it was grabbed from mid air by Xena's hand.

Next instant, she crashed full into him and took them both the ground as the rest of the Amazons joined Gabrielle behind a fallen tree and fired over it.

She saw a figure in dark gray leap over the edge of the camp, as the enemy they had subdubed got up and joined the fight, and she saw where he was aiming and without a lot of thought she was up and jumping over the log.

He had his bow out and was already aiming and she reached him through a cloud of arrows that peppered her on every side as she brought her staff around and he sensed her presence.

He turned his head and glared at her. "Stop!"

Gabrielle didn't even pause. She got the end of her staff and smashed it against the crossbow he was carrying, feeling a heavy sting in her hands at the impact. Then she was up right against him and slammed her elbow against his head as he scrambled to react, obviously shocked at the attack.

He dropped the bow and pulled a dagger out and she was too close to use her staff so she ducked to one side, but he anticipated her and the blade was moving too fast for her to get out of it's way.

Then he was being picked up and moved and was gone, and she caught her balance and followed, whacking him on the back as Xena slammed him against a rock and the dagger went spinning away.

The warrior continued her motion and yanked the bowman back towards her, then tossed him against the stone again, backhanding him across the face as he reached out for her.

He thumped against the rack and stared at her. "Xena!"

She smiled grimly and grabbed the hand clasping at her. "Have we met?" She asked, having a good idea who he was regardless.

"No." He said, staring past her. "Why did you stop me?" He snarled. "He's not your friend."

"No." Xena felt it go a little quiet around her. "Neither are you."

"You wont stop us." He responded, in all that quiet. "It's the end. Join us."

Xena knew if she looked around, the figures would be still, as her opponent took them for a moment out of time.

"He'll just use you." The man said. "You know it."

She could sense Gabrielle behind her, could sense Ares not far away, and knew he was watching her. She took a breath and bore down, closing her eyes and wanting the noise back and in that breath it was. "It doesn't matter." She said, raising a fist and smashing it against his face.

He was too surprised to stop her and he bounced back against the stone, reeling off balance and falling to one side, the snow absorbing his fall for an instant, and then, seemingly, absorbing him as well.

Xena turned as Gabrielle collided with her, the bard's pale eyes wide and startled "Hey!"

"Oh." Gabrielle said. "That was weird.. I thought for a minute.."

"Yeah. Later." The warrior told her. "Right now let's not get clobbered."

The army was now at their backs and repelling the attack, heavy fighters coming over and going toe to toe with the bowmen who had come out of the trees. There was no yells, and no sound save the crunch of boots on the dead branches and the dull thunks and clangs of weapons in flight.

Gabrielle heard the sound of Xena drawing her sword, that distinctive whoosh and ting as the blade cleared the scabbard and she got herself around two fighting men and behind her partner as she engaged a third.

The man in gray was gone, she realized, and she looked down as her foot encountered an obstacle, finding herself standing on the crossbow he'd dropped in the fight. She kept her weight on it and swung her staff against the head of the man fighting next to her, sending him to the ground and freeing up Redder from the battle.

"Thank ya!" The captain saluted her briefly with his sword, before he swung it at an enemy soldier who had gotten up and was trying to take a spear from one of their own. "Smarmy bastards!"

Gabrielle felt a touch on her side and she glanced over to see Xena there, her head sweeping side to side to view the battle.

Two whistles, then three short ones,. "Kill them all!" The warrior added in a bellow. "Coward's deserve it!"

The army roared in response, and now a second wave of Xena's troops charged the attackers, moving past their general and driving the enemy back towards the trees.

Xena hopped up onto the rock to watch, her sword in her hand. They outnumbered the enemy significantly, and she could see the bowmen already retreating, their weapons clutched in one hand as they ducked through the trees with Xena's forces chasing them.

There were bodies all over the ground where she was. A few hers, mostly theirs, many of the troops they'd captured having fallen as they tried to get re-armed.

The Amazons gathered around them, bright eyed, and pleased. Pasi was going from body to body retrieving arrows and Solari was cleaning her sword off on her cloak before resheathing it. "Y'know, one thing about this cold stuff." She remarked. "Got something to wash the gunk off and something to wipe it down yeah?"

"Yeah." Pasi agreed. "Good fight. Don't know what they were thinking trying to jump us."

Xena sheathed her own sword, unblooded in the fight, as Ares came up to stand next to her. "That was.."

"Yeah." The God of War cut her off. "Thanks." He added, grudgingly. "Didn't want to go through that nursey nursey thing of yours again."

Xena nodded. "Move out!" She ordered the army. "Lets get after them!" She glanced at Jessan, who had come up dusting his hands off on his battlecoat. "Don't leave anyone living here."

"You got it, Chosen." Jessan said, firmly. "There's a lot of scummy stuff going on with these guys. They were drawing the rest of them in."

"Yeah." Xena exhaled. "It's becoming a little clearer who's on what side."

**

They were all shoved into one wagon, as it turned out, with only one little boy inside it. He scrambled back away from the when they entered, eyes wide, and huddled at the back of the dirty space as the soldiers threw in first the bleeding Hercules, then Iolaus, then the two Amazons.

The hatch slammed behind them.

Inside the wagon had a thin layer of straw on the bottom and a bucket in the corner that stank.

Iolaus exhaled. "Not how I wanted today to end up."

"I saw in the other wagon before they put me in this one." Cait said, in a quiet voice. "I think they're in there."

"Doesn't really help now." Iolaus knelt beside the unconscious Hercules, examining the arrow sticking out of him. "This is from Hade's realm."

Cait edged closer, looking briefly over at the boy and giving him a smile. "It's all right. We're not going to hurt you."

"The arrow is?" Nala asked, ignoring the kid.

"Yeah." Iolaus exhaled. "It'll keep going inside him until he fades out."

"Fades out?" Nala frowned. "Is that like.."

"Something like that." Iolaus cut her off. "We've got to get it out of him." He looked around the inside of the wagon. "Anyone got a bit of candle?"

Cait fished in her belt pouch, which she'd been left along with her belt knife and, to her befuddlement her sword. "Here you are." She handed over a hand span long wax candle. "Got that just before we left. Most if its there."

Nala had been left her weapons as well, though Iolaus and Hercules had been completely stripped of theirs.

Made no sense, really. Cait pulled out her flint and striker and offered that as well. "Or I could do it for you." She said.

"Would you mind?" Iolaus held the candle out and put a bit of his waxed cloak under it to keep the sparks from the straw. "Gotta be careful. Wouldn't take much to make this gunk go up in flames."

"Too right." Cait carefully struck sparks at the candle, and the third one hit the cup and wick and it started to burn. She cupped her hand around it as it caught and the inside of the wagon grew in clarity from the dim gray light coming in through cracks in the boards.

There was a lot of blood on Hercules's chest. Nala pulled out her waterskin and uncapped it. "Hope someone kind finds those horses." She commented, with a sigh. "Glad we didn't tie them."

Iolaus put the candle on a bare area of the wood, dripping a few drops of wax first to hold it in place. Then he held his hands out to Nala and took a little water into his cupped hands scrubbing them briskly. "Got a.. ah."

Cait handed over her dagger. "Had that done to me once." She said, in a mild tone. "Here." She pulled aside her thick overtunic, exposing a long healed scar. "They had to burn it closed."

"Whoa." Nala's eyes widened.

“Mm.” The younger Amazon agreed. “Xena did it. I only just remember it hurting and Gabrielle taking hold of me.”

Iolaus gave her a respectful glance, before he started running the blade through the fire, balancing carefully as the wagon started to move. “Nice.”

“They’re in a hurry.”

“G’oin to Pinu.” The boy spoke up, suddenly. “Gonna eatcha.”

“Not hardly.” Nala said. “I’ll cut his tongue out if he tries.” She shifted around and started clearing the cloth off from around the arrow. “That’s wicked looking.”

“It is.” Cait had dribbled water from her skin around the shaft protruding from the demigod’s chest, the surface moving faintly but steadily. “Is it metal?”

“Forged in Hade’s hearth.” Iolaus examined the knife, then shifted around, to let the light fall on the arrow. “Stupid bastard. I know how Xena feels now.”

They watched as he took a deep breath, and, with a pained grimace, gently started cutting around the arrow shaft protruding from Hercules’ chest. Blood spurted from the cut and started to roll down to the straw, but not even a twitch moved his face as he lay there still.

Cait tried to imagine what had been like, when she’d undergone the same process. She’d been unconscious, but in a faint echoy way she seemed to remember hearing voices and the pressure of hands against her flesh.

Xena’s voice, quiet and calm, and Gabrielle’s, full of compassion. And Ephiny’s, since she’d been with them escaping from the village capture.

Would Hercules remember hearing their voices? Cait reached over to gently clasp his hand with her own. “It’ll be all right.” She said, not entirely sure if she was talking to the injured man or to Iolaus, whose face was flinching at every cut he made. “After all, mine was.”

Outside they heard the drover’s yelling and felt the wagon moving faster. Iolaus crouched closer, lifting his elbows so the motion wouldn’t skew his aim. “Know what I wish?” He said, as he paused to dribble a bit more water on the wound.

“That Xena was here?” Cait guessed.

“We should have stayed with the army.” He obliquely answered. “Sure hope she’s moving fast.”

**

Xena pushed her hood down and studied the ground before them. The road stretched out in front of them, now angling downward towards the plains that would eventually end at the port city. To the right a branch of the road headed towards a thick woods, and on that road they could see some abandoned wagons and debris. “Redder, check that out.”

“Aye.” The captain wheeled his horse and whistled up a squad of cavalry, who followed him towards the wagons.

Xena whistled and pointed at the main road and the troops started moving that way. “Phillippi is down that road.” She said, to Gabrielle. “Don’t really have time to visit.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Wish we’d hooked up with Bennu and Cait, though.” She said. “I’m worried about them.”

“Me too.” Her partner responded. “But we could end up doing them a favor bypassing them.”

“And Phillippi.”

“True.” Xena shifted a little and removed her water skin from her saddle ring, taking a sip from it as they moved past the split in the road and started down the slope.

The road here was level with the ground and the army spread out on either side of it, almost a dozen abreast as they gave themselves more space, only the wagons sticking to the level surface of the old Roman roadway.

They would make good time now. Xena could see the snow thinning on the ground as well, though the icy cold bite of the air still brushed against her skin and made her pull her hood back up to cover her ears.

But at least it had stopped snowing, and with clear ground ahead of them the hoofbeats picked up and the last of the treeline went by them. "Keep a sharp look." Xena called out. "We're gonna be easy to spot."

Ares was riding on her other side, once again visible only to her and Gabrielle. "Now we're getting somewhere." He commented.

"We are." Xena had her map out and she was studying it, the parchment clasped in both hands, her reins draped untended across her saddlebow. "We should be in sight of the port city after dark."

Ares nodded. "Then what?" He asked, giving her a sideways glance.

Now that was a good question. "Depends." Xena deferred it. "I could just come up on them in the dark and go head on against them." She looked back at Ares, who paused briefly, then grinned. "Thought you'd like that."

"Get them before they have a chance to dig in?" Gabrielle commented. "Hope those walls aren't as high as Therma's were."

"Me too."

Xena rolled up the map and put it back in it's hide holder, tucking it away in her saddlebag. She looked up as Redder returned. "Anything?"

"Empty, genr'l." The captain reported. "Just rags, and bits of boxes, tossed away." He handed her a rolled up bit of fabric. "This is the only thing that was whole."

She unrolled the ball and shook it out. It was a flag, of sorts. A pennant roughly the size of the one the cavalry was posting on a spear, but it had the emblem of a sun with an outline of a duck in front of it. "Huh."

Gabrielle came closer. "You know that one?"

Xena shook her head. "Redder?"

"No, ma'am."

She turned to her left. "You?"

Ares agreeably moved his black steed over and took the fabric, examining it. "What is this supposed to be?"

"City pennant, probably." Xena said. "Seen it before?"

The God of War studied it with a frown. "Maybe." He admitted. "Not on this." He flapped the fabric. "On a shield."

"Makes sense." Xena said.

Ares looked at the sigil again, then handed it back. "Probably some war somewhere." He said. "Any other piece of trash you want me to look at for you?"

Gabrielle half turned away as she adjusted a bit of her cloak, then she caught sight of Iolaus's head as it came up, his nostrils flaring. "What's up, big boy?" She patted him on the neck.

He shuffled his hooves a little, then threw his head up and snuffled hard at the air, his ears flicking backwards and forwards.

“Hey Xe?”

“I see him.” Xena sidestepped Argo over, studying the horse. “What’s got you all excited, boy?”

Iolaus suddenly let out a bugle, which startled the rest of the animals around him and would have risen on his hind legs if Xena hadn’t grabbed his bridge. “Hey!”

“What the heck?”

“He smells something.” Xena stood up in her stirrups and stared past the army, who had paused as she had and were milling around a little.

Iolaus let out another bugle.

“That’s a stallion call.” Xena said, eying him. “Mare in heat maybe?” She studied her own horse. Argo was facing in the same direction as her son, her ears pricked forward. Then she turned her own face into the wind, licking her lips and opening her mouth a little to allow the air to pass over her tongue.

Ares watched her. “What is she doing?”

“Trying to figure out what the horses are smelling.”

“Other horses?” The God of War ventured a guess. “As if it’s not surrounded by them??” He gestured around at the cavalry. “Hello?”

“No.” Xena sat down abruptly. “Guard!” She let out a yell. “To the left, along the path!” She guided Argo through the army as the edge of the woods beyond the wood shivered into motion, several running forms bursting into view and galloping towards them.

“Oh crap.” Gabrielle grabbed her own reins and released the eager Iolaus’s head. “Those are our horses.”

She waited for a wave of riders to get started ahead of her and then she went after Xena, the warrior rapidly getting into the forefront as they headed in the direction of the riderless animals coming in the other direction.

“Huh.” Ares gave his horse a slap on the rear. “C’mon Cherub, move your tail.”

The coal black steed gave him a droll look, then accelerated into a gallop that almost left his rider behind. “Hey!”

Xena was already ahead of the scouts, letting out a whistle as she closed in on the four horses heading their way. She recognized both Shadow, the gray in the lead, and the sorrel mare that Nala had ridden and behind them the white mare she knew was the human Iolaus’ with a big bay she remembered was Hercules.

Having them be running free in broad daylight with their tack in place meant nothing good. She let out another whistle and Shadow and the sorrel swerved and headed towards her. The other two kept galloping but after a minute they slowed.

“Cmere girl.” Argo caught up to Shadow and Xena leaned over, taking hold of the gray horses’ bridle and slowing them both to a halt. “What’s up with you huh?”

Iolaus had bugled again, and the two mares touched noses with him, as the vanguard of the army closed around Xena in a circle.

“Those are yours.” Jessan said. “I know that gray and the white one.”

Two of the other soldiers had caught the other horses and brought them over. Gabrielle had dismounted and she went over to Shadow’s saddle, opening the pouch there and peering inside. “Cait’s.”

“Yeah.” Xena was examining the white mare. “Iolaus’s gear.”

“What’s up?” Ares threaded his way into the circle. “Hey great. More horses.”

“From our scout group.” Xena said. “And your half brother and his friend.”

Ares chuckled. “I told him to stick with us. But no.” He said. “He had to go out and find his little buddy. Guess he did. Now they’re both probably stuck in some ice hole.”

“Let’s go find out.” Xena said. “Raj, take the four of them and put them with the spares. Take their tack off, and stow it in the wagons.”

“Aye.” One of Xena’s grooms had made his way up and was taking the reins. “Take care of them for ya, Xena.” He and another groom led the horses away and the troops started to form up.

Xena turned Argo around in a circle. “Redder, take the army and keep going down the road. I’ll keep the scouts with me, and we’ll see if we can find our people.” She glanced at Ares. “You can pick which one you want to go with.”

“I’ll stick with you.” The God of War said instantly.

Xena didn’t reply. She started Argo up the path the four horses had come down, a track in the snow, really, leading between the trees. As she closed in on the dark, dead branched line, she removed her sword from it’s sheath. “Careful.”

Gabrielle flexed her grip on her staff. She leaned forward a little as they entered the woods, having an uncanny sense of someone watching her as she ducked under a branch. “Xe?”

“Yeah.” Her partner also ducked. “I feel it.”

“Feel what?” Ares asked. He had guided his steed in just behind Gabrielle.

“Someone watching us.” Gabrielle told him. “Any idea who?” She asked. “One of your friends by any chance? If Xe has to be diving off Argo to catch arrows aimed at you it might be good to know.”

Ares frowned. “You mean Brunius?” He asked. “Hade’s pup? That’s who blue eyes popped in that last fight.”

Gabrielle blinked at him.

“Sent him back to daddy for a while. I saw him take a dive down.” Ares said. “C’mon, blondie. Clue in.” He bumped her aside and sped up to catch up Xena, who had dismounted and was now leading Argo through the heavy branches. “If old uncle wasn’t ticked off at your BFF before, he’ll sure be now.”

“Oh great.”

Ares lifted a hand and rotated his finger in a circle.

Xena ignored the banter, focusing on the trail left by the horses. She eased between the tree trunks and tracked the easily seen hoofprints in the snow, moving up the ridge as a handful of the scouts also dismounted and spread out on either side of her.

She could sense something in the air. There was an energy that made her nape hairs prickle and she found herself going slower, placing her boots more carefully, and pausing to let the air bring what it would to her ears and nose.

Woodsmoke, without question, and a hint on the air of human squalor.

“Genrl.” One of the scouts called out. “Found a camp here, seems like a big one.”

“And was a fight.” Another one said. “Blood in the snow.”

Motion in the shadows ahead of them, and the scouts were drawing sword and heading to engage, a dozen of them crossing in front of Xena, but pulling up as the motion resolved into a single man, wrapped in furs, staggering towards them.

“Bastards.” He coughed out as they caught up to him. “They ran off. I tried to stop them.. slavers!” He said. “They went that way.” He pointed back the way he came from, through the woods.

The scouts grabbed him and a moment later Xena and Gabrielle were there, and they were face to face.

The figure stared at them.

Gabrielle was the first one to speak. “Oh my gosh.” She said, with an indrawn breath. “Are you.. you’re Jacob, aren’t you?”

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“I can’t get at it.” Iolaus finally said, in a tone of worried frustration. “Damn thing is fighting me.”

Cait got up on her knees and leaned over Hercules’s body to examine the arrow. “Let me see if I can help.” She said, as Nala came over to join her. She put her hand on the shaft and rested her wrist on the blood covered skin. “Right, now I”ll keep a steady pressure and you can work at it.”

Nala held the candle closer to give him a better view.

“Thanks.” Iolaus said after a moment, before he took a deep breath and dug deeper into his friend’s flesh.

There was no reaction from Hercules. His face was still and quiet, and his breathing, though light, was steady. It seemed very strange to Cait, since blood was now welling up and spilling over his chest, staining her hand.

Cait felt like the arrow was slowly moving, digging itself in deeper. She tightened her grip and strained against the motion, sure she was imagining the shaft growing colder against her skin.

“Bloody bastards.” Iolaus muttered. “He’s a god when it’s convenient for his enemies and mortal when its convenient for his family.” He carefully edged the sharp blade a little deeper, feeling the tip scrap against one of the barbs.

He had one knee upraised and was resting his wrist on it, to keep the irregular motion of the wagon from making him plunge the blade deeper than he meant to. He rinsed the shaft off with another small squirt of water, then leaned closer.

There was noise outside. “What’s up?”

Cait half turned her head to listen. “They’re upset about something.”

“Aren’t we all.” Iolaus went back to his grisly work. He could feel the wagon rock to a halt and took advantage of that to ease the point of the dagger under the tip. “Pull up a little wouldja Cait?”

“Absolutely.” Cait tensed her fingers and straightened, carefully pulling up on the shaft. It moved slightly, she felt it shift in her hands and reluctantly the tip of the barb Iolaus had just freed emerged. “Good job.”

The yelling outside got louder, and a moment later the wagon lurched into motion again and this time bounced along at a breakneck pace, throwing them off balance. “Damn it!” Iolaus yanked his hand back as he tumbled sideways. “Keep hold of that, Cait. Don’t let it go back in!”

Cait had been thrown forward, but kept her fingers tightly wound around the arrow. She could hear whips striking horseflesh just outside the wagon, and the thunder of hooves slowly fading to the rear.

The wagon kept moving at a headlong dash though, and with a great jar and booming sound it came off the rough track and onto a smoother surface, and sped up.

Iolaus took advantage of the easier motion and got back into position, gripping the roof of the wagon as he lowered himself down onto his knees. “Better get this done. Sounds like we’re running to somewhere.”

Nearby, someone screamed.

Men yelled.

Iolaus bore down and dug into the second side of the arrowpoint, crouching over his friend's body. "Put the candle a little closer?"

Nala did, braced with one hand on the overhead spar, and both knees planted firmly apart. "Easy."

"Yeah."

"Gosh." Cait said, suddenly. "It's really pulling isn't it?" She took hold with both hands and leaned backwards, as the arrow sought to plunge itself back into Hercule's body.

"Bastards." Iolaus gritted his teeth. "No you're not going to have him." He added one hand to Cait's in resisting the motion of the malevolent arrow, cutting hurriedly at the second barb. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

**

"There were wagons here, gen'rl." Redder came over to where Xena and Gabrielle were standing, giving the boy next to them a brief, dismissive look. " Two big ones, see, made them tracks there." He pointed. "Horses and this." He held up a fistful of rags, which were stained in a dark rusty copper.

Xena took them. "Blood."

"Aye."

"But nothing else."

"No. No sign of anyone gen'rl, not the rotters, not our lot." Redder said. "Not a bit of a weapon, or nothing but what was on them horses."

"Damn it." Xena walked past the road, to the rock overhang they'd found a campsite in. She pushed the ashes of the fire aside and went past it, ducking into the shelter they'd made.

It was rank. It stank of spoiled food and body stench, and her face twitched a little as she studied the ground, seeing some greasy bones there, and a cast off wooden cup.

She moved back out into the cold air and stood with the fire at her back, going over the ground carefully. There was a small slope up to a wooded area, and she could see some logs there, partly free of snow.

After a pause she crossed the icy ground to the logs and stood there, observing them. The snow was scraped off and behind the log, she found a spot that had snow melted in a body shaped area. With a grunt, she knelt, running her hands over the bark and stopping at one spot that showed a fresh gouge.

"What is it, Xe?" Gabrielle called out.

"Just looking." Xena called back, running her thumb over the gouge, which was triangular in shape. She leaned closer to the log and checked the position of her belt dagger, then nodded and stood back up, dusting her hands and knees off. "Someone was watching them."

She walked back over and stopped near them, looking at the ground. "More blood."

'There were some hurt men." Jacob spoke up. "I saw them, and then I hid.. until I saw you." He paused. "I thought I remembered you."

"Well, you did." Gabrielle smiled at him. "You said you were chasing the slavers?"

He nodded. "I think they took a friend of mine." He said. "I was trying to follow them, to see where they were going. I thought I could help them."

"Took them from where?" The bard asked. "I remember your sister coming to Amphipolis, and telling us you'd been taken."

The boy eyed her uncertainly. "My sister? You mean Bekka? She came to where?"

"Amphipolis." Gabrielle said. "That's where Xena and I live." She added. "It's through the pass into Macedonia."

“Oh right!” Jacob said. “Yeah, I don’t remember much about how I got to the town they took us to. It was okay, after a while.” He said. “They took Ruben somewhere else. He didn’t get along with people really well.”

His younger brother, Gabrielle remembered. A little tow headed boy who’d been saved from death by Xena’s heroism. “That’s too bad.” She finally answered. “It must have been hard for you, not having your family anymore.”

He half shrugged. “I got along okay. I did what they told me to, so they got to liking me.” He said. “One of the merchants took me as an apprentice and I did that until the slavers came.”

Xena had moved off with Redder and now she returned, Argo’s reins loosely caught around her fingers. “There were two big wagons.” She told Gabrielle. “Loaded down, no telling with what, but one of the scouts found this.” She held up an iron gray arrow. “Let’s get moving.”

“We’re not going to look for our people?” The bard asked, lowering her tone.

“They’re not here.” Xena told her. “My guess? They were here, and they’re with those wagons now.”

“That’s not good.”

“Maybe it is.” Xena leaned against her. “Depends on who else is in the wagon.”

“Mm. You have a point.”

Xena gave her a friendly scratch on the neck, then patted her shoulder. “We’ll find em.” She got up on Argo’s back, tucking the arrow away in one of her saddlebags. “If we pick up the pace maybe we’ll catch up with them before it gets dark.”

Gabrielle nodded, climbing up onto Iolaus’ back. “You want to come with us Jacob?” She offered. “We’re going to follow those wagons. Maybe your friend is with them? We think they’re slavers.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “I’d like to.” He said. “I thought I’d find them and help, but there’s a lot of them.” He turned. “But I thought they went that way?”

“No.” Xena shook her head. “Towards the port city.” She gathered up Argo’s reins. “Redder, get him one of the spares.”

“Thanks.” Jacob said, meekly. He mounted the brown gelding one of the grooms brought him and settled himself, removing the small pack from his back and fastening it to his saddle. “I’m glad I ran into you guys.”

Gabrielle smiled at him. “Yeah, what a coincidence huh?” She said. “So tell me about your friend? Is it a he or a she?”

Jacob colored, a flush coming to his face. “It’s a girl.. “He admitted. “She’s my master’s daughter.”

“Ahhh.”

“No one there wanted to go after her, even her father didn’t’ care.” Jacob warmed up to his story. “It was awful! So I ran away and ran after them, all the way down the river, and through the hills until we got here.”

“I see.”

‘Then I met these other people.” He said. “They said they were from Amph..what was it?”

“Amphipolis.” Gabrielle replied. “They said they were from here?”

He nodded. “Some soldiers and some women.” He paused. “Well, a woman and a girl.” He amended. “I sorta liked the girl but she was weird.”

“Weird?”

“Weird.”

**

The army got moving again, heading back up to the fork and onward across to the higher road that would lead down to the flatlands that fronted the port city. Gabrielle glanced around, noting Ares absence and caught her horse up to Xena's as her partner worked her way up to the front.

"Xe."

"Yeees?" Xena slung her waterskin back on it's ring. "You get the story out of that kid?"

"He met up with Cait and the gang." Gabrielle said. "That part, I believe since he described her and Nala but some of the other stuff he's told me… "She shook her head. "Something doesn't ring true."

"Storyteller instinct?" Xena's eyes twinkled a little.

"Something like that." Gabrielle glanced behind her, spotting Jacob riding amongst a group of the soldiers. He had been the oldest child in that family, and used to as much privilege as his background had allowed him, conscious of being the first born, and male, but now apparently having left that all behind.

Right? The bard frowned. Except there was something about him that just made her a little uneasy. Despite his youth and what she knew of his background, there was something in his eyes that wouldn't let him meet hers for more than a second.

"You don't like him." Xena commented, relaxing into her saddle a little.

"No.. well." Gabrielle made a face. "I liked his sister. I was sorry that group decided to move away and took her with them. I wonder where they ended up." She shifted a little in her saddle, leaning forward and taking her weight off her back. "He reminds me of someone but I can't think of who."

Jessan joined them, and heard her last words. "Who? That kiddo?" He glanced behind him. "I get nothing from him. Which is weird."

Gabrielle glanced back again herself, and saw him shift his eyes from the soldier he was riding next to and look slowly around, a faint smile on his face.

That smile. The bard frowned and turned forward again, searching her memory for where she'd seen that same sort of slightly self satisfied look.

'He's been out in the world a while." Xena said, philosophically. "People change."

Well, that was true. Gabrielle exhaled. "I'm worried about Cait and Nala." She changed the subject. "It's hard to believe they got themselves captured. I know Cait's impulsive, but Nala's a rock."

Xena was about to answer, when a whistle rose up, and she looked forwards to see the vanguard scouts signaling. "Let's go see what that is." She put Argo into a canter, and they headed forward through the crowd.

**

"Hang on!" Nala yelled, as the wagon pitched hard to one side and she went tumbling off, juggling the candle in her hands with wide eyed frantic skill. "Holy sheep!"

Iolaus grabbed hold of Hercule's body and lifted the dagger away just in time as they were slammed against the side of the wagon as it half turned on it's side.

Cait refused to release her grip, and she felt herself flung to the side as the wagon teetered on the edge of rolling over, amidst frantic yells from outside and the sudden, surprising sound of rushing water.

The pungent scent of it blasted through the boards of the wagon, and then just as suddenly it righted itself with a lurch, sending Cait back across the middle of it with the arrow still gripped tightly in her hands.

The motion swung her half around and with a grinding rip that sent blood flying the arrow came unexpectedly loose from the demi-god's body as Cait went reeling into a corner. "Oh!"

The wagon lurched upward and built up speed again and they were bouncing and rumbling on a rocky surface as Iolaus pounced on his friend's form and held it down. "Did it all come out?" He yelled, with a touch of panic. "Cait! Look at it!"

A little stunned, Cait blinked and then held her hand up in front of her. "I can't see it." She said. "Nala, you have that bit of candle still?"

"Somehow." Nala crawled over towards her and held the candle up. "This is nuts!"

Cait braced her legs against two of the wagon's sides and wedged herself in the corner, getting the head of the arrow into the flickering light of the candle. She examined the edges. "What I am looking for?"

"Chip or break.. anything that could have been left inside him." Iolaus took an uneven breath."Might have been broken off.. all that moving.. or the knife…"

Cait turned the arrow in her hands. "I don't think…"

"It's fine." Nala said. "But Great Hera. Look at those barbs." She looked wide eyed at the double barbed arrowhead, wicked points coming backwards intended on gripping and slashing the body it entered. "Nasty."

"Too right." The younger Amazon agreed, inspecting it carefully. "But Nala's right. Seems all right."

Iolaus let out a long exhaled. "Lucky."

Cait gingerly touched one of the barbs with her finger, swearing she could feel heat in the metal. It was night dark, and seemed to have no discernable surface, just edges and darkness, and a deep rust red coat.

Nasty. She took out a piece of hide from her belt pouch and carefully wrapped it around the arrowhead, tying it in place with a bit of gut. Then she put the arrow in the corner of the wagon with the barbs in the corner, and placed her boot on top of it to hold it down.

Iolaus was sopping up the blood now welling freely from Hercules chest spilling over his chest onto the floor of the wagon. "Should stop now." He muttered. "Damn thing."

Nala edged over and offered him a piece of cloth from her belt pouch. "Might help."

"Thanks." He took it and held it against the ugly wound.

The wagon rocked again, but they were all braced now and it just made them sway with the motion, as the sound of whip strikes echoed softly and the speed increased.

Then a clamor rose, many men yelling and then, the sounds of steel against steel and the screams of horses, and then a crashing sound so close outside it rattled the metal straps holding the boards together.

The wagon slowed abruptly, and then stopped, and they heard the driver jump off. "Shall we.." Cait looked at the hatch they'd been shoved through, pushing a tentative boot against it.

"Can't move him." Iolaus said. "And our horses are long gone.."

Cait grabbed hold of the roof spar and lifted herself up, swinging her body back and then slamming both boots against the hatch with surprising force. It cracked, and she kicked it again, knocking it open.

Outside was chaos. There were three or four dozen soldiers running around, and some were running back towards the river with buckets in their hands. The other wagon was on fire, the end of it shooting up flames and no one was watching theirs.

Without hesitating she jumped out, and hauled herself up on the wagon, and then onto the driver's seat. She turned her head and saw all the soldiers around the other wagon, trying to salvage it's contents, and she picked up the reins and gave the horses a slap.

They started off, gathering quickly into a run as a few of the soldiers caught the motion and started running after them. Cait kept her head down and slapped the reins again, then whistled sharply and the two stocky animals lumbered into a gallop, heading now downhill towards a line of trees far off the path they'd started on.

The arrow she'd wrapped up dropped out the back and bounced, flying up ito the face of the nearest follower, the hide dropping off as it powered itself into his gut. He grabbed at it and screamed, falling to the ground and tripping the soldier after him, hanging them up long enough for the wagon to gain ground.

The soldiers turned back and whistled for their horses, and mounted companions were already whipping their mounts into the chase, their yells echoing down the slope and casting back at them as they rode hard after the runaways, two of them readying flaming arrows to shoot.

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They made it right to the edge of the last patch of forest, beyond which there was nothing but open ground before the port city.

It seemed empty, but there were so few details visible aside from a thick blanket of snow it was hard to really tell.

It was very dark, and the clouds had returned to cover the stars and moon, blanketing the army in a cloak of shadows as they camped among the trees, busy with rubbing down horses, and getting a meal together after a long hard ride.

It was cold, and the wind had swung around to come from the south, and everyone was glad of the break that the trees provided, and the thick cover they likewise afforded.

Xena was standing just inside the treeline looking out over the sloping earth covered in snow, worn down in spots to reveal tufts of dead salt marsh grasses. The wind was blowing now into her face and she could smell the city already, the stink of humanity carried on the sea tinged air.

She could smell death, too. Not overpowering, but just on the fringes as though there was a foxes cache somewhere nearby. Instinctively she tipped her head back and searched the clouds over head for the telltale outline of vultures, but the sky was a empty of birds as the land was of animals past the forest she was in.

Odd.

The steady pocking of a cantering horse made her look around, as Jessan slowed his mount to a halt next to her and dismounted. "Any luck?" She asked, glad to turn her attention from the slope for a minute.

"Nothing." Jessan shook his furry head. "I can see where they went off the road, but its like they disappeared. Track just stops." He lifted one clawed hand. "I could smell them, Xena. There were women there, human women."

"Could be any women." Xena suggested.

"Could be." Her friend agreed. "But I smelled blood too."

Blood. Almost nothing about that would be good unless the blood was a woman's cycles. Xena exhaled. She felt like things were slipping through her fingers, and now her fairly cut and dried plan was giving her a big dose of self doubt.

Should she have gone to Phillipi instead? Picked up allies or at least, gotten the local scoop?

"Now that we're here, though, they won't get past us on the road." Jessan said. "My guys are heading down to the end of the trees there, to make sure there's no way to double back on us."

“Thanks.” Xena folded her arms. “It’s a long stretch of empty to the city.” She said. “We’ll camp here and maybe stay the day through. Hit them at the new moon.”

“Should we keep going?” Jessan asked. “If we ride hard, we can get there before dawn.”

“No.” Xena tipped her head back and regarded the sky briefly. “We’re not going to hit them full on.” She said. “We don’t have siege gear with us, and that’s a damn sturdy wall they’ve got. I think I want to send a scouting party in first.”

“Undercover?”

Xena nodded. “Too many unknowns.” She said. “I want to see what the deal is in there before I go riding up with an army at my back.”

“Xena.” One of the cavalry captains came riding up, fast. “Got a lot of troops coming up the road heading for the city, behind us.”

“How many?” The warrior asked. “It that same bunch we ran into?”

“Hard to say.” The captain frowned. “Might be the same, it’s too dark to see that much. I’d say they’re ten score, or so, mounted mostly.”

“I think your plan just went pffft.” The forest dweller said, in a commiserating tone. “I hate it when that happens.”

The warrior sighed. “Okay, get everyone ready for them when they hit the edge of the forest. We’ll take them down.” She ordered. “Lets hope we don’t end up between them and a force coming out of the city.”

“Right. Bout a candlemark, scout says.” The soldier nodded and turned, riding back down the line.

Jessan peered past the treeline at the city on the far edge of the plains, just visible as a smudge against the clouds. “Seems weird there’s no people between then and here.” He said. “Just a lot of open space.”

Xena abandoned the ridge and started back through the forest where the army was now assembling and making ready for battle. “At least we’re far enough away that they won’t hear the fight.” She told Jessan as he paced next to her, his horse Aris ambling behind him.

Gabrielle was kneeling beside a small, shielded campfire and she looked up when Xena came up next to her, then stood up. “We moving out?”

“They’re coming to us.” Her partner said. “Looks like a force of them is running home and they’ll come right past us.” She stood next to Gabrielle. “Too damn bad. I was looking forward to resting everyone tonight.”

“I’ll call in the hunters.” Jessan said. “At least we can get a snack in.”

“Thanks Jess.” Xena peered past her partner. “Is that tea?”

“Mm.” Gabrielle leaned against her, then found herself wrapped in Xena’s cloak, their body heat conjoining. “Xe this all doesn’t feel right.”

“No.”

“I’m not sure what’s going on.”

“Me either.” Xena admitted. “I thought I had a pretty good handle on what we were going to do, but now.. I’m not sure.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle absorbed that. “You think we’re being played?”

“Maybe.”

“By who though?”

“Now that’s the gooooood question.” Xena rested her chin on the top of her partner’s head. “Hades? Ares? Zeus? Pinu? The bootheads fromPhillippi?” She exhaled. “So many depths of a cows bunghole possibilities.”

Gabrielle started silently laughing, burying her face against Xena’s shoulder.

“So what are we doing now?” Ares’ voice interrupted them, as he slid between two snow covered trees and came over to them. “You stopping toscrew around with each other?” He asked, with an incredulous tone.

“Sure.” Xena answered, wrapping her arms around Gabrielle and stretching luxuriously. “Best thing I can think of doing right now.”

The God of War glowered at her.

“Since we’re waiting for a big bunch of enemy soldiers to come riding into my ambush.” The warrior continued, in a mild tone. “So have a seat and relax for a while.”

Xena’s captains had gathered around and were standing up nearby, wolfing down trail rations as they waited for the scouts to report. One of them came over with a wooden mug, and offered it to her. “Cider?”

“Aye.” The man said. “Heated up some.”

“Thanks.” She took a sip, glad of the warm, cinnamon tinged sweetness as it filled her belly. Then she offered the lip of the cup to her partner, who took several gulps, before she unwound herself from Xena’s embrace and went over to their baggage.

“Strange to have em moving in the dark like that.” Redder commented, as he chewed some trail bread. “Lots of odd stuff eh genr’l?”

Xena nodded. “Maybe we can capture some of this bunch and find out what’s going on. That attack before didn’t make sense.”

Gabrielle removed some dried venison from her saddlebag, and unwrapped two rounds of trail bread to wrap around it. There would be no hot food tonight, not until after the fighting and even then there was no guarantee.

So she added a handful of dried berries and a pinch of her carefully hoarded spice mix into the pocket sandwich before she returned to Xena’s side and handed her one, keeping the other for herself. That, and the hot cider would have to suffice.

She wished the other army would have found some place to sleep for the night. She was tired, and she wanted some rest, and as she nibbled a bit of the venison from her sandwich she had to wonder if they’d ever catch up to their quarry with all the distractions.

And they were, she felt, distractions. “Ares.” She went over and sat down next to the God of War, who was seated on a log, his long and leather clad legs sprawled out in front of him. “Can I ask you something?”

“Can I stop you?” He rolled his head to one side and gave her a droll look.

“No, not really.” Gabrielle tore off a chunk of the sandwich and offered it to him. “I was just curious. What is the end game for Hades? If everyone is backing off from believing, why does he think he can reverse that?”

Ares thoughtfully chewed her offering. “Thinks he can do it right.” He finally said. “That’s what the deal is, according to what Apollo told me.” He glanced around. “Before he cut out and went poof.” He snapped his fingers. “We figured he ducked out to try and win the prize before the rest of us.”

“We?”

“Dite and me.” Ares said, briefly. “She stuck around upstairs to keep the rents calm.”

Gabrielle could see that. She was quiet for a bit, ingesting her food. "This really sucks." She said, after she swallowed. "I don't want Hades to take over. What kind of world would it be ruled over by death?"

He remained silent himself for a while. "I don't know." He said, his head cocking slightly to one side. "I didn't much like being dead."

"No, me either." Gabrielle rested her elbows on her knees, watching Xena lounging around nearby keeping as close an eye on her. "I just don't know, Ares. I think there's something about us, about mortals, when we worship you gods. It makes us act better than we would have otherwise."

Ares mimicked her pose. "Why?"

"I don't know. We're scared, I guess. We want you to help us and we want to end up in a nice place when we're dead."

"You know better."

"I do." Gabrielle agreed. "I didn't mean me. Or Xe. But most other people. "

"Sure." Ares said. "Otherwise what's the point? Dirt grubbers grub dirt and you end up with what? Dirt. Nothing." He said. "If morts didn't think they'd go on to some place better they'd just all croak themselves. No fun in that."

Gabrielle stared past him. "So you give us something to strive for, so this mortal time has meaning."

The God of War smiled, an odd, unusual for him, gentle smile that even had a hint of – if not compassion – understanding in it. "What's the alternative, Gabrielle? Live a miserable, short life and be worm food? You need us."

"Just like you need us." The bard answer, in a quiet tone. She turned and looked at him. "What happens to you, if this all goes bad, Ares? You're immortal."

He studied her for a long moment in silence, his lips pursing a little in the dim, red firelight. "I don't know." He finally admitted. "Let's not find out, huh?"

One of the watch came over. "Xena, there's someone coming."

"The army. We know."

He shook his head. "No, we think it's a wagon. Ahead of them, and alone."

Xena put her cup down and dusted her fingers off, swallowing hastily. "C'mon boys. Let's find out what's on the way." She got her cloak arranged to clear her sword. "Maybe we'll get lucky."

Soldiers mounted up all around her as she whistled Argo over, and a moment later she was guiding the cavalry out and up the slope to the road that stretched long and empty behind them.

It was a solid inky dark, but as Xena got past the trees she heard the sounds that had alerted the watch, the rumble of wagons wheels and the heavy, lumbering clatter of horse hooves on the icy ground.

A wagon. And they had lost a wagon, and they knew it was possible a wagon might contain captured people going to be sold into slavery in the city.

"Xena!" Jessan rode up on her. "The soldiers are right behind them!" He pointed. "We're going to ride into the teeth of them!"

That felt right. Xena took her sword off. "Let's go!" She waited for Gabrielle on Iolaus to catch up to her, and saw Ares and his black horse at her heels. "If that army is chasing that wagon, we probably want whats in it."

Ares drew the Sword of War. "Go baby go."

They were all thundering down the road in the next minutes, spreading out across it, and across the ground to either side, hundreds of mounted riders in the dark shadows of the night as they left the support groups behind, sheltered in the forest.

Xena got to the front, and she had Gabrielle at her left hand, and Ares at her right, forest dwellers on either side of them and her hand trained cavalry spreading out to either side. There was no sound but the thunder of hooves.

There was enough light to see the snowy ground and the bare outline of the road. Xena lifted herself up a little in the saddle and peered ahead, seeing the vague outline of the oncoming wagon, behind a team of two big horses.

Behind them? A huge cloud of dark riders, yelling.

Enemies? Xena didn't think she had any friends in the area. She was aware of Ares riding at her right, and there was a ripple of energy she could feel coming from him, as ghostly blue flames chased up and down his sword.

And yet, she was in the lead. Xena didn't deny the prickle that thought raised in her, every nerve waking as she tucked her cloak back and got ready to fight. She could see torches now in the mass of troops behind the wagon and she drew in a breath to let out a yell.

The driver of the wagon caught sight of them as the clouds broke a little, and silvery moonlight flooded through them to outline the road – the horses picked up speed and as Xena's battle yell rose up over the snowy landscape, it was answered.

Solari, riding fast on her horse and with Gabrielle her target let out a yell of her own and they all split across the road to let the wagon through just as the chasing troops caught up with it.

It bolted past them and then they were plowing into the other army, the spearpoint of their own two tall and dark haired figures who seemed to be calling down lightning from the sky overhead.

**

It dark and wild and deadly, as torchlight flickered as the sky lit up overhead with silver and shadows. Xena found herself in the middle of a melee, and she dropped her reins to give Argo her head as she used weapons in both hands.

Gabrielle was behind her, staying close. All around them was the sound of horses and their riders fighting, and Xena could hear the twang of bows, her ears acutely recognizing the sound as Amazon longbows.

The Amazons were just behind Gabrielle, surrounding her in a wedge, and Xena had to smile to herself as she knocked aside a pike, slashing the hand that held it with the edge of her chakram as she deflected a blade coming at her head from the other direction.

This was a dogfight. The two forces had come together in a crush of bodies and the momentum had shoved horses into each other, and some were rearing and kicking in instinctive response.

Argo was snapping at one of the enemy horses, baring her teeth and she moved forward at a nudge of Xena's knees into a more open space between three or four fighting enemy soldiers. Xena quickly looked around to check where her partner was, and then she engaged one of the riders who had come sideways at her.

He swept his sword at her and she ducked it, then lunged forward and plunged her blade into his side, the sharp steel penetrating his scale armor as Argo slammed against his horse, trapping his leg in it's stirrup as he tried to escape.

His sword dropped to the ground and he grabbed for his side, his other hand scrabbling for his dagger as he tried to return the attack.

A sword came from the other direction and took his head off, sending it flying into Xena's chest where it bounced off and dropped, along with the man's body, to the ground.

Ares chuckled, and moved on, heading for three soldiers who had regrouped and were coming back for another attack. Xena went with him and they took the charge head on, both Argo and the black horse turning to their left as their riders engaged the enemy.

Xena let loose with the chakram as she went hilt to hilt with the nearest soldier, catching a second that was coming up on them in the throat. The weapon spun off in a spray of blood and curved back, coming back to rest in her palm and she turned her wrist to the side and brought it back to slash the soldier's sword hand.

A prickle of instinct, and she ducked just as she heard Gabrielle's warning yell, feeling something come over her back and hearing the thounk sound as an arrow buried itself into neck of the enemy soldier's horse.

It screamed in pain and reared, and the man reeled backwards.

Xena turned her head to find the archer and pulled Argo to one side behind two fighting men. She let out two short whistles and pointed her sword, feeling compression at her back and turning to see the Amazons lining up, bows raised.

Then she was turning to find another group rushing at her, and seeing the blue flare of the Sword of War nearby. "Ares!" She let out a yell, and a moment later he appeared, black horse snorting and making an odd chuckling noise. "That way!"

The soldiers nearby had heard her, and heads turned, and eyes suddenly widened as Ares raised his sword and laughed, visible now as he and Xena headed towards the enemy lines together.

Gabrielle sent her horse after them, readying her staff and sliding her hand hold on it a little lower as she rested it across Iolaus' neck. She watched the enemy line stir in turmoil, then in a visible desperation join up and return the charge, ten of them gathering in a wedge to meet Xena's troops.

She got up cross of them and then a flicker of motion caught her eye and she turned to see a dark, cloaked figure jump up onto a rock and draw his bow back.

No time to even yell. Gabrielle dropped her reins and clamped her knees down, sending Iolaus barreling forward through two other engagedsoldiers as she lifted her staff up and turned half sideways to swipe it through the air.

The tip smacked into the black arrow in flight, knocking it off it's path and then she was bringing it back around as the cloaked figure jumped off the rock and headed right for her. Gabrielle could see the knife in his hand as he aimed for her horse and without much real thought she swung her self off his back and hit the ground as he reached her.

A swipe of her staff and the knife was flying through the air and a breath later the return stroke smacked against his head.

He grabbed the end of it and yanked, not expecting Gabrielle to go with the motion and use the momentum to slam into him and take them both to the ground.

Then three other bodies came barreling in and pinned him, knees on his arms and a thick wooden club against his throat.

"Tie him up." Gabrielle ordered, getting ot her feet and whistling for Iolaus. "I"ll be back."

"Yes, my queen." "We will."

**

Cait finally got the horses to stop and she jumped off the wagon, racing back to open the door up. "Sorry about that!" She gasped. "We're all right now."

Nala came tumbling out and shook herself, staring around. "Where'd they.. " She looked down the road and saw the fighting. "What…" She paused. "I heard Amazon calls."

"Yes." Cait peered anxiously inside. "Are you all right?" She asked Iolaus.

“Beat up.” Iolaus coughed. “I think he stopped bleeding though. Good sign.” He stuck his head out. “What’d we run into?” He looked around. “Where’d… wait, I thought I heard like a couple hundred horses.”

“You did.” Cait swung the back of the wagon open. “They came right past us, and a good thing too.”

“Friends, then.” Nala looked relieved. “Was it..”

“Xena and the army.” Cait advised them. “ Didn’t you hear her? They’re fighting off that other lot.” She pointed behind them. “Lovely charge, terribly sorry you had to miss it.”

“Phew. That’s luck.” Iolaus looked relieved. “I thought for sure those guys were going to catch up to us. This wagon wasn’t going that fast.”

“Yes.” Cait said. “Something’s not quite right about that.” She looked ahead, and saw torches approaching, but a moment later she relaxed as she recognized the hawk’s head tabard on the foremost man holding one. “Hello.”

The man peered at her. “Ah, Cait.” He smiled. “Glad it was you then, the genr’l went out to battle for.” He peered into the wagon. “Hello, there. Is it Iolaus? We finally catch up with ye?” He lifted his torch. “Got someone hurt then? I’ll get the healers.”

He turned and put his fingers between his teeth, letting out a loud, strident tone, then a handful of shorter ones.

Xena’s whistle language, taught to all the army, and most of the rest of Amphipolis as well. It was a rare night when the calls weren’t heard echoing between the watch posts and the fields.

“Brennan, is it quite all right if I leave this here with you?” Cait said. “And may I borrow a horse? There’s fighting to be done.”

“Aye, sure. We’ve got your gray lady.” He pointed back to the camp. “Got all your horses, in fact. Xena was fair worried about the lot of you – we’ve been looking after you now a day.”

Cait exhaled in relief. She hadn’t been looking forward to telling Xena she’d lost one of her carefully bred horses. “That’s great.” She turned. “Nala, will you stay with them please? I’m going to go see what the queen is up to.”

Nala hesitated, then she nodded. “Better that.” She was holding her elbow. “Cracked my arm on one of those bumps. I’d be a mess with a sword right now.” She admitted.

“Sorry about that.” Cait apologized. “That ground was a mess.”

“Good thing you met up with us gal.” Brennan said. “My bones tell me we’re in for weather again, and that ground past there.. its cold and empty.” He pointed past the trees. “Glad the genr’l decided to make camp in there. We’d just been a candlemark when the likes of you came riding up to us.”

“Glad we found you.” Iolaus eased out of the wagon and straightened, grimacing as his back popped. “We thought this was a good idea, finding out what they were up to. Turns out not so much.” He looked past the wagon at the barely seen battle, yells and the sounds of horses in distress floating back on the wind to them.

“Right. I’ll just go sort out my horse and get a move on then.” Cait said. “I’m sure we’ll have this all settled in a bit.”

“Be careful.” Nala told her. “That sounded like a lot of soldiers chasing us.”

“No worries.” Cait got her cloak tied and started for the camp only to haul up when two horses emerged from the trees and headed in their direction and a brief lightning flash identified the lead rider to her.

Ah. She broke into a run, bouncing over the frozen ground as the lightning flashed overhead, bringing a chill moistness to the air as clouds started to steadily lower over them. “Hello there.” She greeted the rider as she reached them.

“Here.” Paladia handed off the reins of the gray mare to her. “I figured you’d want to go kick some ass.” She shifted her arm, moving a crossbow over to rest on her knee. “Sounds like a mess.” She added. “There’s some cranks back there watching the road.”

“Oh Pally.” Cait pulled herself up onto Shadow, giving the mare a pat. Then she nudged the mare up against the horse her partner was riding and reached over to get a grip on her arm, pulling her over and giving her a kiss. “Glad you all found us.”

“I think you found us, nutcase.” Paladia seemed pleased with the greeting though. “Cmon, I got some of those chobos on me. Let’s go give em some help.” She held up one of the clubs.

“Right.” Cait grinned. “Just keep your eyes open. There’s a lot of that bunch with bows.”

“No kidding. You should have seen Xena catch one of those big black arrows and saved Mr Poobah from it.” Paladia advised her. “Pretty freak show.”

“Oh bother. I am sorry I missed it.” Cait frowned. “Let’s go then before we miss something else.”

A group of the support workers were coming out past them, heading for the wagon, two of them carrying a stretcher. Satisfied that her companions were going to be well taken care of, Cait settle her knees and swept her cloak off her shoulders, pressing the mare into a canter.

Paladia was right behind her on a brown gelding, her tall frame overtopping Caits by a good measure. She rode competently, as Cait did, but neither were born riders and as they approached the battle neither had any intention of letting go of their reins.

The ground was already churned up, and there were bodies flung over it, some human and some equine, and as they worked their way through the debris the sounds of battle got incrementally louder.

Cait picked a likely target and drew her sword, remembering the man she was charging at as one of the ones who had captured them.

She smiled without any humor at all, and went for him, seeing his eyes widen as he got close enough to see her face. Her sword hit his and then they closed and she got her arm through his and wrenched sideways, slamming her shoulder into his chest.

“Why you little…”

Cait punched him in the throat, barking her knuckles on the rim of his chest armor, but knocking his head backwards. She drew her sword arm back again and shoved off him, just as an arrow came over her shoulder and took him in the chest.

“Hey nutcase! Keep moving!” Paladia called out, making Cait turn to see her partner holding up the bow. “I got this down.”

Cait grinned and waved her sword at her , then she turned and as the lightning flashed overhead, she spotted Xena fighting up on a slight rise over the road. “Ah.” She pointed with the sword. “That’s where we want to go.”

“Sure.” Paladia followed her with a shake of her head. “Where all the really dangerous people are.” She sighed. “Cant we fight down here?”

“Pally, c’mon.”

**

Xena got up to the high ground and turned Argo in a tight circle, momentarily free of enemy soldiers taking a whack at her. She scanned the battle, the gray and silver shadows resolving for her eyes and she nodded, seeing her forces gaining ground everywhere.

The battle was almost over. There were now pockets of fighting, but the greater part of the field was cleared, and she could see her men starting to gather up and check the fallen.

A moment later, and Ares was next to her, looking around. “What’s next?”

“We’re winning.” She told him. “We need to take out that bunch there, and they’re gonna run like chickens.” She searched the ground, relaxing when she spotted Gabrielle making her way over, and let out two sets of complex whistles.

The enemy heard the sound, though and a group of the mounted soldiers headed her way, two of them with torches that lit the rise with garish orange shadows, yelling as they spotted her and Argo’s golden coat against the dead trees behind them.

An arrow arched her way, and Xena knocked it aside with her sword. Then she gathered herself to meet the attack, half raising up in her stirrups and letting out a battle yell that echoed across the frozen ground.

A squad of her soldiers interrupted her though, bolting up the rise and driving against the enemy soldiers, getting between them and their leader with wild yells of their own, slashing and cutting with blades that briefly reflected the torchlight in silver and crimson.

Xena pulled up and observed instead, as Gabrielle joined her, unhooking her waterskin and taking a swallow from it. “Almost over.” She greeted her soulmate.

“Xe.” The bard put a hand on her thigh. “The guy with the bow and arrow from Hades.” She pointed with her staff. “We’ve got him tied up down there.”

Ares sidled his horse over. “Did I hear that right? You’ve got Hades’s pup tied up?” He asked with interest.

But Gabrielle shook her head. “Not him.. just some guy who has those same arrows. I knocked one down.” She pulled the arrow out and showed it to them. “The Amazons got him under control down there. He had a dozen of these on him.”

Xena took it and studied it, then turned and handed it across to Ares. “Looks the same as I pulled out of you.”

Ares reached over and took the arrow, inspecting it carefully. “Huh.” He turned it in his fingers. “Let’s go see this guy.” He said. “This could get interesting.”

“Did he get them from Hades?” Gabrielle asked.

“They’re from Hades.” Ares answered. “Where he got them? Lets go find out.”

Xena sidestepped Argo over and surveyed the field, seeing the tide rapidly turning and the battle fading out, just as snow started falling again over them. She let out a whistle, and it was responded to, and torches started to spring up everywhere.

Where the battle had been, the ground was dark, snow churned up and removed or covered in blood and as they started down the slope they had to skirt around fallen men and horses, some dressed in Xena’s colors.

Redder rode up. “Pack of em took off through the trees there, Xena. Looks like they’re trying to head back past the camp.”

“Stop them.” Xena said. “I don’t want any of our people hurt there.” She said. “Get our wounded back to camp, give the dead a pyre.”

“Not to many of that. “ Redder said. “Dozen, maybe.”

“Good to hear.” Xena’s eyes swept the field. “Damned lucky, in all this. Don’t know who was crazier us or them mixing it up in the dark.”

“They started it.”

“They did.” The warrior agreed. “And we finished it.”

“Aye.” Redder rode off, circling his arm and letting out a call for men to join him.

They continued down to the road, where the Amazons were all gathered, including two Xena hadn't expected. "Cait."

"Hello." Cait came right over as they approached. "Sorry we stirred up all this bother." She said, as Xena dismounted and gave her a hug, followed by Gabrielle.

"Everyone accounted for?" Gabrielle asked, as Solari finished sheathing her sword.

"Eyup." Solari said. "We stayed on the skirts, mostly. Got some good shots in." She said. "Glad to see you back, Cait. Nala with you?"

"She's back in camp." Cait said. "We've got Iolaus and Hercules with us too." She looked at Xena. "Hercules is hurt. He was shot with one of those arrows." She pointed at the one in Ares hands, then looked warily up at him. "Hello."

Fully visible, the God of War was gently tapping the arrow against his hand. He studied the Amazons, who were watching him back in somewhat awed silence, their cloaks and skin liberally covered in the gore of battle.

"Y'know something?" He said, finally. "You chicks were wasted on my sister." He winked at them. "Now show me who coughed up this thing?"

"This way." Pasi said, shyly, pointing at a fallen tree just off the road. "We've got him tied up."

"Ah huh." The God of War strolled past her, jerking his head at her to follow. "Better make sure he's not enjoying it. C'mon."

Xena cleaned her blade off and sheathed it, then put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders as they went after him. "C'mon." She repeated Ares order. "Lets go get this over with so we can go back to camp."

Several of the Amazons followed, and after a moment, the rest of them trailed along.

**

They gathered around the ramble of fallen tree trunks, as the army sorted itself out behind them, and a trail of horseback riders started back towards the camp.

One of Xena's men picked up the trussed figure and hauled him to his feet, pulling his hood off and turning him for his general to examine him. A second man thrust a torch close, illuminating them all in russet highlights.

He was a scruffy man with thinning brown hair, and a prominent adams apple. His eyes were indistinguishable, but very dark and there was a long scar across his face that only narrowly missed his mouth.

He was glaring at them, especially at Xena and Gabrielle when they pulled their own hoods down, exposing dark and pale heads to get a better look.

"Anyone you know, hon?" Gabrielle asked after a moment.

"No." Xena was aware of Ares standing just behind her, watching in silence. "Who are you?" She addressed the man, who promptly spit at her.

The soldier holding him cuffed him across the face. "You respect our genr'l or I'll cut your tongue out." He told the man. "Answer, or you'll wish you did."

"I'll wish?" The man said. "When my master gets here, you'll wish you never laid hand on me, dog."

"Who's your master?" Gabrielle asked. "Pinu, or Hades?"

The snow started to fall harder, as though in commentary at her question but the man just briefly glanced at her and then looked away.

“His master’s who offers him the biggest bowl of dog food.” Ares spoke up, moving forward to take up a position next to Xena’s, one boot propped up on a log, the arrow clasped lightly in his fingers. “He probably stole those arrows, the little punk.”

The man twisted in the soldiers’ grip, as apparently Ares became visible to him. “You.” He growled. “I’ll get you the next time.”

“No you won’t.” The God of War told him. “Ain’t gonna be a next time.” He straightened and moved closer, one hand going to the sword on his back.

“Ares, wait.” Gabrielle slid in front of Xena and touched his arm. “Can you explain who he is, before you cut his head off?”

The man stared at her, as though she’d suddenly grown another head herself, and stopped struggling, going still and quiet for a moment.

Xena decided to keep silent and just watch, realizing there were things going on and people’s histories being exposed she had no real knowledge of.

“He’s Cupid’s grandson.” Ares supplied promptly. “Never really went in for that side of the family. He was a hanger on of Posiedon’s for a while but now I guess he switched sides. Again.” He studied the cloaked figure. “What did the old uncle offer you, little man? He going to make your face pretty again?”

“Bastard.” The man growled.

Ares chuckled. “One thing I’m not, scrubbie. Unlike you or your mother.”

The man lunged out of the hands of the soldiers only to be caught by the throat by Ares free hand as he dropped the arrow on the frozen ground. “Ah ah ah.”

“Let me go!” The man gasped out, his face turning purple. “You’ve no right to touch me! “

“Don’t I?” Ares said, squeezing harder. “When you decided to come squirming out here you brought the rulebook with you, little man. You shoot atme, you open yourself up to me shooting back. Don’t you know that?”

The man’s tongue poked out, already purplish black.

“Neither of us is safe.” Ares whispered. “Nothing’s by the rules down here you little fool.”

“Ares, don’t kill him.” Gabrielle said, in a quiet, urgent tone. “We’ve got his bow and arrows. Let him go.”

“Think he wont get more?” Ares turned his head and looked at her. “I thought Xena taught you better than that.”

The bard exhaled. “She did. But sometimes violence really isn’t the answer.” She squeezed his wrist gently. “Let him go, please?”

Everyone was still around them, just watching. Even Xena remained quiet, her hands folded in front of her, snow settling on her dark hair. Even the archer had stopped struggling, his chest only moving slightly, convulsively as he tried to intake air.

Ares turned around and looked at Xena, both his eyebrows hiking. When he got no response at all, he turned back around and released the man, watching him fall to the ground, twitching. With a shrug, he walked away, shaking his head.

Gabrielle knelt next to the man and got a fold of her cloak under his head and a moment later Xena dropped down to one knee beside her. “Give me a hand here, hon.”

Xena helped her turn him over on his back. “We better get everyone to camp. It’s going to dump.” She remarked. “Winds already coming up.”

The man looked up at them. “You shouldn’t have done that.” He rasped, licking still purple lips. “He’s right. I”ll get more arrows and eventually I’ll put one in him.”

“Someone already did.” Xena told him, resting her forearms on her knee. “I took it out.”

He studied her avidly. “You’re a healer.” He said, after a long pause.

“I am.” She agreed. “You really want to kill him?”

“I do.” The man said. “And you should too. You all should. How else are you going to be set free from them? You of all people, Xena. You know best of their tyranny.”

“Trading one god for another?” Gabrielle said. “Can you stand up? You’ll freeze if you stay there.” She rocked back and stood up, then offered him a hand. “How can you say some other tyranny won’t be worse? What’s the difference really?”

The man took her hand and let her pull him upright. “You said yourself, Gabrielle, that Zeus and his family have brought nothing but grief to you. Isn’t it better to at least see what someone else would bring?”

“How about seeing what no one else would bring.” Gabrielle answered, with a faint smile. “What about no gods?”

He took a step back from her and held his bound hands in front of him. “You need gods. Set me free, and I’ll prove it to you.”

Xena shook her head. “Your army lost.” She motioned one of the soldiers to take hold of him. “Put him with the rest of the captives. We’ll ransom them back to the city.”

He took another step back and as the soldier was about to grab him, he let out a shrill cry, then faded out to nothing, leaving behind only a faint gray stain on the snow.

“Gosh.” Cait had been standing to one side. “That was creepy.” She was just finishing resheathing her daggers and she came over next to Gabrielle. “But you know, it might be nice not to have to worry about that lot.”

“Why’d you do that?” One of the soldiers asked Gabrielle curiously. “He wanted killing.”

They started back to where three of the grooms were holding the reins of their horses. “Why did I do that.” Gabrielle mused. “Because, honestly, sometimes killing isnt’ the answer.”

“Hm.” The man just grunted.

“And also, now he owes us one.” The bard continued, with a smile. “When you’re dealing with gods and their families, sometimes that counts.”

“Ah.” The soldier’s face shifted and he nodded a bit. “That’s sense.”

Gabrielle felt Xena’s arm settle over her shoulders and she glanced up at her partner, seeing the faint smile on her face. “Was it?” She muttered under her breath. “Or should I have let it go?”

“No, that was the right thing.” Xena answered instantly. “In fact….”

They reached the horses. “In fact what?” Gabrielle asked.

“Let’s talk back at camp.” Xena pulled herself up into her saddle and waited for Gabrielle to do the same, then they started back towards the forest at a fast trot .

**

“Can’t even tell it’s day.” Gabrielle settled into their hammock, tucked under the thick hide covering of the tent, as she watched a heavy snowfall outside. “Xena, I’ve never seen this much snow in my whole life. Have you?”

“No… well, there was that winter we got caught up in the mountains.” Xena said. “That was about this thick wasn’t it?”

“Not all at once.”

No, it hadn’t been. They had worked their way through a high pass and found themselves trapped in what was already a white wasteland. There had been snow after that, but not like this. “No, that’s true.” The warrior concluded. “I asked Ares. He said he didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know or doesn’t want to tell.” The bard said, shrewdly. “I thought that storm we had, when we were at home for our joining wasn’t really right.”

“Wasn’t him. Wasn’t them. I’d have known.” Her partner responded. “This isn’t them.”

Gabrielle remained quiet, watching the tall figure as it slowly paced. Xena was still in her armor, though her sword was hanging on one of the branches that formed the support for their makeshift shelter.

The torchlight inside, it’s smoky residue gathering at the vent in the side of the roof outlined her, picking up little highlights off the brass and outlining the distinct planes of her face. “But it could be someone else.” She guessed. “Or something else.”

Xena came over and settled into the hammock next to her, sitting sideways and gently pushing them back and forth with her heels. “Could be.” She agreed. “Anyway, we need to wait this out a little anyway. Even using it as cover to approach the city I’ll end up losing troops and supplies.”

Gabrielle considered that. She had a cup of hot wine in her hands and she sipped it thoughtfully. “What if they’re using this as a way to sneak up on us?” She asked. “That’s a lot of open space to cross for both of us.”

“We’re watching.” Xena replied simply. “I talked to Cait. She’s convinced those guys chasing them could have caught them if they’d wanted to. She said they kept just close enough to keep her full out.”

“Huh.” Gabrielle grunted “Distraction?” She guessed, looking over at Xena, watching her head nod. “Keep us from finding the sisters?”

Xena nodded again. “But right now we can’t do anything about that. The only tracker that might find them in this is me.”

“You are not going out there alone Xe.”

The warrior smiled. “No, I’m not.” She agreed. “But I think something wants that. They want my ego driving me to find those women and save them.”

Well. Gabrielle got up off the hammock and went over to the tent flap to pull it aside and look out. It was almost a solid dark gray, the trees and ground covered in snow, and more falling thickly even through the branches.

She could see troops, vaguely, cloaked forms under rigged hides, on watch nearby. Just on the other side of the tree nearest her was the healer’s shelter, where Hercules was resting in well warmed woolen blankets, the gash in his chest very slowly closing.

Too slowly, Iolaus had told her, visibly worried, watching Xena examine the wound with equal concern.

Too slowly, but still making progress. The other reason Xena had decided to keep the army in camp, along with the other wounded who had some time to heal up.

She turned and regarded the hammock, where Xena was seated with her hands folded over her stomach, thumbs tapping lightly against each other. As they looked into each other’s eyes, Gabrielle got the sense that they were thinking the exact same thing. “It’s a game.”

A faint smile appeared on Xena’s face. Then she held her hand out and wiggled her fingers. “C’mere.” She said. “Game or no game, snow or no snow, gods or none, we should get some rest.”

Yes, it was true. The bard came back over and as she rolled herself back into the hammock Xena swung her long legs up into it and they ended up together in the middle. “Xena.”

"Mm?"

Gabrielle took a breath, then shook her head slightly "Why did we wait so long to use these damn things?" She poked the hammock. "I mean, sheesh!"

Xena chuckled, accepting the subject change. "Because if we'd gotten used to them I'd have had to find two damn trees close enough every time we camped, and staying in town wouldn't have been such fun the times we did."

And that, the bard had to admit, was also true. You had to know the worst of life before the best of it really could be savored didn't you? If her life had taught her anything, it had taught her that. "I should have known you'd have an answer for that."

"Rather than the fact we were just self suffering morons for all those years? Sure." Xena stretched herself out and exhaled in contentment. "You know I can revise history with the best of them." She felt Gabrielle start to laugh, her body shaking with it. "Besides I had you to teach me."

Gabrielle laughed harder, her chuckles becoming audible.

"I remember the first time I happened to be passing by an inn window and heard you telling some story in there and going.. WHAT?" Xena reminisced. "I thought you'd gotten into the spiced mushrooms again."

"Ah Xe." Gabrielle snuggled up to her and exhaled. "I love you." She said. "That's not something I ever made up or exaggerated."

No, Xena smiled, as she tugged the furs over both of them, booted and armored as they were. That love had always been steadfast and true and honestly given and returned.

No strings attached. Even when it had caused them both soul searing pain and driven them to the extremes of grief.

She let her eyes close.

**

Cait carefully climbed up the side of the small rock escarpment, her face wrapped in dark cloth, hands covered in the same. She got up high enough to gain visibility over it and peered into the darkness.

The flat plains before the city were still empty. The road was covered and obscured with snow, but the fall had slowed, and now was mostly just flurries that dusted her skin.

Behind her, the army was packing and getting ready to move, to advance across the open space and within range of the city gates.

It felt strange to be looking forward to the darkness for battle. Cait had gotten some rest, and she was feeling all right, but that big, empty wasteland before them seemed vast and somewhat threatening.

"What are you looking at?"

Cait turned to find Paladia standing on the ground, looking up at her. "Where we're going." She said. "It's almost stopped snowing."

Paladia climbed up next to her and thumped herself into place against the rocks. She folded her arms on the top of the rocks and studied the ground in front of them, issuing a disgruntled grunt deep in her throat. "Nuts."

"To fight in the dark?"

"This whole thing is nuts." Paladia said. "Guys with arrows, gods, other gods, people running around. Makes no sense."

Cait leaned next to her. "How do you feel about the gods?"

Her partner pondered a minute, then shrugged. "Never did anyone any good that I knew about." She said. "I remember them killing the last of the lambs, one year, for some sacrifice to one of them. All that ended up being was a waste of meat."

"I never learned about them." Cait admitted. "I don't remember which ones my parents worshipped or if they did even ." She paused. "I don't even really remember them."

Paladia shifted a little. "You didn't miss anything. Mine sucked." She said. "People that aint gods have done more for me than any of them did."

"Well." Cait cleared her throat a bit. "There's Xena."

Paladia, predictably, rolled her eyes.

"Stop that." Cait nudged her. "It's not her fault."

Paladia rolled her eyes again. "So what's the deal now? We going to march up to the gates of that stupid city and knock on them?"

Cait returned her attention to the darkening slope, straightening a little as she suddenly caught a brief flash of motion. "Hello, what's that?"

"What's what?" Paladia shaded her eyes and peered into the distance. "Something out there?"

"It's a wagon." Cait turned and leaped down from the rocks. "Stay there and watch it Pally!" She dodged through the trees and broke into a run, heading for the center of the cavalry, where she could see Xena's tall form already mounted.

Halfway there she felt a prickle of warning and something made her duck to one side, half sliding down the slope as hands were outstretched to grab her. She let out a yell of warning, then grabbed a passing tree branch and whipped herself around in mid air.

A body, cloaked, coming at her. She uncoiled her legs and hit the oncoming figure in the chest with both feet, kicking out as hard as she could as she heard a rush of clawed feet approaching and a bass roar along with it.

She let go of the branch and unsheathed a dagger, then remembered her original task and turned around. "Got that bad bit?" She asked, the forest dweller who'd come rushing over. "I've got to get to Xena."

"Got em." The furry warrior said. "Go on!"

Cait started running again, only to haul up once more when she spotted Argo's distinctive figure coming at her. "Xena!"

"They coming?" Xena yelled back.

"A wagon! Alone, heading to the city!" Cait called back. "I think it's the one we were with!"

Xena let out a long and two short whistles, and from no where literally Ares appeared next to her on his black horse. "Let's go! See if we can catch up to them!"

Cait ran for Shadow as the rest of the army swirled into motion and streamed past, not even pausing to wonder who it was who tried to grab her.

Later, for that.

**

The vanguard gathered briefly at the crest of the ridge and surrounded Xena. "Try to cut them off." She instructed the dozen chosen men. "We'll start the march towards the port city walls."

"Genr'l." The vanguard captain saluted, then gathered his troops and started down the road at a flat gallop, with the rest of them at his heels.

Xena half turned "Get in formation. Let's head down the road." She called out. "Keep watch. Could be anything including booby traps on the route."

The army started moving, the cavalry fanning out over the frozen ground, with archers running along side, armed with spears they swept in front of them.

"You think it's them?" Gabrielle asked, getting herself settled as they prepared to start off.

"Dunno." Xena turned to Ares. "Is it?" She asked.

Ares studied the distant target, and then, reluctantly, he pursed his lips and shrugged. "I can't tell." He admitted. 'They're morts. They don't light up."

"Great." Xena exhaled. "Well, no harm in chasing them down anyway." She settled her knees and they started forward as the body of the army did, the soft rumble of wagon wheels behind them as the support group brought up the rear.

After a moment, Cait wormed her way up beside them, and the Amazons joined them just to the rear. "Xena."

"Yeah?" Xena had just furled her map up and put it in her saddlebag. "Good catch on the wagon."

"Yes, thanks." Cait said. "But coming back to find you, someone took a grab at me. One of the fuzzies stopped them."

Xena turned and looked behind her. "What?" She spotted Jessan and whistled, motioning him forward. "Someone took a grab at you?"

"Yes." Cait said. "I think they were trying to stop me telling you."

"That's a good sign." Ares commented. "Probably was one of Hade's troops. Last thing he wants is me to find those chicks."

"Why?" Gabrielle asked. "Why does he care if you do? I'm not really getting all the motives in this thing."

"Welcome to Olympus." The God of War said, drolly. "Nothing's what it looks like." He stood up a little in his stirrups. "They're catching those guys."

Jessan came riding up. "Yo, boss." He said. "Glad we're on the move. I was getting creeps in that forest." He said. "You need something?"

"One of your guys grabbed someone who tried to grab Cait." Xena said. "Who was it?"

Jessan stared at her, then turned to look behind him. "Let me go find out." He said, turning Eris and galloping back along the lines.

"That's all we need is a viper in the camp." Solari had been listening, from her spot just a half horse length behind Gabrielle. "Maybe it was that kid."

"Good gracious is he back?" Cait asked, in an astonished tone. "Really?"

"What kid?" Gabrielle asked. "You don't mean Jacob?"

Cait focused on her queen. "He called himself Jake when he met up with us before. He's a bad lot, if it's the same person." She said, in a serious tone. "There's something not right with him."

"Ah.. I talked to Nala." Solari grinned. "I think he was stuck on you."

Cait gave her a withering look. "He's a rotter."

"Wait, we know him." Gabrielle said. "He was one of a family we ran into when I was pregnant with Dori, in that village.."

"Oh crap." Solari's eyes widened "That family? Those weirdos with the sheep? Who dissed women? Those guys?"

Gabrielle nodded. “Yes, it was him, and his brother and sister. I was surprised to see him… and there was something he did the other day that made me think of someone else… “ Gabrielle stopped talking and went silent, her eyes going internal.

Xena looked right and left, measuring the alignment of her troops, feeling a sense of satisfaction as they moved at a good pace, eyes alert, and hands on weapons. There was uncertainty in the air she could feel, and a certain potential for things to happen that they needed to be ready for.

She didn’t like it.

Jessan was coming back along the lines, and he pulled up next to her. “Okay, my guys did get hold of this human who was making a grab. Beddus is bringing him up now.” He indicated a fast moving forest dweller, mounted, with a slight figure in front of him.

“Xena.”

“Yeah, hold on a sec, hon.” Xena peered through the twilight gloom at the captive. “Damn. Cait was right. It’s that kid.”

“Xe, don’t let him near Ares.” Gabrielle said suddenly, reaching out to grip her partner’s arm. “I just remembered who he reminded me of yesterday. When he smirked.”

Ares heard his name and came closer. “What’s up?”

“Who?” Xena put her hand on her sword, glancing between Gabrielle and the oncoming captive. “He’s just a kid.”

“That look reminded me of Seraphim.”

Xena drew her sword within a breath of hearing the words, and she let out a yell of warning. “Get around them!” She pointed at Gabrielle and Ares, and she started forward to intercept the forest dweller.

“What the heck’s going on?” Jessan asked, in a bewildered tone.

“No telling.” Cait answered him as she got in front of Gabrielle and pulled her own blade, as the army slowed and moved into a swirl of confusion.

Xena sent Argo through the rapidly parting troops, none of which understood her intent but knew enough to get out of her way. “Stop!” She got sideways to the forest dweller, who had pulled his horse to a halt in front of her.

She kept her sword out and side stepped over and three soldiers came over with torches, throwing them all into golden relief, and shadows behind them. “Explain why you went after Cait.” She could see his face, pale and a little desperate, opposite her.

“I…” He said.

“Don’t lie.” The warrior warned him. “We’re in the middle of battle, and I don’t have time to play games.”

He took a breath, and released it. “You won’t catch them.” He said. “”We’ll get our pay.”

Xena studied him. “You work for Pinu.”

He nodded, defiantly. “Only person ever who took care of me. Tried to get the rest of them to the hunters, but that little bitch warned em all off.”

With a flickering motion ,Xena brought her sword around and smacked him across the face with the flat of it, the sharp sound echoing across the snowy ground. “Count yourself lucky you didn’t.” She shifted the blade into reverse and moved closer, watching him flinch backwards, eyes tearing from the blow. “Have any idea who they got in that other wagon?”

He stared at her. “Half dozen nice, fruity wenches. Ripe for Pinu’s harem.” He said, licking a bit of blood from a split lip. “He’ll know I’m out here. Then you’ll get yours.”

"Tie him up. " She told the forest dweller, who hadn't stirred an inch. "Tight."

"Sure, Chosen." The furry head nodded. "I'll take care of him. Put him over the back of that stock horse over there. Head down."

Xena let out a whistle and turned around, sheathing her sword. "Move out." She got the troops moving again and then went riding back over to where the Amazons, Gabrielle, and Ares were still waiting.

"What's his story?" Gabrielle asked. "I couldn't hear him." She glanced around. "And my little posse here wouldn't let me get closer."

"Snake in the grass." Xena said. "But not the hydra I thought for a minute." She shook her head. "He's with the slavers. Apparently they adopted him."

"Ugh." Cait frowned. "I knew he was a rotter. I said so."

"More idiocy." Ares had already started riding ahead. "Neverending."

"Sorry." Gabrielle glanced back at the retreating forest dweller. "I just had such a bad feeling about him." She felt a faint sense of relief though. "I guess they gave him a home when he didn't have any."

Xena eyed her. "I'll trust your feelings any time, love." She said. "I had a feeling myself when he tried to convince us the wagon went the other way. It's just…" She paused, and shook her head. "Something's not right."

No something wasn't. Gabrielle leaned forward and shifted her staff, as they moved into a canter along the road. Ahead of them, far ahead, she could faintly see the torches that had gone with the vanguard, and she wondered.

She just wondered. That look of sly knowing in Jacob's eyes that had reminded her so strongly of the same look, the same faint, almost smile she remembered in her old friend turned path to her soul's desecration.

Too late, of course, when experience had revealed to her what she'd been looking at, removed in time to allow her the perspective to see it.

So he was a party to the slavers. Raw and unkind as that was, did it really give her the prickle up her spine that remembering Seraphim did?

Xena half stood in her stirrups to look at head of them, and as the moon very briefly broke through the clouds and lit the road, they could see a single rider heading back their way, riding hard. "Now what?"

Redder let out a whistle and a moment later it echoed back. "One of the guard." He called out to Xena "Maybe they caught em?"

A few moments later the rider was up on them and pulling up as the front of the army reached him. "Xena!" The man called out. "We've got em. Need a healer! Bad!"

"Oh, that's not good." Gabrielle exhaled.

The army thundered forward, heading now to the circle of torches that were no longer moving, but still, staked out around a wooden structure and now, as they all approached the bodies circling it parted and drew their horses aside, sides still heaving.

It was a dark patch in a dark plain in the echoing emptiness before the city. They were still a long distance off, long enough to be unable to even see any lights from the walls, but out in the open here it felt exposed.

Xena hauled herself off Argo and felt the hardness of the frozen ground in the impact against her boots. "What do we have?"

The horses in the wagon traces were exhausted, steam coming off their bodies visible in the torchlight. One of them was on his knees, and as they dismounted, he keeled over onto his side with a pitiful whinny.

"Get that horse out of that rig." Xena ordered, before anything else. "Jessan, put your scouts out around us. I don't want any surprises."

"Right." Jessan let out a low bark, and the forest dwellers circled around him.

Xena pulled off her gloves and walked over to the wagon, stepping over the body of what had, apparently, been the driver.

"Wouldn't stop." The vanguard captain caught up with her. "Had to shoot him." He indicated the crossbow shaft.

Gabrielle caught up with her along with a handful of the Amazons as they walked around to the back of the wagon and stepped up next to the soldiers clustered there.

Xena could already smell the blood. She eased between the soldiers and put her hand on the top of the wagon, which was thrown open. Inside, one of the soldiers was kneeling down, and had a woman's torso cradled against his chest.

He looked up in relief on seeing her. "Genr'l, these people are sore hurt."

Xena took a breath and knelt herself as two of the soldiers brought their torches closer so she could see the interior of the conveyance.

It was filthy. There were tattered blankets and dirty straw, and in the back, small barrels were lashed, with a dark stain around their edges. There were four bodies in the straw, three plus the one in the soldiers arms.

"This one's the worse, I think." The soldier told her.

Athena, no question. Xena felt Ares presence in back of her, but she steeled herself and moved aside the dirty sacking covering the woman.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and then Gabrielle was kneeling next to her, unrolling her kit out on the wooden edge. "Cait's bringing some water."

There seemed to be no awareness at all in the woman, her arms were sprawled out, hands upmost, her body criss crossed with lurid bruises. But the blood was from a gut wound, deep and triangular, made from a long, heavy hilted dagger that was lying on the straw next to her. "Ah."

Gabrielle looked around. "Who did that?" She asked. "Was it the driver?"

The soldier shook his head. "Was two, three that jumped off and ran, ma'am." He said. "Captain kept us on the wagon, said let em go."

"Good decision." Xena said, quietly. "Gabrielle tell them to get over here and get a fire started. I'll need some cloths."

"I'll go." Solari said, giving her queen a tap on the shoulder. "Think it's gonna dump again."

"Figures." The bard exhaled. "Xena is.."

"Don't ask me that yet." Her partner said. "How are the others?" She glanced aside as Ares eased between the soldiers and knelt at her side. "Bad cut."

The God of War's face was still. "Bad like mine was." He said, briefly.

"Yes."

He nodded, then looked into the back of the wagon. One of the other women had stirred and lifted her head and their eyes met.

"You." She hissed.

Ares stared stonily at her, then lifted his finger to his lips.

She ignored him. “It’s too late.”

Cait ran up and put down a folding camp bucket of water, and removed a thickly folded pile of cloth. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” Xena nudged Ares’ knee. “Go over there and talk if you want to I need some space.” She muttered under her breath. “I don’t know how much time we have here.”

He moved aside and went to the other corner of the wagon, without comment. Xena plunged her hands in the bucket and washed them, then got the cloth good and wet and started cleaning the wound Athena’s belly.

It was bleeding freely, and she reached to her kit, pausing when Gabrielle forestalled her and put the collapsing cup in her hand. “Thanks.”

“I’m going to.. “Gabrielle started to speak, then went silent as Redder and three other soldiers unfolded a large, square skin and set it over them, using spears driven into the ground to hold it up. She went back to the kit instead and got out the gut and bone needles, starting to thread one through the other to get them ready when Xena needed them.

The other two women were slumped in the straw, but they seemed to be unmarked. “Redder.” Gabrielle half turned. “Can you get two or three men here, to get thes other two and move them back to the support wagons?”

“Aye, surely” The captain agreed. “Be coming up the road, yeah? No place here to set up anywhere.” He looked around. “Riders tell me they’re hearing yells, from up ahead. “

Xena exhaled. “Can’t move right now.” She said. “Set the troops in a circle cadre, with the wagons in the center and let’s hope we don’t have half of Hades coming down on top of us.”

The soldier nodded and trotted off, and Xena went back to her task.

“You’re gonna regret suggesting that.” Ares spoke up, after a period of silence. “Might want to sew faster.”

Xena looked up at him, then over at Artemis’ baleful stare. Then she went back to her tending, using the cup to wash the wound clear over and over again. “Not sure it’s going to matter.”

They could hear running, and yells, and the sounds of horses galloping.

“Get your arms ready.” Gabrielle told the Amazons, quietly. “Give her as much time as you can.”

**

The wound was too deep. Xena knew it. There were things inside that were damaged that she could barely keep blood clear enough to see to try and repair them.

She set the cup of water down and half turned, finding Gabrielle offering her a bit of gut and a bone needle in anticipation. “Thanks.” She took it. “You wanna go find out what’s going on?”

“Not really.” Her partner answered honestly. “I’d rather stay here with you.”

Xena smiled briefly and went back to her task, aware of the eyes watching her intently. The soldier holding her patient up shifted just a little, leaning back against the wall of the wagon. “Doing okay?” She asked him.

He smiled wanly. “Don’t like blood so much.”

Xena got her fingers into a big pool of it and grunted. “Might want to find a different job.” She got the big gash inside roughly sewn up and was starting on a second cut when she heard footsteps rapidly approaching them.

Gabrielle stood up immediately and turned, grabbing her staff and bringing it up crosswise to her body. She got in position before the Amazons around her could even react. “Get back a little” She warned. “I don’t want to hit anyone.”

Cait took a step to one side and drew her sword, and Paladia got around to the other side of the wagon, tall enough to rest her crossbow on the top and see over it.

“Where’s Xena?” A male bellow sounded.

“Here, Bennu!” Cait recognized the voice, feeling a sense of relief. “Over here!”

Bennu came hauling ass around the wagon and skidded to a halt, seeing Xena’s kneeling figure. “Xena, it’s a trap!”

“No, really?” The warrior said, turning briefly. “Glad to see ya. Which is the trap? Phillipi or the city?” She went back to her task, as her patient started to move around and moan. “Hold her still.” She said. “Solari, give a hand.”

“You bet.” Solari knelt next to Xena and got her hands on Athena’s hands, holding them still. “Think she’s coming round, champ.”

“Not a good idea.” Xena reached up and applied a pressure point, and Athena slumped back again, unconscious.

Bennu knelt on her other side. “We got back to Phillipi, Xena. People there’s gone nuts. They took up the men were with us, and killed them. Near killed us, but we did like you taught us and ran off.”

“Good.”

“They’ve got some dark things with em.” He said. “Took over, and they’re heading this way, scouring as they go.”

“What kind of dark things?” Xena asked. “Gab, can you wash this off? I can’t let this gut go.”

Gabrielle picked up the cup and dunked it in the bucket, letting it run across her soulmate’s hands, covered in deep red gore. “This cold’s not helping.”

“No.” Xena said. “What dark things, Bennu?” She asked again.

Bennu was silent for a moment, then he shook his head. “Beasts, some like. Skeleton birds.”

“The minions of Hades.” Ares spoke up. He was seated on the other side of the wagon, his hands clasped around his knees. “He called them up from his realm.”

Bennu looked over at him.

“Hi.” He waved a hand. “You’re lucky they didn’t bite you. When they do, you turn into one of them.” He added casually. “Then you’re one of his.”

“What?” Gabrielle paused in mid motion.

“Sure.” Ares said, giving her a humorless smile. “Hey, you morts end up in Hades’ realm anyway. Whats the diff?”

“You might have mentioned that before.” Xena glared at him.

He shrugged. “You didn’t ask.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Artemis said. “It’s too late.”

Ares looked at her. “Giving up?”

Artemis looked right back at him. “It was you caused this. Pitu’s army heard you were in the field, and called on Hades.” She said. “Idiot.”

Xena shook her head and went back to what she was doing. “Tell the rest of the army what’s coming.” She told Bennu. “Pass along the warning about the teeth.”

“Genr’l.” Bennu said, sounding unhappy. “Hope ye cut my head off if it happens to me. Yeah?” He eyed Xena. “Don’t want to be on the other side of it.”

The horror of the potential suddenly made Xena’s hands go still. Up until that moment she’d let the danger roll past her as she usually did, but now she stopped and thought about it.

She looked up and then looked over at Bennu, then her head turned slightly as she regarded her soulmate.

“Even you, blondie.” Ares commented. “Bet he’d love to get a fang in you.”

“In me.” Gabrielle repeated.

“Sure.” The God of War said. “That’s his gig, you know? The more morts he knocks off, the bigger his army gets.”

Xena stopped what she was doing and turned to stare at him. “You knew he’d come after us.”

“I figured.” Ares said, in a reasonable tone. “After you started steamrolling those other guys. He wanted to use them first.”

“And then he heard you were fighting.” Artemis repeated. “You, Ares. The Sword of War. He would have let the mortals fight to the end save that.” She said. “You changed the game.”

There was a brief, total silence. “You stupid jerk.” Gabrielle finally said. “We were trying to help you.”

Ares lifted his hands then let them drop. “Doesn’t matter. Would have come to this anyway. I just cut to the chase.” He said. “Those city morts wouldn’t have beat ya. We all know it.”

Xena glanced at her partner. She had no need to ask Gabrielle what she thought. It was written explicitly on her face. “Go get Bennu.” She said. “Get the army turned around and ready to run.”

Gabrielle put a silent hand on her arm, just that one touch, before she got up and shoved her way out of the circle and broke into a run.

“What do you mean?” Ares said. “You’re gonna fight those guys right?”

“No.” Xena redoubled her speed, her hands moving quickly to sew up the last of the gaping wound, not without a the faintest of trembling in them. “All bets are off. I’m not giving up my troops, my friends and my family to Hades on your behalf.”

She could already hear the shifting of bodies and the sound of horns behind her, one the ox horn she’d carved for Bennu during the last winter. It had a piercing, almost wild note to it, and as she exhaled, she felt that inner sense of sureness. “I”ll finish this. You want to come with us, you can. You want to stay and face Hades? You can do that too.”

“You’re a coward.”

Xena looked up at him, not even insulted, a faint smile on her face. “Always glad to be that, in a good cause.”

Ares was staring at her, as though he was seeing her for the first time. “You’re really going to run?” He sounded honestly surprised. “Really?”

“Absolutely.” Xena finished tying the last knot and picked up the cup, washing off the wound that was now a long, angry, bitter looking line across Athena’s skin. She reached up and released the pressure points, but the woman remained limp. “Two of you take her back to one of our wagons. This one’s no good.”

She stood up and rolled her healer’s kit up only then looking up over the collapsed wagon, to see the army in motion, and the bright golden flash that was Gabrielle on Iolaus leading Argo to her. She put her fingers between her teeth and whistled. “Let’s go people.”

Redder had joined the soldier in the wagon and they were carrying Athena between them, with urgent gentleness, leaving Ares and Artemis inside.

Xena looked at them “Coming?”

Artemis didn’t wait for Ares. She scrambled out of the wagon and stood with as much dignity as she could muster, her head even with Xena’s, eyes fastened on her face. “I”ll go with you.” She said. “If you have a spare cloak.. “ She paused. “I’d appreciate it.”

“We have one.” Xena smiled briefly. “Cait, can you get her a cloak and a horse?”

“Right.” Cait gestured with respect to the mortal goddess. “Would you come with me, please?” She said. “My friend Pally might have a tunic you could use too.”

Artemis studied her. “You’re’ an Amazon.”

“Sort of.” Cait said. “It’s all a bit difficult.” She added, as she led the mortal goddess off towards a small huddle of Amazons.

Gabrielle arrived, releasing Argo’s reins. “The scouts are already heading back up the road.” She said. “We’ve got Athena settled in the healer’s wagon, with Hercules.” She added. “Xe, let’s go.”

Xena nodded, and since Gabrielle was close enough, winked at her. “We’ll run all the way back to the valley if we have to.” She agreed. “We might even end up fighting at the gates of Amphipolis.”

The bard nodded, and they both exchanged, quiet, knowing looks. “Stay close.”

“Like a tick.” Xena crouched slightly then leaped up into Argo’s saddle, before she turned back to Ares, still seated on the wagon. “There’s no win in this Ares.”

“I shouldn’t have told you about the gnorps.” Ares sighed. “Shoulda kept my mouth shut. Would have been a cool fight.”

“Would have been the last thing you didn’t tell me.” Xena let her hands rest on her saddle, and studied him. “You’ve got your sisters back. I upheld my end of that bargain. Losing everything else wasn’t part of it.”

Ares stood up. “Hades still wins.” He said. “Only challenge we could have brought was you.” He looked around, then snapped his fingers. “He couldn’t have turned ya.”

“Why not you?” Xena asked, as the black horse came galloping over to him. “Raise your own army. Fight him. You’re the God of War, right?”

He looked over at her, with a curious expression. “I could take yours.” He mused. “It’s a nice army.”

Xena smiled. “You could try.”

He rolled his eyes. “Run from Hades, but talk crap to me. Nice, Xena.” He sighed. “Stupid army probably woudnt want to get loose of your tit anyway.” He looked around. “They believe in you, not me. Isn’t that a kick in the ass?”

Xena thought about that, and understood in that moment, that it was true and the envy she heard in his voice was also true. “Why is that?” She asked, suddenly. “I’m just some by blow bastard, Ares.” She paused. “Of whose I’ve always wondered.”

Ares was on the horses back and now he came up against her, and everything got quiet around them, even the wind dying down. He held up his hand, and the world halted for him. “Listen.” He looked around then ducked his head closer to her.

Xena took a breath and felt the air prickling all around her, raising goosebumps on her skin. “Was it you?”

Only the briefest of smiles appeared on the angular, cruel face so close to hers. “Baby I’d love to claim you.” He said. “You got no idea how much. “

She lifted one eyebrow.

“Can’t.” He said. “None of us can. You’re not one of us.”

He hauled the horses head around and clenched a fist, and the world rushed in again. “S’why Daddy wanted you to stay up there. Aint’ often we find something we don’t know about.” He smiled again. “Though he can’t convince Hera of that.”

Xena knew a moment of utter bewilderment. “What?”

“No time, babe.” Ares said. “Guess I lost this round anyway. Might as well run away with the rest of you.” He turned and cantered off leaving her there on Argo, with Gabrielle just as still and just as stunned next to her.

The last of the army was moving past them, but they just stood there for a moment, ignoring the blowing, icy wind, and the falling snow, and staring at each other.

“Son of a bitch.” Xena finally said.

“Let’s go.” Gabrielle concluded, with a shake of her head. “We can figure it all out later, Xe. If we get out of here in time.”

“Son of a bitch.” Her partner repeated, but got herself settled and they started out after the troops, getting to the road as a cadre of Amazons fell in around them, and Jessan came in on Eris next to Argo.

**

They gained the shelter of the forest before anyone turned around, and Xena turned herself right back forward as her eyes caught motion in the darkness behind them. A gust of wind brought that scent of decay to her again and now she realized what it was.

She felt like an idiot, being played by Ares yet again. Would she ever learn? Would any of them? The thought of her own army being cut down and joining Hade’s made her so sick to her stomach she stopped chewing the trail roll she was consuming and closed her eyes.

She’d known they were heading into something wrong.

Son of a bitch. That was exactly and precisely what Ares was, and now.. Xena drew in a careful breath. Now any sense of loyalty to him had disappeared, ground to dust in the knowledge of what he’d led them to.

What she’d let him lead her to. She growled under her breath.

“We’ll end up fighting anyway won’t we?” Gabrielle spoke up, wrapped in her cloak, and hooded against the snow. “We can’t outrun them forever.” She also glanced behind them, and then to her right, where the clouds were showing a faint hint of lightening.

“Probably.” Xena dusted her fingers off. “Lets get as far away from the port city as we can first.”

“This sucks.” The bard said, succinctly.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.” Her partner sighed. “We should have stayed out of it.”

“Xe.” Gabrielle chuckled a little, wryly. “Never in a million years would we have stayed out of it. Don’t kick yourself. We’ll get through it.” She reached over and patted her partner on the knee. “Somehow.”

Somehow.

**

It was noontime before they reached the rocky escarpment they’d camped by and Xena called a halt for them to rest and regroup. “Better for us to take a break in daylight.” She told Bennu, who firmly nodded in agreement. “What a damn mess.”

“Aye.” Her russet haired captain agreed wryly. “Least no one’s behind us.” He pointed out. “Guard came through, roads all clear back.”

“Yet.” Xena exhaled. “If we’d have kept going towards the city, would have been a different day.” She felt a touch relieved at having a moment to get her act together and she stood briefly in the center of the camp, hands on hips.

“We staying long enough for soup?” Gabrielle came up to her, bumping her gently.

Xena looked around the camp, studying the army, the horses, and the support people hurrying back and forth with sacks. “Yes.” She said, after a brief pause. “Might as well, while we can.” She exhaled. “I’m going over to the healer’s wagon.”

Gabrielle gave her a brief one armed hug, then she patted her on the back as she started off towards where the support groups had halted the supply wagons and were rubbing down the horses drawing them.

She watched her partner trudge across the frozen ground for a minute, then she went back to the sheltered rock overhang where wood was being collected waiting for her to come back to say to start a fire with. “Go on.” She instructed the waiting soldiers. “We’ll get something hot at least.”

The soldiers smiled and went back to work, stacking the fire while two of them brought over one of the big cook pots and the iron grate it would sit on, the pot already full of clean snow packed down well.

There were two other gatherings and at the whistles from Gabrielles group, they also went into motion, everyone’s spirits picking up a little.

“Let’s get everything in there.” Gabrielle put her back to one of the trees and folded her arms across her chest under her cloak, glad to be standing still.

Jessan came over and stood next to her, conveniently blocking the wind nicely. “Whoa.”

“Whoa.” Gabrielle agreed wryly. “What a day.” She looked around to see if Ares was loitering but saw no sign of the god. “I felt there was something wrong with where we were going. Just wasn’t right, all that stuff, all those armies… felt like a..”

“Like a setup?” Jessan asked.

“No, actually.” The bard said. “It felt like a play. You know? Like someone was writing us into a place we couldn’t get out of.” She added. “Just like it wasn’t real.”

“Ah.”

“And, we did what we came for.” Gabrielle went on. “We got the sisters. Have no clue what we’re going to do with them, but we got them, and they’re not captives anymore.”

Jessan grunted. “Can you make em not mortal?”

“Me?” Wide, green eyes studied him. “Honestly not even Xe could do that. I hope if we all back off and get out of this craziness, then stuff will work out so they can go back where they came from.”

The forest dweller looked skeptical. “We don’t get off that easy.” He suggested. “I sent two of my guys back along the trail to find out what’s heading this way. They’ll send a message when they see anything.”

“Hope they don’t.” The bard muttered. “I get the creeps every time I think about one of those things taking a peck at me.”

Jessan watched her profile, seeing the twitch of the muscles across her jaw. “Little sister.” He said. “I don’t believe there’s anything on either side of this life that could make you do something against your will. Even Hades.”

Gabrielle eyed him, then after a pause, she smiled, just a little. “I don’t want to take that chance, Jess. I’ve been on the line too many times for that.”

He put a clawed hand on her shoulder. “Xena won’t let anything happen to you. We both know that.” He said. “She won’t let anything happen to you, or to her or to us.”

No, that was more that likely true enough. Gabrielle covered his hand with her own and squeezed it. "We'll get through it." She said. "There's just too much god stuff in this even for me."

Jessan chortled softly, under his breath.

"I just don't see any good coming from this." The bard admitted. "What's a good ending for us? They survive? They don't?" She exhaled. "But I am glad we found them."

Jessan leaned against the tree, watching the fire build. "They're glad too." He said, after a long pause. "But they'll never say so."

"No." Gabrielle gently pushed herself off from the tree and headed towards the campfire, wanting to feel the warmth against her skin after the long, cold, bitter ride. She dodged the two women who had come over to the pot, dumping dried vegetables and meats into it. "That's gonna taste good."

The nearer woman smiled at her. "Anything, in this cold." She said. "Glad we stopped to take a rest. Those in the healer's wagon coulda used it. Rough road."

"I know." Gabrielle went over to the saddlebags someone had brought over for them and fished in hers, bringing out a small sack she unrolled as she walked back over. She sorted through the herbs and added a handful to the pot, watching them disperse across the surface of the already melted snow in it.

Voices were echoing a little in her hearing and she knew a short nap would do her good, as she could feel the ache of too much riding, and too much cold in her bones.

She took a step back and found another tree to lean against, letting her body relax and her mind finally, finally to think about that frantic retreat, and the words she'd heard in it.

Ares had been telling the truth. She could see the chagrin in his face, and that look of arrogant envy in his eyes when he told Xena she was no making of his.

Wow. Gabrielle had to smile. That had been a surprise. To Xena, and to her, because if she'd had to pick any of them, it would have been him. Xena even resembled him, a little, with that angular face and the height.

And the eyes.

That had even made him a little safe, to her. Made her harbor an affection for him, even unacknowledged because at the root of him she'd always sensed there was part of him that had that same unacknowledged affection not for her, but for Xena.

She remembered him saving Iolaus' life, because Xena had asked him.

She remembered saving his life, with Xena, because it had been the right thing to do.

And now?

Gabrielle wasn't sure how she felt now. She spotted Ares moving through the mist, his boots stirring the fog coming off the ground that he was walking across. He saw her and angled his steps towards her, coming up next to her and parking himself against her tree. "Hey."

"Hey." He had his cloak on, and the hood of it up and it framed his face with inky darkness. "Bad scene in there." He indicated the healer's wagon. "Depressing."

"Being hurt is no fun." The bard agreed. "And it's no fun when someone you care about is hurting either. I know I hate it when Xe's injured"

"Why?" The God of War asked. "Its not your blood."

Gabrielle turned towards him, resting her shoulder against the tree. "But it is, Ares. When Xe gets cut, I bleed."

"No you don't."

"I do." She touched her chest. "I hurt in here for her. It brings me to tears, every time."

Ares's brows creased and he stared at her. "You're so weird."

"Maybe I am." Gabrielle acknowledged. "I even felt bad for you, when you were telling us about your sisters messing with your stuff." She shrugged. "Anyway, I've got soup to make." She returned to the fire, and sniffed the steam starting to come off the water.

He followed her over, and peered into the pot, as one of the grooms came over and offered Gabrielle a small bag. "What's that?"

Gabrielle peeked inside. "Ah nice. Dried onions." She emptied the bag in and took the bark stripped branch handed to her and stirred the liquid. "Anyone got any meat?"

"Here." Jessan came over and offered up a bloody, furry bundle. "Fresh caught."

"Glad Dori's not here." Gabrielle loosened the field dressed rabbits and eased the contents into the pot, sensing the men and women around her relaxing. "Did I tell you she decided she didn't like eating animals before we left?"

Jessan made a face at her. "Does that mean she's starving, back by us?" He asked mournfully. "We don't do much in the way of salads."

"She got over it before we left, mostly." Gabrielle said. "But it'll come up again I'm sure. She was in a snare class up in the village and Xe explained to her what they were for."

"Oo."

"Yeah." Gabrielle took comfort in the casual talk, and in thinking about her daughter. "She's so funny somemtimes."

The Amazons appeared, and drifted over to her, carefully easing around Ares' silent form. Solari cleared her throat a little and offered her queen the contents of a leather sack. "Salt?"

"Always." Gabrielle took a pinch and added it. "Everyone doing okay?"

Solari put her sack away. "If you want, I'll keep stirring this. Maybe you should go check out the stuff in the wagon."

Uh oh. "Okay.." Gabrielle handed the stick off. "If anything else is offered, just add it. Two handfuls of stuff, a pinch of salt. Okay?"

"Got it."

The bard dusted her hands off and headed past the gathering crowd, moving between the frozen trees towards where the support wagons had been clustered, with soldiers resting all around them. She passed more cookfires, and pushed her hood back as the heat of them worked to remove the utter chill from the air.

The biggest of the fires was built near the center of the wagons, most of them opened to allow the getting to of supplies and tools. There were a group of soldiers, and two of the army's healers standing next to the biggest of the wagons and they turned with looks of relief when Gabrielle arrived.

"Hey." She paused. "Everything all right?"

One of the healers had just put a bucket of water near the fire to heat. "Somes feeling poorly in there, Gabrielle." He said. "Xena's working on them."

Xena being the most experienced healer they had. Gabrielle eased past them and ducked her head to peer into the healer's wagon, where there were six patients receiving her soulmate's regard. "Hey."

Xena looked up and around at her. "Glad you're here."

Now, that was a bit confusing. Gabrielle moved into the space and settled next to Xena's kneeling form. Hercules was lying in front of her, and she saw the re-opened wound, and the blood and Iolaus's face and she understood.

Understood because she'd been there, had seen Xena slipping away from her, and knew that sickness in the gut that showed clearly on Iolaus' face. "What happened?"

"I tried to kill him." Artemis said, from her spot in the straw. "You should've let me. It's his fault were all like this."

"No it isn't." Gabrielle objected. "I was there. You lost a bet. Zeus made you like this." She paused. "If it's anyone's fault, it's yours. Or his." She glanced at Xena, who was mixing up a paste in the small mortar and pestle she carried.

"Not that." Artemis shook her head, voice surprisingly mild. "It's his fault, because he's a mongrel, and he lives and that's what made people start thinking they had no need for the Gods."

Gabrielle studied Hercules's long form, then she looked over at Athena. "Hey listen." She said. "I realize I'm a shepherd's kid from the sticks, but even I know babies don't retroactively cause themselves to be born."

Xena smiled briefly, but kept silent.

"I had no choice who my parents were." The bard clarified. "Neither did he."

"That's true." Artemis surprisingly agreed. "But he had a choice given to him, and he chose to stay here, stay with mortals, and that, Gabrielle, was in his control."

Well, that was true.

"And he did it, to make this happen. To make mortals understand that the gods weren't so different from them." Artemis concluded. "So that is why I want him to die, to spill his blood out on the ground and show that he is, in fact, no god. He's mortal. Not one of us."

"But what would that achieve?" Gabrielle asked. "We all know the truth."

"It will give me satisfaction." Artemis said, in a very serious voice. "And after watching my sister be gutted and penetrated by laughing mortals, I'll take that."

Oh, ugh. One glance at Xena's profile told her the goddess was telling the truth, and now she had to wonder where that all left them. "Wow."

Xena gently spread the paste she'd finished grinding over the wound in Hercules' chest, then she picked up a fresh piece of gut already threaded through the end of her bone needle. The gash, which had been on it's way to slowly closing had been ripped open by Artemis, her fingernails up to the task of cutting through her stitches and tearing his flesh further.

His skin tone was fading, turning a dull, slightly grayish color and his breathing had shortened and shallowed, as though the attack itself had damaged him more than the physical injury.

Which it well may have. Xena was struck at that moment with the essential futility of their situation, where nothing and no one seemed poised to win in any sense.

Had they lost? What did that really mean now?

She felt the sudden warmth of Gabrielle's hand on her back, just resting there near her spine. With a sigh, she went back to her work, shaking her head.

Athena had never regained consciousness. The badly injured goddess was against the wall of the wagon, on the other side of her sister. The other injured soldiers were on the far side of the wagon and visibly glad to be there.

The goddess was fading. Hercules was fading.

Xena finished her suture and tied it off, running the edge of her armor knife against the end and then sheathing it. She put more paste over the top of the wound, and then she swiveled around and sat down in the straw, leaning back against the wagon wall as Gabrielle eased in next to her.

Moments later, Ares appeared, and perched on the edge of the wagon, his cloak wrapped around him and his hood up covering his head.

"So what happens now?" Gabrielle asked, after they all looked at each other in silence long enough.

When there was no answer, and not even a comment, the bard turned her head and looked at her partner. "Xe?"

"Yes?" Xena looked back at her. "You going to ask me what the plan is?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle agreed. "You're the one in charge."

True. Xena had to admit to herself. She was, in fact, the one in charge because it had been her idea to come out here, and it was her army. The problem was, she really didn't know what the next step was and aside from avoiding running into Hades' army she didn't have a plan.

She suspected strongly that Gabrielle knew that. She also knew that the bard really didn't mean to put her on the spot, or embarrass her, she just wanted Xena to either say point blank they had a clean slate or come up with some plan they at least could say they were following.

So.

She pondered their options in silence for a few minutes while everyone else waited for her to answer. What really would achieve anything useful for them? "Let me ask this." She said, looking over at Ares. "What actually was your plan?"

"What?"

"You got me to take my army out to find your sisters." Xena said, catching the look of surprise on Artemis' face from the corner of her eye. "You knew about Hades. You knew what was going on. What was the plan?"

Ares shrugged.

"Ares, c'mon." Xena prodded him. "What were you hoping to get out of all of this?"

"That's a different question." The God of War said. "I was hoping you and your minions would kick Hades' ass and I could take credit for it." He responded straightforwardly. "Keeps the morts in our camp, gets rid of old uncle, makes points with the rents, it's all good."

"You're such a scumbag." Artemis said.

"Look who's talking?" Her brother retorted. "Look who sold her follower's down the river and let that get out in front of the biggest mortal mouth in all eternity?" He pointed at Gabrielle. "Know how many people know about all that now? About blondie here kicking your ass in front of half of Therma?"

"Don't start with me, Ares."

"Guys, c'mon." Gabrielle said. "Can we just say everyone made some bad choices, and move on?" She leaned against Xena. "Let's not fight. Let's find a way out of this that makes sense."

Everyone looked at her with veritable cornucopia of skeptical expressions, with the exception of Xena who merely smiled. "So Gabrielle." She regarded her soulmate. "What's the plan?"

Gabrielle took a breath and circled one upraised knee with both arms. "Okay. This is what I think we should do." She paused.

"This should be good." Ares muttered. "Probably involves puppies."

"Not exactly."

**

"Look." Gabrielle said, after a pause. "It really comes down to making people want to support you." She rested her forearm across Xena's thigh. "Because when they realize they don't have to,

when they realize they have a choice, you have to give them a reason to choose the way you want them too."

"Mortals must worship. They have no choice." Artemis shook her head.

"No, really we don't." Gabrielle disagreed. "You can learn that from your family, but there's nothing forcing us to believe in something, not when you're grown up and you know better."

"That's not always true, hon." Xena objected. "Depends on the person. I've known people who blindly believe and would never consider anything else, and so have you."

"Most mortals are too stupid to know better." Ares spoke up.

"Then why is this an issue?" Gabrielle turned on him. "If it's only us few who can make a choice, why is it a problem? Why doesn't the belief of all the rest of us make up for it?"

The gods and mortal facimilies of gods remained quiet for a few minutes, watching each other and the rest of the wagon with thoughtful looks.

"Good question." Xena finally said.

"Why would Pinu showing you two off to the port city cause them to stop believing?" Gabrielle took another angle at it. "Why? I have to work my butt off just to get people to see a different viewpoint in a story that's real and that I've actually lived through."

Ares shifted a little, and folded his arms over his chest. "We saw it happening." He said, slowly. "Zeus and Hera saw it. They stopped being able to do things." He snapped his fingers. "We stopped. You saw it." He looked at Xena.

Xena wiped the last of the water off her hands, rubbing tiny shreds of dried blood off her skin. "Was that because people down here stopped believing or.. "

"Or you stopped believing." Gabrielle finished her sentence for her.

Another long silence, even Iolaus looked thoughtful, one hand clasped around Hercules' shoulder resting near his knee.

"Anyway." The bard said. "Maybe your problem is also that people here, us mortals." She produced a wry smile. "We also have kind of a 'what have you done for me lately' thing going. You know?"

Now, both Ares and Artemis snorted briefly, under their breaths.

"So a lot of the stories I've heard about the gods.. they're from a long long time ago." Gabrielle said. "It's kind of like the stories you hear about Xena, from way back when." She patted her soulmate's knee. "I made new stories about her, and that changed a lot of minds."

Xena nodded thoughtfully. "That's true." She said. "But sometimes those old stories come in handy."

"When you want to scare the pants off of everyone yes." Her partner said. "But maybe what you guys need is some new stories – new things for people who are alive right now to start telling."

Ares just laughed. He got up off the edge of the wagon and left, disappearing around the corner towards where the fire was now well up and crackling. Artemis rolled her eyes, then after a moment she eased out after him, and stretched gingerly, leaving them behind.

"Good thought." Xena told her companion. "Not your fault they're jerks."

"You know." Gabrielle exhaled. "They've been around so long and they don't get it. We want to believe in something. Just give us a hand, huh?" She let her head rest against Xena's shoulder. "What are we going to do, Xe?"

"We back to my plan again?" Her partner chuckled wryly. "I like your idea better. Get you up on a stage, and let you go and make them as crazy ass wonderful as you do me."

"No stage and no audience, hon."

That was true. Xena let her head rest on the wagon wall and pondered her choices, which were few and bad and dwindling every minute.

Or were they?

Bennu came over and offered her a steaming mug. "Genr'l?"

She took it, warming her hands with it. "Benny, those dark forces you saw."

"Aye."

"Sure they were heading for us?" Xena lifted her eyes and met his. "What's the chance they were heading for the port city instead?"

Bennu perched on the edge of the wagon. "Was chasing us." He said. "Came through Phillipi, like, and then we ran from em, and they came after us."

"But did they?" His war leader asked. "Or were you just going in the same direction?"

Bennu thought about that, sipping from a wooden mug gripped in one big hand.

"Was there some point they stopped chasing you?" Xena changed the angle a little. "Where you got ahead of them? Saw us?"

Slowly, he nodded. "Now's you say that, Xena, we came out the trees, and saw the road, and when we done that, we… " He paused. "Didn't stop to look behind me but got the sense they hauled up." He added. "Thought maybe they saw t'army."

"They could have." Xena agreed. "With all the torches and the running horses – you knew it was us?" She glanced at his nodding head. "In the dark?"

"Could tell by the ranks. Circled the camp, like." Bennu said. "And there were torches, could see your banner. I know that one."

"Go find Jessan for me, wouldja?" Xena asked. "Let's see what the deal is with Hades' forces. Where are they, and what's their target."

Bennu saluted her with his mug then he strode off into the camp.

"You think he's going for the city?" Gabrielle asked. "What does that mean? We have a free run home?"

"We might have." Her partner answered, thoughtfully sipping the hot wine in her cup, then offering it to Gabrielle. "But you might have given me an idea, depending on what we find out."

"You mean about the stories?"

"About creating new stories." Xena answered. "But it might be a risk."

Gabrielle exhaled. "When isn't it?" She looked over at Iolaus, and then reached out to clasp his hand. "Hang in there."

He looked at Hercules, then looked at her, with the knowledge in his eyes she knew in intimate, aching detail.

"Hang in there." She repeated. "It's never over until it is."

**

The atmosphere around the camp had changed. Xena, though she was not exactly sensitive to other people's feelings, realized that as she crossed back from where they'd put their gear down towards the healer's wagon.

She'd given the orders to fully set up the camp, and the scouts had come back, happy to report they weren't being followed. Now soldiers were seated around the campfires, with cups in their hands, waiting for the stew pots to finish.

Voices were drifting over the cold ground, the occasional laugh echoing softly. Off to one side, past the curve of the rock she could hear the stamp of horses' hooves, and the soft nickers as the animals were fed and cared for.

The weather even seemed a bit better, the snow dispersing, and the clouds thinning overhead, allowing isolated slices of sunlight to come through and dust them with unexpected golden beams.

"Get some rest." She called out as she wound her way through them. "While you can."

"Genr'l." They smiled at her. "You as well, eh?"

Jessan intercepted her as she neared her goal. "You were right." He said, without preamble. "I mean, you usually are right, but everyone figured we'd be running from them so.."

"They went the other way." Xena concluded. "We weren't the target."

"They went the other way." Jessan agreed. "They're surrounding the port city. We lucked out." He added. "My guys figure they'll move on them at dusk." He pondered. "Sort of the same plan we had when we were camped out there."

"They laying up in the daylight? "

"They took over that forest we were in." Jessan said. "Glad we're not in it. Those guys were seriously creeptastic." He rubbed his ears a little. "Sort of like hearing angry bees, y'know?"

"No, I don't." Xena was grateful for that. "But I wonder if we were being drawn to that spot because they were."

"Why?" The forest dweller asked. "Still don't get what the deal was. There's more sides to this than a twelve legged table."

Xena's face scrunched up onto a wry grin. "True. I thought the port city was working with Hades. Now? Not so sure."

Jessan regarded her. "We going to go find out?"

"Maybe." Xena eyed him. "I might have to find a plan." She waggled an eyebrow at him, before she climbed back up into the wagon and settled back onto the straw.

Gabrielle had seated herself next to Iolaus, with a warm, wet piece of linen in her hand, wiping Hercules's face as they sat there with him. She exchanged looks with Xena as the warrior slid past her. "Hey."

Xena set down the small pot she'd been carrying, and several bowls. "Here." She said. "Might as well get some food while we can." She edged past them and went to Athena's side, laying down her healer's kit and pushing her sleeves up as she studied her patient.

The goddess had been very ill handled. Aside from the gash in her side, which was swollen and hot to the touch, she had bruises across her body and one side of her face was dark purple and red. Xena settled herself cross legged on the straw and rested her elbows on her knees.

Then she sighed and pulled the bucket of water over closer to her and dipped in a fresh piece of linen, gently washing the long, red line under her ribs.

A hand touched her arm, and she only just kept from reacting as she looked up to see Athena looking back at her. "Don't move around." She warned. "You'll make it worse."

Those eyes, ancient and almost colorless studied her, and there was a dark irony in there that Xena acknowledged with a tilt of her head. "Yeah I know. Worse is relative."

Athena's lips twitched, very briefly. She glanced past Xena at the three figures behind her and then shifted her eyes back. "Where's my brother?"

Xena rinsed off her linen and started combining some of the herbs in her kit. "He's with Artemis, near the Amazon's camp."

“I wish to speak with him.”

Xena mixed the herbs into a paste. “When I’m done here, I’ll bring him over.” She said. “We all need to talk anyway.” She spread the paste over the injury, focusing on getting the substance to completely cover the lurid gash.

She knew it had to be painful, knew, in fact from personal memory. “I’ll be done soon.”

“I have learned what pain is.” Athena remarked softly. “Is this something you know?”

Xena smiled wryly. “Better than most.” She admitted. “When you live by the sword, as I do, you get cut by it more often than not.”

“Yes, mortals live such short, violent lives.”

Xena glanced up at her, but the tone was reflective, and not sarcastic. She studied the woman’s face, then went back to her task. “Why’d they cut you?” She asked, as she wiped her hands off and started mixing more herbs into a tisane.

“The man who defiled me did it.” The goddess said, briefly. “After took hold of a piece of wood and crushed the parts he did it with.”

Xena exhaled. “Good job.” She finally said. “Sorry it went down that way.” She looked up into Athena’s eyes and whatever the goddess saw there, brought a change of expression. “Glad you took a piece of him for it.”

“I wanted to kill him.”

“I would have.” The warrior acknowledged, aware of Gabrielle’s intent attention behind her. “In fact I think one of my troops did kill him if he was in the back of that wagon when we caught you.”

Xena offered her the herbs, after she doused them from the wineskin hanging on the side of the wagon. “This’ll help the pain”

The goddess sipped from the cup held to her lips by Xena’s steady hand. She was propped up a little on a thick pile of straw and she relaxed back onto it when she finished, staring all the while at her attendants face. ‘Why not just let me suffer? It’s no secret your feelings for us, Xena.”

Xena rinsed the cup out in the bucket. “Maybe because I know what it feels like.” She remarked. “Don’t wish that on anyone, really.”

Gabrielle’s hand circled her elbow and gently squeezed, and she turned to find her partner looking at her. ‘Anything you can do here, Xe?”

Xena shifted around so she was seated next to the bard, regarding Hercules’ still quiet form. She laced her fingers together and took a moment to consider her words.

“He’s fading.” Iolaus said, quietly.

“Xe.” Gabrielle shifted a little closer. “I remember when you took the arrow out of Ares. He healed up right away.”

“He’s a full god.” Iolaus remarked. “Makes a difference, probably.”

“It does.” Athena spoke up from her corner. “If even a sliver remained, it will take him.” She shifted a little, grimacing. “And those heads are meant to shatter inside.”

Xena turned and looked at her.

“Hades is my uncle.” Athena said. “I studied his methods in his realm. His hearth brings forth weapons meant to do damage to his own.” She glanced at Xena. “My sister’s attack was ill done, if that’s worth anything to you.”

Xena studied the wound thoughtfully. “Maybe not.” She got up and went to the edge of the wagon again. “Bresus, get me a fresh bucket of hot water, and a torch.”

“Aye.” Her soldier ran to do her bidding.

“What are you going to do?” Iolaus said, nervously. “We got the whole arrow out, Xena. I was there.” He paused. “I mean, I’m pretty sure we did. It was crazy, and we were bouncing around but you know, your Cait has a pretty steady hand and she was helping me.”

“Want me to get Cait?” Gabrielle was already scrambling to her feet. “And Nala was there too.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Xena said. “There was too much going on.” She looked out over the camp, seeing the campfires, the banners. Her soldiers. Gabrielle’s Amazons.

A nascent plan was forming. But she had yet to decide if she wanted to execute that plan, and risk all those soldiers, and her soulmate, and herself in the doing of it. What really was the greater good in all this?

Was there even one?

Gabrielle came over to stand next to her on the back of the wagon, letting her hand rest on her shoulder.

“Got anything on your mind?” Xena asked, watching her men coming back with a steaming bucket.

“Only how much I love you.” Gabrielle answered, straightforwardly. “And how I really appreciate every heartbeat that goes by that I’m with you.”

Xena grunted softly and leaned over, giving her a kiss. “Nothing more I could ask for is there?”

“Nope.” The bard replied.

They stood there in silence together, faint gusts of wind blowing their intermingled hair back off their faces as one of the patches of sunlight found them.

Unexpectedly poetic. They blinked into the golden light, and Gabrielle held her hand up to cup some of it, faint dust motes settling into her palm.

“Go find Ares and Artemis.” Xena said, finally, as the soldiers came up with the hot water. “Start talking them around to where they realize they need to stand up.”

Gabrielle nodded. “They have to do this.”

“They have to do this.” Her partner confirmed. “I’m going to see if I can find a shred of that arrow.”

“I’ll be right back. I want to be there for Iolaus.” Gabrielle patted her on the back and jumped off the wagon, the soldiers parting to let her pass as she walked across the camp, heading for the gathered Amazons on the other side.

Xena hefted the bucket up onto the wagon and set it inside, then she pulled out her armor knife, running it’s blade through the torch flames until it’s surface was heated enough to reflect a dull red back at her.

First things first.

**

Gabrielle eased herself into the campsite, spotting Ares and his sister sitting together on a log in the back of it. She deferred transferring her attention to them and focused on her own sisters instead, picking up a bowl and joining Pasi and Solari on a nearby log. “Hey folks.”

“Hey your maj.” Solari responded, her bowl resting on her knees. “How long you think we’re staying here?”

“Depends.” Gabrielle extended her legs and crossed them at the ankles. “Xe’s got to get those wounded people stabilized, then we need to decide what we’re going to do.”

“We going back home?” Pasi asked. “We could take all of them back with us. Them being all wounded and all.”

“Eventually, sure. But we found out that we’re not being pursued. I think Xe wants to maybe see what’s going to happen with the port city.”

Cait wandered over, her ears visibly pricking. “Does that mean we might end up fighting after all?” She asked in a hopeful voice. “Seems such a shame to have come all the way out here and end up without that.”

“Nutcase.” Paladia had taken a seat on rock behind them.

“Well.” Gabrielle straightened up a little, projecting her voice. “I don’t know about that, Cait. Seems to me like there’s no one really to fight for, you know? The port city seem like they’re bad guys, and those other guys we saw definitely seemed like bad guys, so really – how do we win in all that?”

Cait sighed.

“I mean, think about it.” Gabrielle was aware of some of the soldiers drifting closer, and all the Amazons were gathered around her listening. “We were going to try and see what we could do about bad guys kidnapping people, right?”

“Right.” Solari agreed. “Seemed like a good thing to do.”

“Right.” Her queen said. “And then there was our other task, those people we were looking for.” She said. “So we’ve done that part, and it looks like those other guys are going to go after the port city – so – why should we?”

The Amazons nodded around her.

“But.” Cait sat down on the edge of the log, her boots tucked up under her. “What about the other people around here? They’ve had a terrible time.”

“We can tell them to come back into our area.” Gabrielle suggested. “There’s really not much here, you know? Even in good weather, there’s so little ground to crop.”

“That’s true.” Solari agreed. “It’s a lot better by us.”

“What if whoever wins that scrap comes after us then?” Nala asked. “I”d rather fight them out here, then have them show up on Amph’s doorstep.”

“Too right.” Cait agreed.

Gabrielle took a moment to get down a few spoonfuls of the stew. “Well, that’s kind of why Xe wants to see what happens.” She said. “She doesn’t like to take those kinds of chances, and I admit I agree that I’d rather not have yet another army show up at the town gates. That’s getting kinda old.”

Now everyone was nodding in agreement.

“Let them fight it out, then we’ll wale on them.” Solari suggested. “Or then if they just move on like across the water, go home.”

“That might not be bad, but I sure wish it was better weather.” Nala said, mournfully. “It’s getting colder again.”

“Yeah, my staff keeps getting caught in the hems of this thing.” Their queen admitted, then put her attention on her bowl, and the others did too as silence fell again.

They could hear the fire snapping loudly, as the wind had dropped down, and the thumps of horses stamping in the near distance.

“Gabrielle.” Cait said, after a moment. “Should we go help the port city? If those other people were kind of awful?”

Gabrielle chewed her stew thoughtfully, as everyone waited for her to answer. “Relative evil, you mean?” She finally said, a faint twinkle in her eyes. “As in, Xena’s army bearing down on you being the lesser of the two?”

“Well, sort of.” Cait looked embarrassed. “I was just wondering.”

“Well.” The bard took a swallow from her waterskin. “That would certainly win points with those guys in the city here, wouldn’t it?” She mused. “They’d be grateful to us, and probably they would stop thinking of doing silly things like offering a bounty on Xena.”

“Crazy nutters.” Paladia shook her head.

The Amazons chuckled. “They got like no idea what they’re asking for.” Solari said.“Big X could just go in there and take over the city. Boot those guys out. They’d never know what hit em.”

“She could.” Gabrielle agreed. “But she hates repeating herself and we just did that, didn’t we?” She smiled herself at the laughter. “But you know, Xe really doesn’t need brownie points anymore.”

“That’s true.” Nala said. “Maybe if the port city were good guys.”

“Yeah.” The Amazons nodded.

“What we really need is to get all the other..” Gabrielle lifted one finger and made a circle with it, glancing behind her at the two gods. “Things settled, and everyone back to normal, you know? I don’t think us just attacking anyone is going to do that.”

‘Yeah, but how?” Nala asked. “All due props to Xena and all that.”

“Now that’s a very good question.” Gabrielle mopped up her bowl with a piece of flatbread. “If Xe could just snap her fingers and make people believe again, she would.” She bit off a smile. “But you know, though I love her with all my heart, I know she doesn’t really understand why people invest all they are in her. And they do.”

“Well.” Cait spoke up after a brief, almost uncomfortable pause. “We know she’s on our side.”

Solari looked thoughtful. “Huh.”

It was a complicated question, and Gabrielle knew it, because she knew some of the people listening to her knew some of the history and knew there had been times when trusting Xena had been a very frightening thing.

She was one of them. She remembered crossing that line again and baring her soul and the mixture of pain and fear and relief it had been. “What I’ve learned in my life with her is this.” She said. “Sometimes you believe in people, and in things, because you don’t know any better.” She glanced up at the group around her. “And then when you do know better, you believe in people and in things, because that’s a conscious choice you want to make.”

“Not because someone tells you to. You want to.” Nala clarified. “I get it.”

“Exactly.”

A loud whistle sounded, abrupt and bright in the chill air.

Then they all looked up at the sound of approaching hoofbeats. The soldiers standing around dropped their bowls and drew their weapons, moving quickly up onto the slope that led to the road. Gabrielle set her bowl down and grabbed for her staff, and joined the Amazons as they got into position, letting out a whistle as the hoofbeats multiplied and it was obvious they were being approached by more than one person.

“Never gets boring.” Solari said, bracing her arm against a tree trunk and nocking an arrow into her bow.

A handful of horsemen rounded the bend and came towards them, already hauling up when they spotted the army camp and yanking weapons out.

“Stop!” Gabrielle let out a yell. “Don’t be stupid!”

The man in the lead half turned sideways and pointed his sword at her. “Who speaks!”

In a breath, the men were surrounded by troops, all with crossbows out and loaded, or bows drawn. He glanced around and then back at Gabrielle who had taken a few steps forward and grounded her staff.

"I think you really should be answering the questions." The bard suggested. "But since you asked, my name is Gabrielle." She stated.

He stared at her, and the sword lowered to his thigh. "Gabrielle the bard?"

Well, that was an encouraging sign. "Yes." Gabrielle was aware of her partner's presence behind her, but far enough into the trees that she was unseen. "Who's asking?"

The man sheathed his weapon and got off his horse, moving in a stiff, weary way. "Then this must be the army of Xena of Amphipolis." He said, exhaling. "And by some miracle of the gods I've found you."

"It is." Gabrielle started moving forward, only getting two steps in before the presence at her back grew to a prickling rush that ended with Xena's hand on her back. "Matter of fact, I think Xena's here too."

The man looked over her shoulder and the expression on his face was nothing short of utter relief. "It's true then. You did come."

"We did." Xena agreed. "What's your story?"

The rest of the riders had also gotten off their horses, and were just standing their quietly, having put away their weapons, content to wait.

"My name is Alan." He said. "My brother Carolous came to you for help, from Philippi."

"He did." Xena said, as Bennu came up to her side. "We sent some people back with him. They barely escaped alive."

He was already nodding. "We know. We lost most of our own soldiers, our homes, and our families. They came down on us at night, no questions asked. They heard we went for help."

Cait made a face. "Sorry I asked that bit, about helping them." She muttered.

"Hold on." Bennu objected. "Men in that city came after us. Killed your own folk."

"From the port city." Alan nodded. "They heard Carolous coming back and just took of their armor and put on the clothes of the dead. He didn't realize.."

"Where were you?" Xena asked. "That you lived?"

"I was with these men, we were fishing." Alan explained. "We came back and it was all over. They were cleaning the town out."

Xena studied him. "Then what?"

"They took everything." He said. "We followed them long enough to know where they went, then a bunch of their soldiers met up with them, and we heard about you."

Xena took a step back and signaled her troops to stand down. "Back to camp." She indicated their own shelter. "You all that's left?" She asked. "Tuck, take their horses"

"Aye, Gen'rl." The groom collected their assorted reins and led the animals off.

The man matched her strides and his fellows followed them. "Handful left, they managed to crawl away in the trees. Half froze. We set up a few shelters before we headed out, left our healer there with them."

Xena indicated one of the fallen logs and took a seat herself on one of the camp stools the men had brung over. A glance to her right told her that Ares and his sister had disappeared, and she slowly looked around, until she spotted the two of them in the next clearing, talking to Jessan.

Interesting.

“So you said you heard about us?” Gabrielle gently took over the questioning. “From the port city army? We ran into some of them over the past couple days.”

“We heard.” Alan smiled grimly. “We heard them tell their buddies about getting slaughtered by an army on the move, fighters like demons. They laughed at them at first, then one of them showed them something… couldn’t see what, and it scared em. They all moved off fast.”

‘Heading for the port city?”

He nodded. “Big road, yeah? Port city’s not so far off past the big forest.” He stretched his booted legs out gingerly. “We knew you all had to be up this way so we rode off to try and find you. Thank the gods we did.”

Xena motioned one of the quartermasters over, who was hovering in her peripheral vision with a jug of hot wine and a big platter of oddiments. As she did, she felt a touch on her leg and found Gabrielle leaning close to her. “Hey.”

“How’s Hercules?” The bard said, softly.

“Found the sliver.” Xena responded. “But it was deep. Almost at his heart.”

Gabrielle closed her eyes in reaction.

“Didn’t have time to really finish.” Her partner said

“Go now?”

Xena took a breath to protest, then saw the steady gaze looking at her intently. “Okay.” She nodded. “After I stop and have a word with someone.” As the quartermaster came over with his platter, and another with a tray of cups she stood up. “Be right back.”

There was a dagger edge brittleness to the situation and she could feel it. She took a meandering route towards the other campsite, using the time to consider what to do – what to say really as she tried to mentally gather the tenuous threads she could sense drifting past her.

This was a crossroads. To walk through it was a choice and the choice lay with her and she felt the weight of it as she made it.

Her steps eventually took her to where Ares and Artemis were now standing alone together, to one side of the campfire, watching her approach. Their faces were unusually serious, and the men around them were walking past with no notice of either of them.

Xena felt the faintest of prickles against her skin as she came up, and wondered briefly if she too were now invisible. She looked past the two Olympians and caught the eye of one of the grooms, and he smiled at her, lifting one hand in greeting.

So then not. “Okay.” She addressed Ares. “I have an idea.”

“Other than running away?”

“Ares, if you’re going to be an ass, I’ll do just that.” Xena said, with a touch of impatience. “Grow up.”

His eyebrows shot up. Artemis, for the first time, smiled at her, with a complete and utter lack of sarcasm, then she looked away, brushing her boot lightly against the cold ground and crossing her arms over her chest.

“This is what we can do.” Xena continued, after a brief silence. “If Hade’s army is showing themselves, then he thinks it’s time to make his play for worship. He thinks he’s won. Right?”

“Right.” Artemis was the one who answered. “Those city mortals raped my sister. He knows it. We all felt it. The man knew what he was about – someone had told him who we were.”

Xena nodded. “So the only play you can make now is what Gabrielle was hinting at. Hades’ army threatens the city, you show up as their champions and ruin his pitch.” She said. “Then the story spreads.”

“So now you say we fight the ghools?” Ares asked. “Weren’t you the one who said you weren’t going to risk it?”

“It’s not a fight. He doesn’t want to destroy the city. He wants worshippers.” Xena said. “You want worshippers. We have to give them the better deal.”

They both studied her in silence for a moment. “What’s the catch?” Ares said then. “Cause I know you have one.”

Xena smiled. “You’re the catch. You’re the one whole, true god we’ve got with us, Ares. You have to act the part. You have to sell yourself and make them want you over Hades.” His bewildered stare almost made her laugh. “This has to be your army. Not mine.”

**

“So.” Gabrielle shared out the platter and took Xena’s seat, tucking her boots up under her. The Amazons settled around the camp, but Cait moved over past her, and took up a guard position just behind and to the right of her. “Your brother wanted us to come help you against these guys. Sounds like they got a lot bigger and more aggressive than he figured.”

Alan nodded, stuffing his mouth with the venison jerky and flatbread. “My pardon. It’s been a day and a half for us with no food.” He said, after he swallowed. “Nothing to stop and hunt for in this weather. Worse I’ve ever seen.”

Gabrielle nudged the platter closer, and handed over a cup of wine. “I know the feeling.”

The other men, busy with their meal, smiled at her. “Thank ye, ma’am.” The youngest of then said. “It’s so good to see a friendly face.”

“Not like them.” Alan shook his head. “Like they were driven.” He added. “Aggressive, like you said.. like wolves.” He took a sip from the wine cup. ‘Terrible.”

Gabrielle leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “You are sure they were from the port city?” She asked. “I mean, when things are crazy and hard, sometimes people do strange things and blame someone else for them.”

Alan chewed and studied her in silence. “The men on the road? Surely. They said they were, and they were heading back there. Who else would they be?”

“Well, we ran into another bunch of soldiers.”

The men all looked surprised. “Really?”

“We were wondering if you had, too. They had dark cloaks, and were into crossbows with black iron arrows.” Gabrielle was watching them from the corner of her eye, judging body posture and motion with the eye of an expert.

There were so many angles in this, after all. But the unconscious reaction, the twitching of brows and slight movements of heads told their own story.

Alan shook his head. “There could have been anything out in this weather, but for me, no – I saw nothing like that. “ He turned to his companions. “Was there anything said?”

The youngest frowned. “I saw nothing like that, but when we saw the wagons meeting up with those soldiers, I could hear them talking.” He said. “I thought surely they were talking about this army here, Alan, but they did say something of a banner yeh? Gray on black.”

All eyes shifted to the war banner lashed to a nearby spear, tucked against a winter black tree. “Not that one.” Alan said, thoughtfully. “And Pinu’s is not like that either.” He looked at Gabrielle. “Who were these others then?”

Now that was a complicated question. “We’re not sure.” Gabrielle said, honestly. “But have you heard anything being said about the gods?”

The uneasiness then was palpable. “The gods, ma’am?” The youngest one asked. He was thin and tall, and straw haired, and he had big hands that now shifted uncomfortably around his cup. “We hear what is always said about them.”

Ah hah. “Nothing new then?” The bard pressed. “Nothing like, for instance, rumors that some had come down amongst us, or anything like that?”

They all looked at each other, then at Alan. He slowly put his cup down. “Rumors.” He repeated. “That we have heard some.”

“Tell me about them.”

**

Gabrielle crawled into the healer’s wagon, the dusk closing fast behind her. Inside, Hercules was still out, his head and shoulders resting in Iolaus’ lap. “How’s it going?”

“Better.” Iolaus looked profoundly relieved. “He turned his normal color again, and the cuts closing.” He lifted a herb soaked pad off the demi-god’s chest, revealing what had been a hand long gash that was now barely two finger widths.

“That’s awesome.” Gabrielle said, handing him over one of the cups of soup she’d been carrying. “Lots of things going on out there.”

“I can hear. We getting ready to move?”

Gabrielle glanced over at the other injured, her eyes lingering on Athena’s still, silent form. “Xe’s sending you all back to the valley, with an escort.” She said, after a pause. “The army’s moving towards the port city again.”

Iolaus looked at her for a bit then exhaled. “I’m staying with him.”

“Of course.” The bard smiled gently. “The forest dweller valley is a safe place. They’ll take care of you there.”

“I thought you were running from Hades.” He said, after another pause. “What changed your mind?”

Gabrielle leaned back against the wagon wall, and drew up one knee, extending her other leg out straight in front of her. “We thought of a way, maybe, to turn this around.” She said. “We’ll see. Depends on what Hades does.”

“Could be dangerous.”

“War’s always dangerous.” Gabrielle’s eyes went a little unfocused. “But you know, I think it’s worth the risk because I don’t want to live in a world where everyone’s busy worshipping death.”

One of the other healers climbed into the wagon, with a bundle under one arm. He crawled across to the back of the space and started spreading out bandages. “Going to get these folks ready to travel.” He explained. “Xena said to make sure they were padded up good.”

He very gently lifted Athena’s head and cradled it in thickly wadded cloth, layering straw under her upper body before letting her back down again. “Cold, this one is.” He scrambled over to the edge of the wagon. “Bresi, warm me up some stones, from the river, yah? Get em good and warm.”

“Yah.” One of the quartermasters trotted off.

Gabrielle leaned over and touched Athena’s arm, and grunted. “He’s right.” She pulled the heavy wool cloak over the woman, and tucked it around her. “I’m glad you all are going to head back.”

“Me too.” Iolaus said, in a quiet voice. “Wish you guys were coming with us.”

Gabrielle paused to think about that. “I wish I was too, especially since my little girl’s there in the valley. I miss her.” She said. “But for the same reason I know we’ve got to take care of things out here, so that she can grow up without all this hanging over her.”

Iolaus smiled and reached over to pat her on the leg. “You’re a corking mom, you know that, Gabrielle? Dori’s a lucky kid.”

Gabrielle returned the smile. “I think she’ll think so, but not until she’s older. Right now I’m sure she wishes her pesky parents would spend less time meddling with everyone else and more time catching fishes with her.”

The healer went back to his work, changing the dressing on an ugly leg wound on the man to the other side of Athena, while he waited for the heated stones to arrive. “Glad the genr’ls sending back a good lot of soldiers with us.” He said. “Tough roads back home.”

Gabrielle nodded. “We want to make sure you all are safe, and Jessans folks get home. They don’t have a part in this. It’s making them really upset to be here.” She said. “In the valley, they’ll be fine and you all will have the best of care.”

“Could go all the way back to Amphipolis.” The man said, glancing over his shoulder at the bard. “Got some troops left there too.”

“Rather have you all in the valley.” Gabrielle gently insisted. “Especially with the weather.”

The man smiled at her. “As you say, ma’am.” He returned to his work, and Gabrielle relaxed back against the wall, apparently content to just sit quietly alongside Iolaus and watch the preparations.

**

“Xena.” Jessan followed her over to where Argo was standing. “C’mon now. I’m not just leaving you here in the middle of an ice ball facing Hades.”

The warrior was packing her things in her saddlebag, and she paused to regard him over Argo’s saddle. “You’re not. You’re escorting Hercules and Athena to safety. You don’t think that’s important?”

“I do.” The forest dweller rested his clawed hands on the opposite side of the horse. “My guys can watch them. I’m not going back.”

Xena sighed. “Jess, you’ve got your family back there.”

“And you don’t?”

The warrior sighed again.

“Xena, I’m not leaving you.” Jess said, in a very serious tone. “From the first time I saw you, I knew our fates were intertwined, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to turn my back on that just because it’s weird and goddish now.”

Xena rested her hands together, her fingers laced.

“I’m not.” He repeated, softly.

“Okay.” She said, after a long pause. “But the rest of your troops go home.”

“Okay.” He grinned briefly, looking relieved. “Thanks.”

“Save that for when we’re done.” Xena warned, lacing up her saddlebags. “Tell your guys when they get back to the valley, send word of what’s going on up to Amphipolis.”

“You want them all to show up here? “ He asked, eyes widening in mock astonishment. “Your mother’ll be at the head of them with that frypan of hers.” He lifted a hand and backed off, then turned and headed towards where his fellows were gathered, all heads turned watching him.

“You’re not going to send us back are you?”

Xena turned to find Cait there. “No.” She said. “It’s not my place to. Gabrielle might.” She warned. “The last thing she wants, and me either, is to have something happen to you all.”

“Xena.” Cait took a step closer. “Please don’t let her do that. We want to stay. We want to fight.” She stood up as tall as she could, her head still only barely reaching Xena’s shoulder. “I’ve talked to all our lot.”

“They send you to talk to me?” The blue eyes twinkled a little.

“Yes.”

“Not to Gabrielle? She’s your queen.” Xena finished up her packing and turned to face Cait, fastening her cloak as she studied the young Amazon. “I respect that.”

“I know.” Cait said. “I do too. I think the world of the queen.” She said. “But if there’s going to be fighting, we want to be with you in it.”

Xena smiled. “I said I wouldn’t ask you to leave. I don’t think Gabrielle will either, unless she and I decide it’s best for all of us that we have as few women with us as possible.” She said, seriously. “A bad things happened Cait. A thing I don’t know if we can reverse, and if we can’t, it might end up not so good for us.”

“With the goddess.”

Xena nodded. “We could end up between two sets of gods and lose everything.” She rested her elbow on Argo’s hip. “But we could do that even if we go back home. At least here..” She flexed her hand. “We’ll be a part of it.”

“Exactly how we feel.” Cait said. “We want to be a part of it.”

The warrior held out her hand palm up, and Cait covered it with her own, and they clasped hands like equals. “Get your gang ready to go.” Xena said. “We need to move closer to the fighting.”

Cait grinned wholeheartedly and released her, turning and trotting off towards where the Amazons were clustered.

Bennu came up next to her, leading his horse. He settled his cloak around him and reached for the hammered metal helm her troops wore. “Always a fight with you around, Xena.” He commented. “Glad we’re stayin in the field though. This all aint set right with me.”

“No, me either.” Xena said. “Gather the troops around the road there I want to talk to all of them.”

“Surely.”

Xena stood there as the soldier started to move, aware from the corner of her eye that Gabrielle was heading her way leading the equine Iolaus.

The bard had her hood up, and her staff in her free hand, and she stopped next to Argo, wrapping her hand around the big stick and leaning on it. “Ah, Xe.”

“Yeah.”

So much exchanged with so few words, and just the tone. Iolaus swung his head over and nudged his mother, who spared him a look as she sidestepped over a bit.

Without further speech they both mounted, and Gabrielle spent a moment securing her staff along Iolaus’ golden side She picked up her reins and settled herself in the saddle, as Xena did the same, checking her chakram, and making sure all her saddlebags were tied down.

Ares appeared on his black horse, with Artemis behind him on one of the spares they’d brought with them. The mortal goddess was silent, and withdrawn in her borrowed cloak, as they both joined the two women on the slight rise before the road.

Ares looked, atypically, a bit nervous. Artemis’s expression could best be described as bemused.

Xena pulled on her gloves. “Here’s what we’re going to do.” She said. “I’m going to lay the plan out for the army. Then Gabrielle’s going to explain to them what we hope we’re going to get out of all of this and who’s going to be leading us.”

Gabrielle grunted under her breath, as Ares chuckled dryly.

"Then we're gonna move the troops up into position behind the forest, and wait to see what Hades is going to do."

"Why wait?" Artemis asked, but in a mild voice.

"Because in order for you to get the most impact out of coming to the rescue, there has to be something we're rescuing them from." Gabrielle supplied. "So we need to wait for them to attack or there's no point."

"You truly think you can defeat Hades' forces?" The goddess asked. "Truly?"

"Yes." It was Xena who responded, with a smile. "Don't you?"

Artemis stared at her uncertainly, but remained silent, as Ares nudged her aside and fussed with his cloak edge.

"You sure they'll attack at night?" Xena asked him.

"Yes." Ares responded. "Night's his gig. You should remember. You were in Tartarus." He reminded her. "Wasn't no fluffy clouds or sunshine down there now were there?"

"No." Xena said, briefly. "Let's go." She kneed Argo and released the reins, as the horse started forward, and they joined the stream of troops heading for the road and the meetup being orchestrated by Bennu and his captains.

Artemis pulled her horse around Ares and came up next to Xena matching Argo's pace. "What will happen to my sister?"

Xena shifted a little in her saddle and cleared her throat. "I don't know." She answered honestly. "The healer I'm sending back with her is good. But whether she'll survive or not is up to her."

Artemis studied her thoughtfully. "You realize we have absolutely no idea what that means."

"What's that?"

"Surviving." The goddess remarked. "Alive, dead, survive, live… means nothing to us."

Xena looked at her. "Your brother understands."

"Is that why you're doing this for him?" Artemis asked. 'Because he knows what it's like to be one of you?"

"No." Xena steered Argo around the bulk of the troops, up to the head of them clustered up at the road. The sun behind the clouds was setting and it was a gray and misty twilight, the moisture in the air coating her skin to an unpleasant clamminess. "I just think it's the right thing to do."

Artemis laughed dryly. "Another mortal concept." She said. "Right and wrong, good and bad."

"So is everything just neutral nothing in Olympus?" Gabrielle eased herself into the conversation. "I thought that's why you spent all your time tormenting us. Nothing else to do up there."

Artemis shot her a sideways, angry look. "I haven't forgotten you, mortal."

"Hope not." Gabrielle was settling her gloves onto her hands. "Since this whole scheme working might depend on me." She rolled her head around to loosen up her neck muscles and turned her focus away from Artemis, starting the process of sorting through what she needed to express.

Artemis fell silent herself, and they all moved around to the front of the army, where Xena halted and turned Argo around so that she was facing the troops.

They all fastened their attention on her, the intensity of their eyes an almost physical thing, and the wind started to come up, catching Xena's hair as she dropped her hood back and straightened up. "All right."

They waited in silence, the troops, and the Amazons, and near Cait, Jessan's tall and solitary form. Behind them, the healer's wagon was trundling off, surrounded by a quarter of the troops, and the forest dwellers, most of whom were turned in their saddles, watching as they went.

Mixed feelings, there. Gabrielle could see it. On one hand there was a certain sense of relief at heading home. On the other, they wanted to stay with Xena, to some measure disappointed at being the ones sent away.

She, of course, really had no mixed feelings. She missed Dori, but her daughter would get both her mothers back or neither.

"Here's the plan." Xena lifted her voice. "We move out. We need to move fast. I want to be in position near the forest as soon as we can."

Bennu was in the front of the troops, hands resting on his saddlebow. "Aye." He lifted his own voice, answering for them.

"Hades, the God of the Underworld has decided to let loose his minions on us mortals." Xena said. "He rides for the port city."

The soldiers remained silent.

"Two enemies don't make a friend." Their general concluded. "It's up to us to make sure death stays where it belongs, and doesn't follow us home."

Gabrielle cleared her throat a little, and straightened her back, ready to continue the game, to put the somewhat unpalatable facts before the troops and in the end, introduce the banner and the body they'd be following into war.

She only hoped it sounded more reasonable and confident to them than it did to her in the privacy of her own head.

**

"So this is how that happened. " Gabrielle paused to take a swallow of water. "You know we set out with two missions from home. One was to find out who was doing evil things and stop them. The other was to seek out two women we had reason to believe had been kidnapped by these same people and rescue them."

It all sounded so noble. Xena sighed internally.

"Why would we do this." Gabrielle went on, her voice echoing softly over the twilight shadowed ground. "We did this because that's who we are, Xena and I. And we brought you with us because we thought having an army would make all that easier than if we'd did it ourselves." She paused. "For a change."

A soft chuckle trickled back to her.

"You think I'm joking." The bard smiled at them. "I'm not. There are possibly two big armies out there and it would not have been the first time I'd have gone chasing after Xena riding out herself to stop them."

"No thought of that, little hawk." Bennu said, with a smile. "I seen it myself, Xena holding the gates against an army outside standing on a pile of bodies taller than me."

Ares sidled over to her. "How'd I miss that one?" He asked, leaning towards her. He was still invisible to the army, waiting for Gabrielle to announce his big entrance. "Sounds like a blast."

"And that's true." Gabrielle agreed. "But this time, we wanted you with us, and now that we're here, it seems the goals have changed." She maneuvered Iolaus closer to the front of the lines. "That happens, in war."

"Aye, it does." Redder agreed, from his position to the right of Bennu.

“So now we find out that though those people in the port city are bad, and they do bad things, that something even worse is going to attack them.” The bard said. “Smart people would just walk away from that, right? They’d let the bad guys destroy the less bad guys and call it a day.”

And here came the complicated part. Xena didn’t envy her soulmate.

“So why would we interfere.” Gabrielle drew in breath and sat straighter up in her saddle. “Now we cross from the world of self interest into something we call the greater good.”

“Blah blah.” Ares rolled his eyes.

“Listen to her.” Xena said, under her breath.

“ I think many of you have long believed that Xena and I have a special connection with the Gods.” Gabrielle shifted on her horse, swinging her leg over and sitting down sideways in her saddle, resting one hand on the saddlebow and the other on Iolaus’ rump.

The troops were moving closer, unconsciously, drifting in to hear her words as they closed in together blocking the rising wind.

“There is truth to that.” Gabrielle said, in to all that quiet. “Xena doesn’t blow her own horn.” She paused, and smiled. “That’s why she has me, after all.”

Bennu and Jessan smiled gently back at her, the forest dweller having edged his way up to the front, perched on Eris.

“So there have been stories spread all over about her skills as a fighter. As a warrior. And as a leader of armies in a long string of successes and victories that some of you have been there in witness and a part of.”

“Aye.” Bennu said. “Us that follows, she earned.”

“And those stories I told, because I was there for them. I lived them.” Gabrielle responded. “I came to understand along the way that the gods played a special role in our lives. Sometimes that was a good thing, and sometimes it wasn’t, but there were times when we needed their help and they gave it.”

Ares shifted a little, and glanced at Xena.

“Sometimes they needed our help, and we gave it.” The bard said. “This is one of those times.”

A prickle of expectation traveled over the troops and Gabrielle could feel it. She got a sense that these people, these men and women they’d led here to this dark and cold place already knew what she was going to say, and were just waiting for her to say it, and get past it, and get on with it.

She imagined Cait telling her she really didn’t need to explain all that, because to them, to her, it didn’t matter because there was an in held belief in her, and in Xena, that made the reasons irrelevant.

In a way, wasn’t that what they were supposed to give to the gods?

Nala leaned forward on her horse. “ My queen.” She said, in firm, but respectful tone. “For so many years we sacrificed to the gods, left them tribute. Prayed to them, and worshipped them, and when we were in our worst straits they never answered.”

Nods and murmurs of agreement rose up around her. “Tis true.” Bennu said.

“Even when other gods beset us.” Nala said. “It was no one we prayed to that came to help us.”

And that too of course was true. Gabrielle acknowledged it with a nod, and a lifted hand. “That’s what we have a chance to change here.” She said. “Because it’s not true that the gods don’t pay attention to us.”

Xena snorted softly.

“What is the point of all this?” Ares asked her, for once just honestly puzzled. “She’s making it worse.” He glanced around. “Make her stop talking and let’s just go do something.”

“And though sometimes you all didn’t know it, the gods have been part of all of your lives because they’ve made themselves part of ours.” Gabrielle concluded. “So Xena and I have decided to help them not because they’ve done so much good for the two of us, but because we do know them, and there’s such a thing as the lesser of two evils.”

“Xena!”

“Shh.” Xena told him.

“So we’re heading out to see what we can do about this other army, and when we do, we’ll show them, and everyone else what our gods can do if they put their minds to it. Because the Sword of War rides with us.”

Xena slapped Ares on the knee, and he reluctantly faded into view.

Hard to really say what the reaction was. Gabrielle studied her audience and came to the conclusion that her pitch wasn’t being bought, but not entirely in a bad way. “So let’s get going.” She said, turning Iolaus and giving her partner a faint shrug.

Xena’s face was impassive, but her eyebrows were doing the little twitch thing that meant discomfort. She lifted one hand and made a circling gesture and then turned Argo and they started off down the road, as the twilight started to fade.

It was cold. Gabrielle felt a few small, hard bits of snow start to hit her skin and the wind thumped against the back of her head and as she turned to look at Xena, she saw exactly what she was feeling reflected back at her.

“Got a bad feeling about this.” Xena said, mournfully.

“Shoulda stayed in that hammock.”

**

It was midnight, and very dark when Xena signaled the army to stop. They were just short of the forest and she stood in her stirrups, listening to the wind blowing back over them.

The silence was almost deafening. Xena sighed and sat down. “You, you and you. Come with me.” She indicated Jessan, Gabrielle and Ares. “The rest of you stay here and keep ready.”

Bennu nodded, and made a hand gesture, and the troops stood down, reaching for waterskins.

“Don’t build fires.” Xena cautioned, as she led her small group out and around the scouts. She steered Argo off the road and through the newly snow covered ground to the left of it.

“Where are we going?” Ares asked.

“To see what’s going on.” Gabrielle answered. “Shh.”

‘This is just a crock.” The God of War replied, shaking his head.

Xena stuck to the line of trees that were just off the road, Argo plowing stolidly thorugh the hock high drifts that were starting to accumulate.

This close, and she should have been able to hear, and smell battle if there was one. But there wasn’t a hint of human or animal on the wind, and she was starting to get the idea that if anyone was being played it was probably her.

Again.

Ahead she could see the long forest that covered up the road, where theyd’ camped and the run from Hades troops, and in fact, she could see lumps under the snow where the port city soldiers lay still, the body of one horse even sending stiff and dead legs up into grotesque view.

Too cold to allow for decay. One small advantage of battling in winter.

But beyond that, all was still. Xena slowed her pace, listening intently as she passed dead and barren trees, peering between them for any sign of motion. She let her mouth open a little, drawing in air over her tongue and tasting it.

Nothing. "Ares."

"What?"

"Where does Hades keep his army?"

"What?"

"When they're not here. Where do they go?" Xena asked, with remarkable patience.

Ares thought about that for a bit. "I don't think there is a place." He said. "I think when he needs em, he just calls em up and lets em loose."

"From?"

Ares opened his eyes in mock exasperation. "Hades' realm?"

"I think Xena means, where does he get them from? From Tartarus? Elysia?" Gabrielle asked. "The in between that I've seen a few times now?" She considered. "Can't be from Elysia, right? They're up there just to service Olympus."

Jessan had been listening, turning his head from one to the other, as his eyes slowly widened.

"Not sure they'd willingly fight for him from Tartarus." Xena remarked.

"Does it matter?" Ares sighed.

"Xena." Jessan spoke up. "I'm not getting anything from that place up there." He indicated the forest. "Except a few rabbits and a fox."

"Were you sensing anything from them before?" Xena countered. "Would you see dead things?"

Jessan pondered that. "Gosh." He said. "I think I was too busy fighting to notice." He admitted. "I just remember what those guys were saying about some dark stuff coming after them."

"Ah huh." Xena nodded. She released her own senses and felt them reach out, listening and smelling whatever came back to her on the breeze as the snow started falling more heavily, dropping an unexpected flake on her tongue.

"What if they're not there?" Gabrielle asked. "Could they already have taken the city?"

Xena spotted a small path through the trees and unexpectedly took it, easing Argo through the stark, dead branches and ducking to clear her head under them. She could see two horse lengths ahead of her, where the ground was level and starting to be snow free.

Why turn down the path? Xena smiled a little to herself, as she acknowledged that internal, infernal woodpecker of hers. Here amidst the trees she felt her shoulders relax, the sense of eyes on her easing as they moved almost silently along.

Then they were on hard ground and deep among the line of the forest that led up to that thick patch of it, the wind now cut and the only sound the soft thunking of their horses hooves on the ground and the faint click of dead branches overhead.

The path was narrow and as such they were going single file. Xena was in the lead, Gabrielle was behind her, with Ares and then Jessan following them.

The ground was sloping upward, and they leaned forward a little as the horses climbed, Xena keeping her back arched as she searched the path ahead of them, one hand on her saddle with Argo's reins tangled in her fingers and the other hand free, cocked expectantly to go for her sword.

There was something ahead of them. She couldn't see it, or smell it, but her senses prickled and she felt her breathing increase and Argo lifted her head, nostrils flaring. "Watch out." She called back softly.

"Hon." Gabrielle's voice was dryly amused. "The only thing I can watch right now is Argo's butt and yours. Everything else is pitch black."

"Fine. If they both start moving fast, follow them." The warrior retorted. "There's something up ahead."

"Gotcha."

"Ares, you know what that is up there?" Xena turned her head, then cursed. "Son of a.."

Gabrielle quickly looked, surprised to find absolutely nothing behind them. No Ares, no Jessan, and no horses. "What the heck?"

They both halted, and Xena stood up in her stirrups again, peering past Gabrielle at the now very empty path behind them. "Ugh." She sat back down with a grunt. "This is just getting worse every damned minute."

Gabrielle exhaled then put both hands on her saddlebow. "Well, hon. Just to hold up my part of our deal, at least we're alone together."

Xena eyed her. "That the silver lining?" She ventured.

"Yup." The bard studied her. "So now what? Do we go back to the army, or keep going and find out what's up there?"

"Smart people would go back to the army." Xena turned Argo and headed her back up hill with Gabrielle right at her heels. "But then we'd lose out on the chance to be alone together and where's the fun in that?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "Hey Xe?"

"Yeees, Gabrielle?"

"I love you."

"Talk about silver linings. That's certainly been that for me." Xena focused again on the top of the ridge, and dismissed her now missing companions. There was nothing really she could do about vanishing gods, and she hoped at least that Ares would make sure that Jessan was safe.

Now without them there, she suddenly realized she felt less anxious, and as they came to a slightly wider part of the path Gabrielle came up next to her and they moved along side by side.

"What do you think's up there?" Gabrielle asked, after a few quiet moments.

"Something watching." Xena said, as she reached over her shoulder and removed her sword from it's sheath, the sound of the metal rasping against leather making Argo's ears twitch. "Get your staff out."

Gabrielle did. It was becoming almost breathless in the midst of the dead forest, and she felt herself getting tense, unable to see past her partner so relying on watching Xena to know how to react.

As they climbed up past a stand of fallen trees, the breeze came down the path and they both jerked a little, as a rancid, rotten scent came with it. "Ugh." Gabrielle uttered. "That's nothing good." She added, as she felt Iolaus twitch under her, his ears going flat against his head.

"No." Xena pulled Argo up on the flat section and dismounted. "Let's leave them here." She gave both horses a signal as Gabrielle got down. She shifted her sword in her hand and let the blade face backwards, then she put her other hand on her partner's shoulder as they continued their climb.

Now the wind died, and the surrounding trees went still, and the soft rasp of leather boots against the rocky ground unnaturally loud. Gabrielle shifted her grip on her staff and brought it up across her body, tested the grip of her hands inside their gloves as they started up the last part of the slope.

At the top of it, there was a granite outcropping thrusting up towards the dark, cloud filled skies and the trees separated. They reached the high point and paused, and Xena edged in front of Gabrielle.

Of course. There were some constants always in their life together.

Xena then took a visible breath and moved forward, her body tensing as she walked towards the outcropping, where something was making her senses jangle. She could see a darkness on the side of it and as she moved closer, the darkness seemed to expand.

She felt like it's attention was on her now, and she rolled her sword up over her wrist so that it's blade was in front of her and then, as she took another step, she realized the darkness wasn't a creature, it was an opening.

"Cave." Gabrielle whispered. "Not the good kind."

"No." Xena moved past it, and studied the rocks, noting that the ridge moved across and past the road, and arched up just this same way on the other side. She turned and went back to where Gabrielle was standing and they looked at the hole in the rock.

It was stained dark, and it stank.

"So now what?" Gabrielle asked, after a long pause. "Is this an entrance to Hades's Realm, Xe?"

Xena went over to a nearby fallen log and sat down on it, bracing her sword between her knees, with her hands wrapped around the hilt.

Gabrielle went over and sat down next to her. "What do we do now?"

"Good question." Her partner answered. "Damned good question."

**

The snow was getting heavier as they sat there, regarding the dank opening in the rock. Gabrielle reached up to dust the flakes off her face and cleared her throat. "So what are our choices."

Xena had her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on her hands. "Really, we have no choices." She straightened up then stood. "C'mon."

Gabrielle had no real idea of where she was going on to, but she stood up and shook herself, getting ready to follow Xena into.. whatever. She wished she had a strong feeling about whatever but if she was honest with herself she really didn't

What she really wanted to do was find a much nicer cave, with maybe a sand floor, and a place for a fire, and Xena coming for her smiling and naked.

She felt her partners arm descend on her shoulder and then she realized they were heading back down the path.

"Going in that hole gets us nothing." Xena said, conveniently reading her mind. "I have to keep reminding myself this isn't about us."

"You mean, if we solve whatever this all is, we lose, because we're really trying to pump up the Olympians."

"Yeah." Xena agreed. "Screw it. Let's go back to the army and find a place to camp. Sort it out when it gets light tomorrow."

"Sounds good." Gabrielle could see the solid outlines of the horses ahead of them. "Someone's watching us from up there, aren't they?"

"Yep."

"You going to turn around?"

"Nope."

Gabrielle kept her eyes forward, but as they reached the horses she stepped around behind Iolaus and peered past him up the slope.

Pitch dark. Gabrielle sighed. "I kind of hoped we'd bump into Hades, so we could talk to him." She hauled herself up on the stallion. "We're going around in circles here. I"d like to hear his side of this."

"Thanks."

Gabrielle gathered her reins and turned, to see Xena still at Argo's side, and a tall, dark, cloaked figure blocking their way. "Ah."

The figure moved closer, and brought it's own flickering starlight with it. He was all shifting shadows, but they could see pinpoints of light, watching them. "You are bold beyond measure, mortal."

"Yeah." Gabrielle sighed. "Sorry. Story of my life."

Xena removed her arm and sidled in front of her partner, standing squarely between the tall figure and Gabrielle, leaning back a little against Iolaus' side and the bard's leg.

The figure regarded them. "I sent away my nephew and his minion so that we can speak in private." He walked over to a rock outcropping and sat down on it. "Because it is my belief that you really don't understand what you are involved in."

Xena walked over and resumed her seat on the log across from him and after a moment Gabrielle dismounted and led Iolaus over to join her. "Wouldn't be the first time." She sighed as she sat down.

"You're probably right." Xena told Hades. "I haven't really understood what was going on in all this since I was up on Mount Olympus." She rested her elbows on her knees. "So could you explain to us what's really going on?" She asked, respectfully. "Please?"

It was surreal in the utmost. But Xena didn't figure pulling her rude pit fighter attitude on the ruler of the underworld was going to get them anywhere. So maybe being nice might.

Hades regarded them from inside his mantle, no real sense of a planed face but just the pinprick eyes moving visibly. "I had heard you went to visit my brother."

"Not voluntarily." Gabrielle muttered.

"No, mortals never do go of their own volition." Hades agreed. "I will educate you on the politics of the gods if you answer me two questions."

"Shoot." Xena said.

"Sure. Why not?" Gabrielle leaned against her partner.

"Firstly, Xena, how did you escape my realm of Tartarus?" Hades asked. "If you reveal this to me, I will reward you."

Xena shrugged. "I'd tell you if I could. I just had something I had to do, and I focused on that until it all just faded out."

Hades sat in silence for a moment. "So you did not bribe anyone, or do some trick to remove yourself?" His voice sounded surprised.

"No."

"Can I ask you a question?" Gabrielle spoke up. "Why do you need to ask her that? Aren't you a god? Isn't the whole point of being a god to be able to know everything with out being told?"

"You who have known the gods as you have need to ask me that?"

"Hmph." Gabrielle grunted.

"The second question." Hades said. "Is to you, storyteller. Do you in fact believe in the gods?"

It seemed an odd question. "I.. " Gabrielle paused to think. "Do I believe you exist? Of course I do. I've seen gods, and talked to gods, and been kidnapped by gods all my adult life. How could I not believe you exist?"

"That is not what I asked."

Gabrielle pondered that, aware of Xena's silent, supportive presence at her side. "Do you mean, do I believe with my heart in you, that you will shape my life, and dictate my future? That I can call on you, and sacrifice for your favors to gain good things in my life? Is that what you're asking?"

"Yes."

"No."

"No." Hades repeated thoughtfully.

"I know the gods too well for that." The bard said, quietly.

"And you?" He turned and looked at Xena.

She chuckled wryly. "Good or bad I've made my own future for a long time now." She said. "The last time I prayed to the gods it was for her soul, and I found out long after it wasn't theirs to save."

"Long after?" The bard leaned against her. "Hades – I think there's a place for gods in our world."

"Kind of you."

Gabrielle ignored the sarcasm. "People need something to believe in, because our lives are so short and so painful, it would be hard to get through them without you." She paused, watching the snow as it fell, holding out her hand to catch a few flakes. "Sometimes we go to such a dark place inside ourselves, the only way back is to imagine there's a being of the light out there watching over us."

Hades looked thoughtful, again. "You are such strange creatures." He said. "Always concerned with what you are doing in that moment."

"Because we have so few of them." Xena said. "We don't know what it's like to know our lives are unlimited."

The God of the Underworld fell silent for a moment as he shifted those pinpoints between the two of them. "I can offer a kind of such unlimited existence." He said. "But you were in Tartarus, so you know this."

"Yes."

"And yet, you escaped." Hades stared hard at Xena. "And say you know not how."

Xena shrugged, faintly.

"I know how." Gabrielle spoke up. "She just decided she could."

"Gabrielle."

"Xena, I know you." Her partner said, seriously. "You're the most focused person I've ever met and the strength of your will is unbelievable. You left there because you decided that's what you were going to do."

Xena took a breath to answer, then paused, thinking fully back for the first time about that moment in Tartarus, when her soul had opened, and she felt all of Gabrielle's grief and despair and all the fire and torment had suddenly seemed trivial in comparison.

That need had changed her. In that moment of memory she could feel it happening all over again, the faint echo, and the shifting of her own consciousness in how she thought of herself when her focus had turned outward from inward.

She'd forgotten about her past, in that moment. Forgotten about everything she'd done, and all the people she'd hurt and killed, and realized what mattered to her more than anything else in that moment was responding to that need.

That moment had been her redemption.

The breath trickled out of her. "She's right." She finally said, on the end of it. "I did what I did because nothing told me I couldn't."

Hades stood. "That I believe now." He said. "But you will never walk that path again." He half turned, then looked at them again. "Lest you teach others the same trick." His eyes drifted to Gabrielle, then away again.

Gabrielle stood up. "What do you want?" She asked. "What's your angle in all this? Are you really going to attack the port city? Why? Don't you get enough dead souls from us?"

Hades regarded her dourly.

Xena studied him back. "You're trying to do the same thing Zeus is." She said "It's not about fighting against him, or taking his place. You're in cahoots with him."

They got the sense that his shadowed face smiled. "Partially true. All souls come to me, after all. I do not need mortal supplicants." He admitted. "As you have discovered, there is a truth to us that goes outside the bounds of belief."

He walked back over to them, and Xena stood up as he did, putting her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder in unconscious reflex. "But this is the twilight of the gods. It has been foretold to us. Zeus knows it. I know it."

Gabrielle nodded a little.

"You, yourselves have been a part of it." Hades said, almost as an afterthought. "But you had no choice about that."

Xena shifted, lifting her free hand and letting it drop. "Then what are we doing here? What's the end game, Hades?"

He stood there for a long moment. Then he folded his hands inside his cloak, and as he did, faint sounds started to emit from the dark hole in the rock behind them. "Our endgame? What do you suppose it would be like to exist forever, and be forgotten?"

The sound of wings fluttered overhead, and they all looked up to see a vulture settling on the branch of a tree nearby.

"Did you ever consider how it might be a better thing to be mortal?" Hades asked. "Or that on occasion, we might envy you?"

"It did." Gabrielle said, in a very quiet voice. "When I was on Mount Olympus and I realized how little there was for them to do other than torment us."

Hades gave the impression of smiling again. "So now we face an unending future with not even that amusement, unless we find else to do."

There was motion behind him and after a moment a large creature emerged from the hole, massive, four legged, and red eyed. A mass of wriggling surrounded his head, but his ears were small, and cupped and familiar.

It had three heads, and as it arrived as his knee, Hades let one hand rest on the closest of them. "This is Cerberus." He glanced down. "He is sent to me by my beloved wife, I think. She comes to me only in the winter." He stared intently at them. "You asked what the game was?"

Xena nodded.

"Pinu pretends himself one of us." Hades said. "He captured one of Poseidon's daughters and keeps her as his concubine and he couples with her in public view to prove the incontinence of the gods."

He glanced around and then back at him. "With Athena's desecration, his reputation rises – it was well done to rescue Artemis."

"Why doesn't Posdeidon help her? Why don't you? Why doesn't Zeus?" Gabrielle asked. "Why are we even involved in this?"

The snow started falling faster, and heavier, making the air between them seem indistinct. Hades took a step backwards. "We have no power here outside our realms. " He said. "Only those of earth, can alter earth."

"Wait." Xena started to follow him. "What are you saying?"

"No time. Must go." Hades was disappearing into the dark space beyond. "Persephone calls. Good luck."

He disappeared, with Cereberus padding after him an as they cleared the edge of the rock it sealed behind them leaving only a cold granite surface.

The scent dissipated. The vulture flapped off, disconsolately.

Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other. "Now what?" The bard asked, in a fit of exasperation. "Xena, what the heck is going on!"

"Don't know. But I think we should get back to the troops." Xena pulled herself up on Argo. "I've got a feeling we're missing something."

"Son of a bitch." Gabrielle exhaled, shaking her head. "This is nuts."

**

They rode through the gathering snow and at the base of the path they found now ankle deep drifts. Xena guided Argo carefully through them back to the road and once on it, she urged the mare into a canter with Iolaus right behind her.

There was no army for them to find going further. There was only the forest, and ahead of that, the plains and the port city, and once again she had to figure out what all that meant to them.

They had just told the army they were doing one thing. Now? Xena felt a ball of frustration building in her guts as they moved with the storm, the wind coming at their backs as they headed up the empty, dark space.

They came up over a ridge and the swirling snow parted briefly to expose a group of figures ahead of them in the middle of a violent struggle.

Of course. Gabrielle reached for her staff. "Xena!"

"I see em." The warrior was reaching for her sword. "Lets see who they are."

The snow muffled the sound of the two horses and so they came up on the group unnoticed and as they did Xena let out a loud yell.

The nearest dark figure turned, and point blank let off a crossbow at her. Xena ducked to one side and let the shaft go past her shoulder, then she assumed this was an enemy and swung her sword around to land heavily on the hand around the bow closest to her.

She let out a whistle, the wind carrying it down the road and at the periphery of her vision she saw motion and torches coming round a curve and heading their way.

Too dark to tell who her antagonists were, so Xena used kicks and punches on them, hearing the resounding whack of Gabrielle's staff hitting something hard.

Someone grabbed her and tried to haul her backwards, but she let her body go limp and her knees unlock and it threw them offbalance insetead. She went to a crouch then uncoiled and slammed her shoulder against the midriff of the figure grappling with her and they both went flying, to drop into the snow just past Argo's dancing hooves.

She dropped her sword and yanked her dagger out as she felt her opponent twist around, but before she could stab him she sensed Gabrielle's close presence and from long experience she dropped to the ground flat.

She heard the staff connect, and felt the faint thump as her partner's booted foot came down just shy of her head and the brush of her cloak as she reversed her attack and knocked the figure she'd been fighting with back on their ass.

Then the army was on them, and she got to her feet as Bennu and Redder grabbed the figure on the ground and the others backed off, torches now lighting the ground and making an odd glare against the falling snow.

The others in the group were getting up, now revealed to be four of Gabrielle's Amazons.

Xena dusted her hands off, then went over and picked up her sword, wiping it down on her cloak before she sheathed it. "Let's see what we've got."

The figure between her soldiers stiffened and reared his head up, staring at her. "Are you Xena?" He asked, in a loud tone. "I was sent to find you." He added. "As the emissary of Pinu the magnificent."

"Great." Gabrielle got her cloak tied and her hood back up. "Just what we needed."

"No kidding. Let's get back to camp." Xena pointed back down the road. "Bring this guy. Good thing I didn't gut him."

**

They sheltered in the big curve of rock outcroppings below the edge of the dark forest, breaking out the tents and tarps against the thickly falling snow.

Xena had camp stools brought to her snug overhang and their dubious guest was installed on one of them, holding his hands out to the neatly made fire in the center of the space.

He was tall, taller than Xena was, and had broad, fighters shoulders made to seem even larger by armor and the thick cloak draped over them. In the firelight his hair showed a deep russet, and he had a freckled face and pale green eyes almost the color of Gabrielle's.

Bennu entered with a heavy copper pot and set it down on the grate in the fire, shrugging off a wineskin off his shoulder. "Genr'l."

"Thanks Bennu." Xena took it and set it down on the folding table next to her. "Siddown and join us."

Bennu looked pleased at that, and took a seat on one of the stools, extending his long legs out before him, looking around as Solari came in past the flap, carrying Gabrielle's saddlebag.

"So." Xena settled herself on one of the seats, braced against the rock wall allowing her to lean back against it's support with some comfort. "You are Jaxus, captain of the guard of the port city."

"I am." He agreed. "I was born in Phillipi, and my family moved to the city when I was young. My father served the prince before Pinu came."

"And?"

"And I came to manhood and joined the princes guard." Jaxus supplied promptly. "When Pinu came, the guard sword fealty to him and he selected me as his captain."

"So then he sent you out alone in a snowstorm to find us?" Gabrielle took the seat next to Xena. "By yourself?"

Jaxus shook his head. "We started out a dozen." He said. "Two of our patrols came back and said they had been set up on by a large force, one brought down on us by traitors from my hometown."

"From Phillipi?" Xena hiked up one knee and folded her hands around it.

“Yes.” He nodded. “We had an agreement with them, for mutual protection. We found out two sevendays ago that they had broken the agreement and sent to entice your army to come and attack us.”

“Uh huh.” Xena nodded back. “Wasn’t exactly how they saw it, but essentially yes. They told us you were threatening them, and asked us to come have a look.”

“Threatening them?” Jaxus looked shocked.

“They had a point.” Gabrielle spoke up. “All the people we’ve met so far from the port city have either been kidnapping people to sell as slaves, or attacking us.”

“Aye, seen that for sure.” Bennu agreed.

“We were not kidnapping anyone.” Jaxus stated, firmly. “That’s the story sent around, and we’ve heard it. We only offered shelter to those dying from the weather, and the crop failure. You cannot fault us for that.”

“At what cost?” Xena asked. “For the shelter?”

He spread his hands. “Of course, the customary arrangement. That they would work for us. We gave them houseroom, and food. Do not tell me it is not the same where you are from?”

“You’re saying they had a choice.”

“Of course.” Jexus said. “No one was forced.”

“Except the women in the wagons we found.” Gabrielle said. “And the woman we rescued in the woods near what was left of her burnt out village. And the guys who hid from you and escaped through the pass.”

Jaxus studied her.

“One of our scouts was captured by your patrol. Luckily, they didn’t take her seriously and left her weapons with her.” The bard concluded.

The man was shaking his head. “It was not our people.” He said.

“So, you’re not soliciting slaves?” Xena asked. “Not paying good coin for them?”

He looked uncomfortable. “The trade exists in the city, of course.” He said. “As in many others, but our troops, our men – no. We have nothing to do with that.”

Solari had taken up a spot just to the rear of where Gabrielle was seated, and turned her head in greeting as Cait came in and joined her, moving past to take up her position on Xena’s other side.

“Cait, describe the people who held you at the wagon.” Gabrielle asked.

“Certainly.” The Amazon replied. “They were soldiers. Dressed like this one is, with armor and surcoats with the same picture on them.”

All the eyes shifted to Jaxus.

“And, of course, they said they were troops from the city.” Cait added. “So I think you just lied to us quite thoroughly.” She glanced at Xena. “Shall I kill him? He was sneaking into the camp when we found him.”

“I wasn’t sneaking anywhere.” Jaxus glowered at her. “We split up and were searching the edge of the forest and we became separated. I was just looking for my comrades.”

He was younger than he’d seemed at first, Xena reckoned. “So what does Pinu want?” She changed the subject.

He returned his attention to her. “He wishes to clear up what must be some misunderstanding.” He said. “He doesn’t hold you to be an enemy, and in fact, would like to extend a hand in friendship to you.”

“Really.” Xena drawled. “So that ten thousand dinar price he put on my head was just an invitation?” She inquired. “Or is he, like you, just a lying sack of square marbles?”

Jaxus stood up abruptly and reached for his dagger, his sword sheath empty as they’d taken his weapon after his capture.

“You don’t want to do that.” Gabrielle had remained where she was, boots extended, hands folded over her stomach. “Or, hey, maybe you do. Maybe this is your fast track to Hades.” She added, aware of the sinuous, animal motion in the body next to her.

“I do not take such insults from anyone.” Jaxus said. “So stand up then, and we’ll see who’s lying.”

“Dying here won’t get your master’s message returned.” Xena remarked. “So I’d sit back down if I were you.” She got up anyway, and stretched, unclasping her cloak and letting it drop to the ground to cover her seat.

She’d taken her sword off, and it was resting on the ledge just past Cait, but she didn’t even glance that way as she sauntered over to Jaxus, as everyone else just calmly sat or stood and watched.

As she came within reach, she spread her hands out , wiggling her fingers at him. “C’mon, kid. Bring it.” She smiled at him, eyes twinkling faintly in the torchlight.

He took a step back, then suddenly reversed his course, lunging forward and sweeping his arm around in a tight, powerful arc right at her chest.

Xena waited for him to commit, then she stepped past him as he came at her, sliding to one side and keeping her balance neatly as she avoided the strike, then booting him in the ass as he tried to recover.

He turned and came back at her, and she waited again, then as the dagger came at her she reached over it and grabbed his wrist, contracting her fingers as she got him on the chin with her other elbow, feeling the solid crack as bone hit bone and his head rocked back.

She pulled his arm out and backwards and turned, a lazy motion that brought his arm up behind his back as he clawed behind him to try and grab her. “If I break your arm, or pull it out of it’s socket you’re gonna have a long winter.”

He struggled against her hold and tried to throw himself against her, but Xena stood like a rock, immovable. At last he turned his head and looked over his shoulder at her, and their eyes met. “You’re a demon.” He rasped. “No woman has your strength.”

“You’d be surprised.” Xena told him. “I’m going to have you put somewhere safe now. Tomorrow you’d gonna go back to your city and tell your friend Pinu if he wants to clear up any misunderstandings I’m up for that.”

“I will tell him all that I’ve seen.” Jaxas ground out, grunting with pain as Xena increased the tension on his arm. “So that he will not be fooled as I was.”

Xena swung him around and shoved him against the rock wall, and Bennu got up to grab him as he stumbled backwards. “Tie him up, Benny. I don’t want to lose him before we use him.”

“Aye.” Bennu let out a soft whistle, and three soldiers entered, all of them taking hold of the big man as Xena went over and picked up the dagger he’d dropped to examine it.

“Quite the jerk.” Gabrielle got up and went over to her. “And I wonder where those other 11 guys are?”

“The guards will find them if they’re fluffing around in the snow like this one was.” Cait said. “Something’s not quite right about that though. Why would you split up like that in this weather? Why would you even be hunting at all?”

“If they ever existed.” Xena handed the dagger over to Cait. “If he wasn’t lying about that like everything else.” She regarded the rest of them. “We’ve been relying on things everyone’s been telling us. Those peasants, the soldiers, the gods.”

“Hades.” Gabrielle grunted.

“Time to start making our own truth.” Xena said, putting her hands on her hips. “There are too many sides to this to make any sense out of it. “

“Now that.” Cait said. “Is absolutely true.”

**

The camp settled down to get some rest, and at last all the guards and friends and thoughtful watchers disappeared and they were alone in their little shelter together.

Xena was seated on one of the camp stools with her boots extended out in front of her, and her elbows resting on her thighs. She looked up as Gabrielle came over, the bard circling her and coming around behind her to drape her arms over her partner’s shoulders.

“I was thinking.” Xena said, as she leaned back against Gabrielle’s body. ‘Wanna hear what I was thinking about?”

“Silly question.” Gabrielle kissed her on the top of her head. “I’ve always wanted to know what you were thinking, hon.”

“Mm.” The warrior looked up through her dark and disheveled bangs. “I think you’re sexy and I want to take you to bed.”

Gabrielle started laughing softly.

“You think that’s funny????”

“No, it just makes me feel so amazing when you say stuff like that and that makes me laugh.” Gabrielle hugged her. “And because it’s been so frustrating all day and all night with all this stuff going on and these gods and people and I’m just so glad to be here with you alone right now.”

Aww. Xena was glad enough to focus on them for a time, setting aside the puzzle that only seemed to get more puzzling every time she turned around. “Back atcha.” She rested her head against Gabrielle’s chest, closing her eyes as the bard gently scratched her around her ears.

“So many loose ends.” Gabrielle said after a few minutes of silence. “Where do we go from here, Xe? To the port city really?”

“Mm.” Xena nodded a little. “Ever since I decided to go call this guy out, everything falls out of the sky to distract us. If an Athenean unicycle rider showed up with a monkey on his head at this point I wouldn’t even blink.”

Gabrielle chuckled soundlessly, wrapping her arms around Xena’s neck again and resting her head against her partner’s.

“Why?” The warrior asked. “Right up to Hades telling us about Poseidon’s daughter and all that. What did that mean? Makes no sense.”

“It doesn’t.”

“I’m going to go back to my original plan. Go to the city. See what’s really going on there.” Xena told her. “Pirate sends a nitwit out to find me? Fine. He found me.”

“He really was a nitwit.”

“We have to change plans anyway. Ares vanished.” Xena said, practically. “I just hope he ended up somewhere safe.”

Gabrielle’s eyebrows lifted, then dropped. “Because he had Jess with him.”

Xena nodded.

“What do you think the end game really is in all this, Xe? You think it really is the twilight of the gods?”

Xena didn't answer for a long time, her eyes slightly unfocused as she sat there enfolded in Gabrielle's arms, the soft pop of the fire loud and close against the softer, vaguer sounds of the army outside their tent.

To one side, their hammock was waiting, outside the edges of the protection of the tent there were guards, sheltering under their own hides and keeping anyone approaching at bay.

"I'm not sure it's as much of a twilight as a crossroads." Xena finally said, in a very thoughtful tone. "When Hades was talking to us, I finally clearly remembered when I was there, in Tartarus. You were right."

"I was?"

"Now I have to wonder how much of Tartarus or even Elysia is inside our own minds?" Xena mused. "I was there. I felt like I belonged there. That I deserved all that torment." She reached up casually and touched Gabrielle's lips with a fingertip, feeling the motion as her partner inhaled to protest. "And then I heard your heart breaking."

Gabrielle went very still.

"The pain of that made what I felt around me irrelevant, Gab. It wasn't real. I walked away from it because it lost it's hold on me." Xena's tone held a tinge of wonder. "Now I can remember. It was like a sound that just faded away."

"Oh Xe." Gabrielle whispered.

'That changed me."

"Yeah, it changed me too." The bard exhaled, tightening her hold. "I never really realized how much I needed you until you were gone. All I kept thinking about were all the things I never said, all the things I never shared with you."

Xena half turned and put her arms around her partner to return the hug. "What do you want to do, Gab? You want to just go home and get Dori and screw all this? Does it really matter if we go see this guy?"

Gabrielle exhaled, her eyes closing as she let her head rest against her soulmates. "In the long term I don't really think it does matter." She admitted. "I think whatever's going to happen is going to no matter what you and I do."

"Mm."

"But y'know."

Xena started gently, silently laughing.

"Rescuing Poseidon's daughter would make for a pretty cool story."

"Yeah, it would." Xena let her chuckles wind down. "And we can't leave this guy out here raping and pillaging. We gotta do something so what the Hades. Let's just do what we do."

"Be who we are."

Xena stood up, draping her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders. "Lets' talk to our little friend Jacob in the morning. I have a feeling he might know a few things we should hear."

Despite the shelter, it was cold. They curled up together in their hammock, glad to be off the ground and sharing body heat under the thick furs covering them. Xena had put one set in the hammock itself, so they were surrounded by the soft hide and after a few minutes they both relaxed as it got warm and cozy.

The sounds around them had faded, save the occasional crunch of boots on the icy ground, and the thrum of the wind against the edge of the hide shelter.

Xena heard a few thumps from the nearby makeshift corral, and then, at the very edge of her hearing, a soft patter of running feet, too light to be human, to fast to be one of the goats or sheep that would call the area home. "Huh."

"Huh what?" Gabrielle was savoring being completely warm at last, for the first time that day.

"Huh I think we're about to have a visitor."

"Oh crap no." The bard covered her eyes with one hand. "I just got comfortable finally.'

"It's okay." Xena lifted her head as the flaps to their shelter shivered and parted, and a black figure entered, trotting across the floor and leaping up, to put paws on the side of the hammock.

"Roo!"

"Oh! Hey Ares." Gabrielle poked her nose out at him, and reached a hand out to pat his paw. "You caught up with us?"

Xena reached out and felt around the wolf's neck, feeling a string there. She fished the small wooden capsule out and removed it, then opened it and unfolded the thin, rolled piece of parchment. "I hope this isn't bad news."

Ares hopped down, then went over to their saddlebags and curled up against them with a satisfied sigh.

Gabrielle took the parchment and unfolded it, and they put their heads together to read it as she tilted it towards the torchlight.

Then they paused, and looked at each other with simultaneous, identical sighs.

**

Gabrielle very slowly allowed the world around her to fade in, the soft, pre dawn sounds of the army stirring waking her. She was alone in the hammock, but as she turned over and squirmed into a sitting position the flap of the shelter drew aside and Xena ducked her head to enter.

"Good morning." Xena greeted her. "I've got Bennu getting the troops moving. Thought I'd let you get a half candlemark more rest."

"Awww." Gabrielle tugged the furs up around her and regarded her partner sleepily. "Thanks hon. It took me forever to get to sleep after that note last night. Holy sheeps."

"Yeah." Xena commiserated, coming over to the hammock and draping her forearms over the edge of it. "Figures our kid would go galavanting with her friends only to end up finding the goddess of love stuck in a frozen mud pit."

"Only to end up rescuing the goddess of love." Gabrielle corrected her. "But you know, I'm glad she ended up there. Hope she just hangs out in the valley until Herc and them get there."

They both smiled wryly at each other. "Glad to just hear from them." Xena admitted. "Good to know things are relatively calm back there."

It was. Gabrielle admitted to herself. She could imagine her daughter riding at the head of her little pack of friends and it was almostheartwrenching to realize this new adventure was one she hadn't gotten to witness.

"What a good story that's gonna make." Xena remarked, reading her mind. She ruffled Gabrielle's hair and gave the hammock a shake. "C'mon, mama. Let's get going."

Gabrielle stifled a yawn, and complied, rolling out of the hammock and moving quickly over to one of the stools near the fire to sit down and pull her boots on. There was a bucket of gently steaming water near the fire, and she gladly used it to wash. "Thanks for this"

Xena chuckled. "Selfish on my part. I had one of the guard bring it over. Wasn't in the mood to wash in snow slush myself this morning."

“Be selfish anytime in that case.” Gabrielle dried herself off and got up, staying near the fire as she pulled on her heavy woolen overtunic and leggings while Xena stood over the folding table near the rock wall studying her notes.

“Is it still snowing?”

The warrior glanced up. “A little.”

“Yuk.” Gabrielle walked around the fire and went to the tent flap, drawing it aside and poking her head out.

The sun wasn’t yet up, it was still dark and gloomy in the camp safe where the firepits were. She could see shadowed bodies walking back and forth, and hear the sound of the horses being moved forward from where they’d sheltered them.

“Good morning, Gabrielle.” Cait greeted her, pushing her hood back. “Lovely, isn’t it?”

Gabrielle eyed the snow, then looked at her, one eyebrow hiking up. “You didn’t stand watch last night did you Cait?” She asked, in a mild tone. “I hope not, with all these soldiers around.”

Cait looked like she was going to deny it, then smiled. “Well, not the whole night.” She admitted. “I did watch a bit at the start since I just couldn’t get to sleep.”

“Me either.” Her queen smiled back.

Xena came up behind her and leaned out. “Tell Bennu to get that guard captain up on a horse, with his hands tied behind him. We’ll head for the gates with that. Let’s see where that gets us.”

“Right.” Cait trotted off.

“Do we look for Ares and Jessan?” Gabrielle asked. “I mean, don’t they sort of have to be around here? I get the feeling he couldn’t go far, and Hades didn’t give me the sense that he’d sent him far either.”

“No.” Xena answered crisply. “I’m glad Jessan’s out of it. I hope they’re up on the slopes of Olympus chasing sheep. I’ve been trying to work them into my plan this whole damn time and it’s gotten us nothing but in circles.”

“Was that maybe the point?” The bard mused. “You know, I just remembered something Hades said, Xe. About them not being able to affect the earth.”

“And?” Xena studied her with a sidelong look.

“Maybe that was him trying to tell us we were going the wrong way. Sending Ares away too.” Gabrielle said. “Maybe the whole point of it is that we do have to do it. We have to make the difference.”

Xena sighed audibly.

“Yeah, I know.” Her partner commiserated. “As in, again?”

“Ah, who knows.” The warrior ducked back inside the tent as several of the soldiers approached to strike it. She was fastening her cloak when the surface was removed, and then she lifted her saddlebags to her shoulder as it was folded away.

Through the misty gloom two golden horses appeared, led by a groom and she settled the bags on Argo’s back as Gabrielle came over with her own gear to Iolaus.

They mounted and rode at a walk through the thickness of the forest, coming up onto the road and turning to wait for the rest of the army to join them. Gabrielle handed over a meatroll, and they sat there munching together, fog roiling around the horses knees.

Bennu moved up out of the trees leading a second horse, with their captive roped into his saddle and in a dark mood due to it. He also had a gag in his mouth and he was shaking his head repeatedly trying to rid himself of it.

Kind of stupid. Gabrielle chewed her breakfast thoughtfully, chasing it down with a swig from her waterskin. But probably natural.

The rest of the army came up onto the road in good order, the six remaining supply wagons bringing up the rear, along with the spare horses. They were a third again less than they started, but still a reasonable force as Xena turned Argo and started leading them on.

The muffled sound of that many hooves made a soft rumble in the early dawn light, pale gray slowly easing the shadows of the trees on either side and as they cleared the edge of the forest the vast, empty plain spread out before them.

A thick layer of fog covered the ground, and as they moved through it plumes of it rolled off away from them and it seemed a bit like water as they crossed it.

The army spread out, again, across the road and to either side of it as the width of the track would not hold all of them save in four file across.

Crossing the open space, they had no need of scouts and so, though Cait and the Amazons rode to one side, and a score of Xena's troops rode on the other, Xena and Gabrielle remained in the lead, hoods down, their hair ruffling briskly in the cold wind.

Xena looked to either side of her, then smiled briefly as her standard bearer edged up on her right hand side, her pennant firmly seated in his stirrup. In the gray and shadowed lands they were riding through, it was one fierce bit of color.

A loud caw overhead made her look up, and she spotted several ravens flying over them. The dark birds circled lazily, then angled off to the south. Higher overhead, mere spots against the clouds, were vultures.

"Hey Xe?"

Xena turned to her partner. "Yeees?"

Gabrielle drew breath to speak, then paused, and visibly changed tracks. "How about a story? Looks like it's going to be a long ride."

"Sure." Xena eased her knees forward a little and relaxed her body. The city was, indeed, far ahead, in the early mist invisible to even her eyes. "Love to hear one."

The surrounding riders eased in closer, as Gabrielle straightened up and readied herself, looking left and right to the prick eared riders, then glancing behind her as Bennu casually led their captive up closer.

No one had asked where Ares was. No one really had cared when she'd tried to sell him to them the previous day. So now they didn't want to hear about gods, or about Olympus.

"So let me tell you all a story about a time, when a great darkness covered the land, and a small town militia rose up to meet it." Gabrielle saw the smiles, at this, their most favorite of stories. "And about their leader."

"Leaders." Xena corrected instantly.

"Pfft."

**

They kept on past midday, making good progress on the flatlands as the clouds got thicker overhead but the snow remained light.

Gabrielle was drinking some water, easing her throat after several candlemarks of storytelling, aware of the boosted mood of the troops around her. They had taken turns in moving up and back, giving as many a chance to listen as possible.

Good for her ego. Gabrielle smiled, and popped a honey ball into her mouth, looking around at the unbroken plain that stretched on either side of them to foothills in the distance.

“You bitch!”

The bard turned around in her saddle, to find their prisoner spitting rope strands out of his mouth, a moment before his head was struck byBennu’s mace hilt. “Watch yer tongue.” The soldier warned.

Xena had dropped back and, having been the subject of the epithet, waited for the man to regain his balance. “Do what he says and you’ll get a drink.” She remarked.

“I did you no harm, only brought an honorable message.” The man said. “And you abuse me so. How would you feel if it were you? Should my master treat you this way?”

“Well.” Xena handed over a waterskin that had just been passed to her. “He could try that. Bennu, hold this for him.”

“Not worth the wet.” Bennu nevertheless opened the waterskin and offered it to the man. “You mind your manners or I’ll shove this down your throat.”

With a visible, internal struggle, he managed to keep silent, bending his head to suck at the waterskin with ill disguised relief. The gag itself had been a thick wad of linen, engorged with all the moisture of the man’s mouth along with the thick rope that had bound it.

“So.” Xena was leaning on her saddlebow. “Pinu sent you out here to find me. You and a dozen others who disappeared into the snow.”

The man cleared his throat. “He did.”

“Why?”

The man looked over at her. “I told you. He wants to meet with you. “

“Got that, but why?” Xena asked. “I’m going to kick his ass. Anyone around here would know that.” She added. “So what does he want to meet with me for?”

The man avoided looking at her. “Told you. Thinks there’s a misunderstanding.” He muttered. “You’ll see soon enough, though.”

Xena just laughed. “Pinu thinks he’s a big man?” She asked. “Figures to make friends?” She taunted him. “Put his gag back in, Benny.” She sobered up abruptly and nudged Argo forward to catch up with Gabrielle again.

They ambled along side by side for a minute, then Gabrielle edged closer. “You being a meanie for a reason, hon?”

“Maybe.” Xena looked up at the clouds, and then out at the horizon. “Depends what they do when they spot us.” She could see the outline, dimly, of the port city now. “We’re probably still blending into the background, since we’ve got armor and shields covered up, but that wont last more than another few candlemarks.

“We’re not going to get there by dark though.” Gabrielle was judging the distance. “Unless we speed up.”

“And end up there with tired troops and horses, right at dusk.” Her partner remarked, with a brief smile. “No, I’ve already figured we’re going to spend the night out here, and that’s going to be a long, dangerous time.”

‘You think they’re going to come out and attack us?” The bard scanned the horizon. “Or something is?”

“I think we’ll be a tempting target.”

“Hm.”

**

Dark caught them still far out from the floodplains of the city, and Xena decided to keep on the march a while longer, until she caught sight of a string of growth, wiry and dead now, that marked to her eyes a water source.

It was a ways off the road, but she sent scouts to inspected it, hoping the flow was towards the city not away from it and they'd have a chance to get fresh water.

There was snow on the ground, but it seemed dark and soiled, and as they paused to wait for the scouts to return she slid off Argo's back and took a torch from Solari's hand. "Looks like something's been here before us."

Gabrielle got down from Iolaus and joined her, and a few of the soldiers did too as she moved past where the horses were gathered and inspected the ground.

The soil was churned up and the layer of snow was broken and stamped flat. Xena knelt on the ground and brought the torch closer, stripping her glove off and touching a rounded imprint in the dirt.

"Horses?" Bennu asked. "Lot of them whatever."

"Horses." Xena, now, close to the earth could smell the remnants of them, the cold air having obscured the scent until then. There was musk on the air and a faint acrid scent that could have been burned wood. "Check the area, Bennu. See if they made camp and left anything."

"Hardly here, probly." Bennu swung around in a half circle. "Spread out, lads. See if anything was left behind."

Gabrielle waited for the space to clear a little and she took a step back, coming to stand in an empty spot just off the road. The clouds obscured the stars and moon and it was very dark, just the torches of the army spreading a dim ring of red gold across the ground.

She turned her head into the wind and listened, but the only sound she could hear aside from her companions was the wind, whistling over the empty ground.

There was no shelter for them, really. If the creek they'd found was good, they could stake out the horses, and make the best of what they had, but here she felt exposed and, from the prickling between her shoulderblades, watched.

Xena came over to stand next to her.

"Xe."

"Yeah, me too." The warrior responded. "There's something out there."

"Where?"

Xena turned and faced the city, her pale eyes searching the silver shadows. "There." Her ears twitched, catching sounds far off on the wind. "Way out there."

**

The creek was mostly iced over, but after a solid bit of chopping they reached liquid water and were far enough from the sea for it to be clean, and fresh.

Xena stood over the edge of the bank and followed the dark silvered line back, seeing it disappear in a long arc into the foothills heading towards home and wondered just briefly if it had it's root in her own mountains.

It could. The river that ran past Amphipolis did in fact split and curve towards Thrace and the idea made her smile briefly, sniffing and tasting the water again from the travel cup in her hands. "Fill the skins." She said, stepping back.

The army was settled in a semi circle with their backs to the creek, the tangle of dead shrubs and brush giving them as much shelter as there was against the wind and light snow.

It wasn't ideal but it was the best they could do and Xena drained her cup, then tied it at her belt and pulled her cloak hood up and fastened it. She moved through the soldiers heading the other direction and found the small knot of Amazons clustered to one side.

She joined them in time to hear Gabrielle utter a resounding "No."

"But Gabrielle.." Cait protested.

"Cait, no." The queen responded firmly. "No one's going out there to scout around. It's flatlands. No one can sneak up on us."

"Right." Xena agreed. "Besides, we already.. " She paused, as she heard running steps. "Uh oh."

"Xena." Bennu had found her taller form and slowed up as he reached her. "T'bastard got out."

"Ah."

"Men untied his hands to let him have a bit of bread, and he broke loose." Her captain reported. "Ran off into the snow." He paused. "You want us to bring him back?"

"No." Xena said. "He's got the message I want carried." She said. "He already thinks he's clever. Don't ruin it."

Bennu chuckled. "Will do, gen'rl." He plodded off across the frozen ground towards the firepit. Here, this close to the city they had chopped a trench in the ground and set the fire in it, and the stores around so it wouldn't reflect across the open plain.

Cait looked at Xena. "You want them to come find us, then?"

"Xena taught me." Gabrielle spoke up, with a wry smile. "It's sometimes better to let the other guy make the first move. You learn about them that way."

Xena nodded. "It could end up a big mistake." She admitted. "But we're gambling anyway." She said, then paused, pulling her hood down and turning her ears into the wind. "Ah."

Gabrielle had been watching her closely. "Trouble?"

The warrior closed her eyes and focused. All the talking around them faded out as everyone became aware of the silent, tall figure in their midstand heads turned, then bodies did, waiting.

To Gabrielle's ears, all she could hear was the wind, and the crackle of the dead branches nearby. But that would not have caught Xena's attention so she watched and waited with the rest of them, putting a hand on her partner's shoulder as she dropped to one knee and stripped her gloves off.

Everyone now went still as their leader put the palm of her hand flat on the ground.

"Get your gear ready." Gabrielle uttered to the Amazons, who scattered without comment to their horses. "Xe?"

"Big force coming." Xena said, after a moment. She stood up and put her gloves back on "Let's get ready to fight."

"How long?"

"Two candlemarks. Maybe three." The warrior said. "Depends on if they keep riding fast."

There was no panic, of course. This was an army, and the soldiers in it had fought under Xena's leadership for seasons and as they wolfed down trail rations and tightened the straps on their armor there was just a sense of calm preparation.

The support staff had gotten the wagons braced and in a square pattern down next to the creek and most were busy sorting spare arrows and spears and laying them up on top for the soldiers to pick up, neatly bundled in dozens.

The healers still with them were getting out bandages and going to the creek for water, while the grooms readied the horses for battle, settling hide armor over their backs and checking their feet for cracks in their hooves.

Gabrielle went over to Iolaus's side and gave him a pat on the shoulder, checking the fastenings of her staff and making sure her bags were tied down snugly. She removed her dagger from one of the bags and strapped it around her waist, already wearing her layered scale armor under her thick overshirt.

Despite the dark and the stormy skies, and mounting wind she felt no fear. In fact it was more a sense of relief relaxing her body, as the uncertainties of the situation faded back into irrelevance now that the fight was coming to them.

Xena appeared out of the gloom with a mug in each hand, and she handed one over. "Stew."

"Mm." Gabrielle gladly accepted it, and tilted her head back to slide a mouthful of the chunky substance onto her tongue. She chewed in silence and swallowed, watching Xena do the same. "Glad?"

"Yeah." Xena said.

"You think they're riding at night for the same reason we were? To be in place in the morning?"

Xena chewed up a bit of venison, glad of the warmth filling her belly. "No. With this open space – there's no way to gain position. They know it. Those other soldiers must have made it back and told them where we were."

"But they think we're on the road." Gabrielle objected. "You took us off the road here, for the last candlemark or so."

"Our escaped friend will find them and lead them to us."

"Uh huh."

"It's not like Therma." Xena said, after a short pause. "These men don't know me, don't have respect for what I've done."

"Mm." Gabrielle nodded. "So you have to kick their ass first."

"Right."

"But Pinu knows who you are, Xe. He put a price on your head." The bard reminded her, then paused. "Unless who he thinks he put a price on was from some old stories."

Xena gave her a thoughtful look. "Destroyer of Nations, you mean?" She shook her head. "That makes even less sense, hon." She tapped the last of her mug into her mouth. "But we'll find out sooner rather than later."

Gabrielle took their mugs down to the creek to wash them out, leaving her soulmate to inspect and sharpen her sword. She knelt at the side of the creek on the wooden planks the men had laid down and quickly washed the cups out, listening to the casual conversation around her.

The soldiers were a little tired from traveling all day, but there was low laughter and to her right, someone describing Xena fighting with words she was pretty sure had originally come from her. She smiled and stood up, shaking the chill water from her hands and the cups and started to climb back up to the bank.

Halfway up she paused, as the shifting clouds overhead parted for just long enough for the moon to shine through them, and bath her in silver, highlighting the army and their surroundings for one brief moment.

It made everything look different, outlined men and horses and wagons with uncommon clarity as heads tilted to look up in some mild surprise.

Then they closed and the light was gone, but Gabrielle carried the picture in her head with her as she got back up on land and she ended up taking a seat next to Xena with it still there.

There was something in that scene in her head that was bothering her. Gabrielle let her elbows rest on her knees and she clasped her hands together, listening to the rhythmic scrape of the sharpening stone against metal and the soft, almost soundless humming under Xena's breath.

So familiar. The song was an old herding tune she remembered from her childhood and one of Dori's favorites, though her daughter had never spent time in the fields with a flock herself.

And, of course, neither had Xena. But she'd learned it somewhere and often sang it, the gentle, almost melancholy tune well suited for her voice.

Gabrielle leaned closer to hear it, while trying to puzzle out what she'd seen that hadn't felt right but the scene was fading as earlier memories surfaced in it's place, of long summer nights out in the hills, watching the sheep.

Waiting for moonrise, and the time to bring the flock home.

Her eyes went unfocused a little, remembering that silver flood of light. "Hey Xe?"

"Yeees?" Xena finished sharpening her sword and tucked the stone away in her belt pouch, wiping the edge of the blade down before she sheathed it.

"What quarter of the moon is it today?"

Xena sat back and reflected a moment. "First quarter." She said. "Why?"

"You sure?"

The warrior's brow knit. "Am I sure?" She asked. "Yes, I'm sure. Even when I can't see the moon I know what day it is. You know that, Gabrielle."

"I know. You always know." Gabrielle agreed. "You always know when my birthday is, when I'm supposed to cycle, when you're supposed to cycle, when Dori's birthday is… its like you keep a parchment in your head. "

She looked at her partner, who was looking back at her with both eyebrows lifted. "When the clouds parted just before? The moon was full."

Xena's eyes grew a trifle wider and rounder.

"So either I have to accept the fact that you suddenly lost that ability, or something's not right." Gabrielle concluded. "And you know, Xe, that's a weird kind of thing for you to lose all of a sudden."

"Yeah." Xena responded softly, her eyes shifting off her partner and off into the near distance, where Argo was standing, chewing some hay the grooms had brought her. After a moment of silence she looked back. "No, it's supposed to be the new moon." She said. "Huh."

"Huh." Gabrielle repeated. "So what does that mean?"

Xena got up and shook herself to settle her armor. "I don't know." She admitted "Keep that in mind after the battle. I don't suppose the moon's going to play any part in that."

"Hm." The bard grunted softly. "Hope you're right."

**

"Okay, spread the archers here, and here." Xena leaned over in the saddle and pointed at a roughly drawn sketch of the area they were in. "Get the mounted troops in the center."

"Aye." Redder nodded, taking his reins in hand and directing his horse down the line.

The soft rumble of the approaching troops could now be heard by the rest of them, and the scent of horses and pitch on the wind blowing into their faces was obvious.

Xena guided Argo to the front of the lines, pausing to check the ground just before them and then proceeding to her spot at the very center, amidst the wedge of troops that were the vanguard.

Horses eased aside to allow her forward, and as she took her position, she saw Iolaus cantering down the lines as Gabrielle came to join her.

The bard already had her staff out, and it was lying cross her saddle. She shifted it upright as she reached Xena, moving it so as not to hit either her partner or her horse. "Okay."

"Okay. " Xena checked her daggers, and removed her chakram from it's pouch, letting it slide into it's holder on her saddle before she untied her cloak and removed it, folding it neatly and lashing it behind her.

She let out a whistle, turning her head right and left so it would echo down the lines and from the gloom she could see animals and soldiers moving into position.

Gabrielle looked all around her, focusing on details that afterward would become bits of color in the story she'd tell about it. Then she took off her own cloak and folded it as Xena had, feeling now the pressure of the wind against her skin.

Two of the vanguard came forward and took up positions on either side of them, with torches seated in their stirrups, casting a reddish gold light into the gloom.

She shifted her grip on her staff, taking these last moments to prepare herself, watching Xena twist to either side to loosen up her own body, and flex her hands, removing her gauntlets and tucking them away.

The watch let out a whistle, and they all moved forward a step or so, as the soldiers seated their spears and untied maces. Gabrielle could feel the rising energy around her and from the brief glimpses of the eyes around her, she knew the army was looking forward to this fight.

Now she heard the shouts in the distance as they were spotted in their turn, and the rumble slowed, shadows growing into visibility bracketed by the torches they'd smelled now for candlemarks.

Xena made a hand gesture, and the vanguard moved forward at a calm walk, easing out in front of the army and crossing the frozen ground.

When she could see the advance lines of the opposing force, she lifted her hand and clenched her fist, and they stopped, watching as a swirl of motion in the gloom came towards them.

Outlined in torchlight, a dozen mounted figures rode towards them, and pulled up within a few horse lengths, the leader turning half sideways and studying them with an arrogantly uptilted head motion. "Who stands there!"

"Stay here." Xena said, under her breath. "Please." She glanced sidelong at Gabrielle, catching the faint smile on her face. She eased Argo's reins and kneed her forward, as the mare carefully picked her way across the uneven ground.

When she was within a length of the man, she stopped, and met his eyes. He had a helmet on, and she couldn't see most of his face, but there was nothing familiar there. "I'm Xena." She announced, in a cordial tone. "And you are?"

Those eyes studied her hard for a minute, then he removed his helmet, revealing a fine, handsome face and curled red gold hair. "So you are Xena. " He said. "I am Pinu."

He looked past her at the waiting lines of the army. "You bring forces into my lands."

"I have." Xena agreed. "Wanna fight? We're in the mood to." She smiled at him, one hand dropping casually to rest on the chakram.

He looked quickly back at her. "My men say you are a demon."

"I've been called worse." Xena said. "But I'm as much a demon as anyone else is." She moved Argo closer. "So what do you say? Can we get this started?"

Pinu studied her. “Are you so anxious for battle, Xena? I have a fine force behind me. It could end up ill for you.”

“It could.” The warrior met his eyes steadily. “I’ll take the chance and bet on my army. “ She smiled again. “And me.”

“Yes, well.” He shifted in his saddle. “I don’t wish to fight with you, or your army. My captain will have told you all I wish is to talk.” He exhaled. “It could be we have more in common than you think.”

Bummer. Xena lifted a hand and made a casual gesture, then whistled softly. The result was a shifting of bodies behind her and the sound of a single horse moving towards her. “All right.” She waited for Gabrielle to arrive. “Start talking.”

He looked at her then moved his eyes to Gabrielle. “And who is this? I only want talk with you.”

“I’m Gabrielle.” The bard supplied. “Do yourself a favor and just go with it.” She advised him. “Is this Pinu, Xe?”

“It is. He wants to talk.”

“He brings a whole army out in the middle of the night just to talk to you?”

Pinu settled his helmet on his saddlehorn. “I had no choice.” He said. “To travel in the midst of an army is the only safety in these parts to be had, as you no doubt have found yourself.”

“There seems to be a lot of people running around attacking and kidnapping people.” Gabrielle said. “Most everyone we talk to think that’s you.”

“No.”

“Yes.” The bard said. “You can say it’s not you, but I’m telling you that people are saying it is. Including a bunch of people from Phillipi who came and asked us to come and find out why you think that’s okay.”

Pinu studied her, then glanced at Xena in question.

“I fight.” The warrior said. “She talks.”

The big man leaned forward a little. “You do not know the truth of this.”

“No. What we don’t know is your side of the story.” Gabrielle said, in a mild tone. “Whether it’s true or not remains to be seen.”

A loud whistle went up, and Xena’s hand shifted from her chakram to her sword. “Something’s coming.” She stood up her stirrups. “Something big.”

“Too late for talk.” Pinu shoved his helm back on his head. “You will get your fight, Xena. May you survive it.”

**

It was dark. Jessan pressed his back against the wall and panted for breath, the blasts of heat and stench washing over him.

He had no idea where he was, and he’d never been so frightened in his life. Every connection with the world he’d known was gone and even more terrifying, he could no longer sense Eleani, or his parents, or anyone else.

Not even Xena.

There were screaming noises all around him, and everywhere he looked there were figures in agony, being tortured, squalling at the top of their lungs.

The only bit of comfort he could find was that the creatures, and people, and whatever they were had been ignoring him as though he wasn’t there. No matter how close he stood to them, or got in front of them, they went past him with no indication they saw him.

He heard a loud bellow he thought he recognized, and he scooted around a stalactite protruding from the floor and ducked, as something big and winged flew over his head. He squeezed between two more protruding rocks and then paused, glimpsing between a crack in the wall a shadowy figure with their hands behind a huge rock, shoving upward.

He stopped. "Oh crap."

With all the sound around him, it was odd to hear his own voice so loudly. It was the first thing he'd said since he'd found himself in mid step heading up a path one moment, and then being thrown against a hot, fetid wall the next, with no horse, no gear, and no companions.

The bellow was repeated, and he tore his attention from the figure pushing the rock uphill and went past a man tied to a piller, with snakes biting him to find the source of the yelling.

Then wished he hadn't.

There against the wall, wrists and ankles encased in rock, was Ares. Stripped of his leather vest and pants, along with boots and wrist bands, the god of war was yelling in rage as a never ending blast of ice and fire bathed him.

Jessan stood frozen for a moment, almost not seeing the two shorter figures wielding the snake heads spewing the substances as he teetered on the edge of jerking himself into motion to go and…

Go and what?

He was in Hades realm. Jessan felt his throat close. He was in Hades realm and more than that, he was in Tartarus.

He leaned back into the shadows and felt the horror of it take him over, feeling his body start to shake.

His clawed fingers gripped the wall, feeling the warmth of it against the palms of his hands, rough and hard and unnervingly real.

He was in Hades realm.

"Stop it!" Ares was yelling. "Get Hades over here you little pipsqueaks!"

Jessan peeked out at him, watching him glare at the two, ignoring the fire and ice that licked his face from either side. The rock trapped his limbs, but he stood out as far as he could from it, his big and powerfully muscled body alternately bathed in red and blue.

Equally trapped in stone near his side was the Sword of War, the stones buried into it's hilt pulsing softly with Ares breathing.

Almost like it was alive.

Then the blasting stopped and with a resounding thump the two were gone, leaving the snakes behind to slowly curl themselves up and study their prey.

Ares stared calmly at them, then turned his head towards Jessan. "Hey fuzzbutt. Get out here."

With a wary eye on the snakes, Jessan edged into the half circle of stone. "Uh, hi."

Ares gave him a droll look.

"Are we dead?" Jessan blurted out. "We're in Tartarus, aren't we?"

"Maybe, and yes." The God of War said, impatiently. "But don't shed your fur."

Jessan took a step back and leaned against the wall, feeling his heart beating so fast it made him dizzy. "Maybe?"

"I'm not. But you have to be to be here." Ares said. "Don't' worry about that now. I've got to get out of here."

Don't worry. Jessan felt the empty echo in his head, and he stared past Ares, suddenly getting an insight into Xena's life he neither wanted nor appreciated. "So that's what it's like." He said, in a bare whisper.

"What?"

Jessan didn't get to answer because at that moment, a hugely tall, cloaked, shadowy figure emerged from the wall, drifting across the floor to face Ares. "Nephew."

"What was that?" Ares asked. "Who asked you to step into my game, uncle?"

"As if I needed someone to ask? It's you who brought this lessening down around us, Ares. You know it, we all know it. You succored mortals, you pandered to them. You taught them our secrets."

"Me?"

So that was Hades. Jessan slid down the wall and sat on the ground, the sounds of screaming all around them fading out. He sounded like a jerk. Ares sounded like a jerk.

He was caught in some argument he had nothing to do with. "I get it, Xena." He exhaled. "I wish I'd gotten a chance to say goodbye."

The two gods were ignoring him.

"I never taught any of them a damn thing. I got sacrifices! Just like you did!" Ares was yelling, yanking at his trapped arms. "I made them love war! I gave you millions of them before their time! Tell me that's not true!"

Hades studied him.

"Tell me it's not true, Uncle." Ares repeated. "Tell me your precious army didn't come to you through me."

"Many have died for you." Hades grudgingly agreed. "And I have used them. But you also raised her up. The dark one. Your spawn."

No question who he was talking about. Jessan looked up to see Ares' face, set and cold and hard and yet filled with a passion he halfway understood.

"Child of my heart." Ares said, in a quiet voice. "But not of my loins, Hades. Wish she was. Only mortal ever who gets the fire like I do."

"She teaches all of them not to worship us. Gives them something else to sacrifice too. Deny it." The king of the underworld shot back. "She has no regard for us."

"Not for you." His nephew taunted him. "She couldn't get out of here fast enough and you couldn't stop her but we've got a deal, she and I."

"You flatter yourself."

"Do I? Wasn't you or anyone else in the family hauling my ass out of being dead." Ares tone was now rough with anger. "Screw all of you. Fade out. Be my guest."

Hades raised his hands and a huge blast of fire, and heat, and flying rock exploded in the chamber, sending sharp pieces everywhere. Jessan threw his hands up to cover his face and felt the sting as the rocks hit him, jolts of pain that shook him.

He peeked between his fingers as the flames cleared, to see Ares still pinned, skin darkened by fire, and blood exuding from dozens of gashes in his body.

And yet he was still smiling, grimly, head up, defying Hades' torments. "They wont forget me, Hades." He said. "Mortals now have a piece of me, and Dite in them. Long as they spawn and live, so will we."

"Traitor!"

“Survivor.” The God of War licked a bit of blood dripping down over his mouth. “G’wan. Do your worst, ya old has been.”

Jessan curled up in a ball as the room erupted in sound and chaos, feeling a pressure against his skin that nearly flayed it off. He heard a sound that pierced him to the quick, and then a moment later a blast followed and he blacked out.

**

Xena wheeled the army around as she sensed the approach in the darkness, blinking hard against the shadows as she sorted the moving figures out. She let out a whistle, then two more, then she got into the lead as the long line of horsemen wheeled at her command.

At least the figures heading their way looked human sized. Xena could see brief glints of armor, and the yells and she let loose a yell of her own, feeling the almost overwhelming surge of savage delight that flushed her skin warm under her armor.

She could see the line of troops heading right towards them and from the corner of her eye she saw Pinu trying to get his own soldiers turned around to fight.

“What are they?” Gabrielle was at her left side.

“Dunno.” Xena answered. “Get your staff ready and keep your head down.”

They closed fast with the enemy and Xena took aim at the front lines, driving a little slantwise into them and lifting her sword as Argo half reared and struck out with her front hooves.

She met a descending blade and sparks flew along the edge of hers as she turned it, dropping her reins as she picked up her chakram and backhanded it across the armor of the man attacking her just as she felt a disruption in the air behind her and heard arrows coming past.

One hit her adversary, and got him in the throat. He reached up for it and yanked at it, but she took the opportunity to topple him off his horse and give the animal a slap on the behind as it plunged past.

She heard her captains calling out and whistling commands, and then she concentrated on the big figure heading her way with a mace and a broadsword.

He was fast, and she ducked the mace at the last second, letting it come past her as she used her sword to deflect the dark metal blade coming at her.

Their bodies slammed together and she shoved off him, moving her head to one side just in time to miss a chop that fell against her shoulder and she hastily put her chakram back on it’s hook so she could get her free hand on the mace.

Gabrielle got her staff in between the man’s arm and his body and she simply shoved through, using her weight and Iolaus’ motion to yank his arm back and duck under his sword.

Xena took advantage of that and got her body around, shoving down on the mace while she drove the point of her sword thorugh the side of his neck between his armor and his helm.

He gargled in shock, his body jerking as she yanked the sword back out and he fell off the back of the horse as it bucked in surprise.

Xena moved past him and joined Gabrielle, going shoulder to shoulder with her as three enemy soldiers came at them, shifting shields to one arm as they couched spears with their other.

“Gonna be a long night.” Gabrielle called out. “Can you see how many of them there are?”

Xena stood up in her stirrups for a moment, then let out several whistled commands, watching as her cavalry came around and started driving from the side. “Three score.” She sat back down and removed her chakram, letting it loose as the foremost soldier reached her.

It slammed against his helm and he instinctively yanked his arm up to protect his face, and she caught the weapon as it circled back to her and pointed. “Get him there.”

“No problem.” Gabrielle rode forward with her staff couched against her ribs, thumping the end into the soldier’s gut and knocking him backwards in his saddle. Xena came past and wrapped her arm in his, and pulled him the rest of the way off, using her sword to deflect the spear of the second man.

A horn sounded.

Gabrielle let out a whistle and a wave of arrows came past them, as the Amazons advanced, tucked behind their horses and shooting over their backs.

Xena waited for the second wave, then she found a knot of men fighting on foot and recognized the hawkshead tabards. She aimed Argo for the bunch and circled them, raising her sword up and slamming it hilt down on the head of one of the enemy.

“Thanks Genr’l!” Redder shoved his dagger into the mans throat, sending a spray of copper darkness out that Xena could smell. He yanked the man past him and picked up the sword he’d dropped, engaging a second who was dodging past two fallen men.

Xena looked around and stood up, taking advantage of the lull to direct her troops. She put her fingers between her teeth and sounded three long and two short whistles, as Solari stepped up next to her and aimed her longbow over Argo’s neck.

She released the shaft and it nailed a rider in the side.

“Nice.” Xena complimented her. “Watch those guys.” She pointed at six soldiers riding hard at them, then half turned as she sensed motion to her right, which turned out to be Gabrielle arriving, catching her breath.

A horn sounded again, and the six men riding swerved, and curved in a circle, heading back the way they came as the enemy broke off.

In the shadows past them, Xena spotted a huge figure, seated on the back of what appeared to be an even more huge, antlered animal.

“Xe.”

“I see it.”

The enemy soldiers broke off fighting and scrambled back, to form up behind this big, silent creature. Xena let out a whistle of command and her cavalry gathered around her, the ground between her and the creature littered with still forms.

“Stay here.”

“No.” Gabrielle responded in a low tone. “No way, Xe.”

The warrior sighed, and gave her an affectionate sidelong glance. “Wasn’t really talking to you.” She said. “Everyone else, stay here.” She repeated, turning her head right and left to make sure they’d all heard.

“Mm.” Gabrielle grunted in satisfaction, shifting her staff and curling her hand around it as she guided Iolaus after his mother.

“You’re a little nutty, y’know.” Paladia had ended up on her right hand side. “That thing’s bad news.”

“I know.” Gabrielle settled herself and waited for Xena to start forward. “But I am who I am, Paladia. I learned the hard way not to pretend anything else.”

Paladia nodded. “Yeah. You’re all right.”

Gabrielle had to smile at that and she did. She patted Paladia on the shoulder then she returned her hands to the reins and pressed her knees into Iolaus’ side, as he obediently moved forward after Argo’s golden hindquarters.

A minute later they were out in front of the army, the soldiers forming up in lines behind them and she could hear the flutter of fabric in the wind as they raised Xena’s standard up overhead.

They came to a standstill together and waited. Xena had sheathed her sword and hung up the chakram, her hands resting on her saddlebow, Argo's reins clasped lightly in the fingers of her left hand.

This close, Gabrielle could feel the connection between them very strongly. She had stopped right even with her soulmate, and her knee was touching Xenas and she could feel the jumping tension in her leg despite her calm exterior.

The tall creature studied them, face indistinguishable inside it's thick hood.

Was it Hades? Gabrielle tried to remember what his outline was, and this looked bigger. Some minion of his?

The animal he was riding moved forward a few steps and then halted, eyes glowing red as it regarded them. Argo and Iolaus's ears pinned back in reaction to it, as a gust of wind brought them it's odd, musky scent.

A soft sound echoed behind it, and then a flicker of motion happened as Xena's right hand came up and caught an arrow in flight across her own body, and a breath later she released Argo's reins and took up her chakram, sending it back in the opposite direction.

A brief cry rang out, then silence, save the hiss of the chakram as it came flying back from the darkness and ended in Xena's ungloved hand.

"Dishonorable cowards." Gabrielle spoke, filling her lungs and projecting her voice. "Who strike from the dark, from the shadows. We respected your request for truce. Have you no honor at all?"

Xena put the chakram back on it's hook and then lifted the crossbow bolt in her hand an tightened her grip until it cracked. Her eyes remained on the tall mounted figure, and she tossed both of the ends away from her.

The tall figure glanced behind itself, then looked back at Xena. "There is no honor in war. You know this."

"There is no honor in war." Xena agreed. "Only in those who make it. "

"Do you claim honor now, Xena?" The figure seemed amused. "You should know better than most the uselessness of it, especially in war."

The voice wasn't familiar. The warrior shrugged, lifting both hands up and then putting them back down. "That all you have to say? Let's get back to fighting."

The figure moved forward again, putting a long separation between itself and them, and now they could see a vague outline of his face, stark and planed, and unfamiliar. "Every man you kill, comes back in my army, Xena. You cannot win this."

Xena leaned a little on the front of her saddle. "Sometimes it's not about winning."

"It's always about winning."

Xena shook her head. "Sometimes it's just about the fight."

The figure backed a step and then drew a long, dark black blade from a scabbard on it's back. "Do you so believe? Then you will fight with me, here. Now. It will be faster then for me to defeat just you, as your army will not then have the will to fight me."

"Sure." Xena agreed readily. "Just be careful what you ask for." She drew her own sword, twirling it lazily around her hand and then gripping it. "Could be dangerous for you either way."

**

It was the smack of a rock against his head that eventually woke him. Jessan jerked up into sitting position, holding his hands over his face as he blinked a blurry film out of his eyes.

"C'mon fuzzbutt."

Another rock hit his leg, and Jessan lowered his hands to see the cavern bathed in red glare, the floor covered in shards of the rock the walls were made of. He blinked again and things came into focus, and he could see Ares now, still trapped in the wall at the back.

One arm was free, though, and that's what the god of war had been using to collect rocks to throw at him. He scrambled to his feet, wincing at the bruises all over his body. "Oh."

"C'mere."

Cautiously he moved the shards out of his path and walked over, his unshod feet making whispering clicks against the stone. "Is he gone?"

"For now." Ares said. "I'm sure he'll be back to kick us around more though so do yourself a favor and help me out here."

Jessan looked around, hoping to find some kind of tool to use to pry the trapped god loose. He spotted the Sword of War instead, partially blasted free from the grip of the wall. "Can I get you that?"

Ares craned his head around, stretching against the grip of the wall as he moved far enough away from it to see what the forest dweller was pointing at. "Yeah." He said, in a surprised kind of tone. "Maybe all that Olympian gas did me a favor. "

Jessan went over and cleared some of the rock away, getting his claws into cracks around the sword and pulling backwards.

Xena had once told him one way she got through some of the horrific things she had was to just focus on the moment.

So right now, he just focused on prying bits of rocks away from this metal thing, and put aside the knowledge that the rock was part of Hades and the metal was the Sword of War. It brought nothing to the situation.

'Just grab it." Ares suggested. "It won't kill ya."

Jessan looked over at him.

"More than you already are." The god of war added, with a smirk.

With an exhale, Jessan flexed his hands, feeling the soreness in them before he grimaced and put his fingers around the hilts of the sword and leaned back, feeling the faintest motion as he tightened his muscles.

"Yank sideways." Ares suggested helpfully. "Uncle chucklehead made a nice crack there."

Jessan threw his weight to the right and then to the left, then he got a good grip with both hands and put his foot up on the rock, lifting himself up off the ground and pulling with all his strength.

Surprisingly, it held, then abruptly let loose with a queer screeching sound, sending him flying back into the rocky rubble with a painful grunt.

"Nice." Ares said. "Gimme." He held his free hand out with his fingers wiggling as Jessan climbed to his feet and limped over to him, gingerly reversing the sword and putting the hilt in the God of War's grip.

Then he moved away and went to the back of the chamber, looking around at the destruction.

Ares shifted his grip on his sword and lifted it, then inspected his lower limbs before he smacked the blade against the rock trapping his left foot, rewarded with a chunk of stone rocketing off to one side.

At that, one of the two snakes lifted it's head and hissed, sliding forwards towards him.

"Watch it, slime-o." Ares lifted the sword again and cocked his wrist. "Or I'll take your ugly head off."

The snake attacked, and just as Ares was about to whack it, the head slipped under his sword and let out a blast of fire, it's lower body striking the god's arm with stunning force and sending the sword flying away.

Jessan watched as Ares got a grip on the snake with his one free hand and he started forward, only to be blocked by the second snake, who whirled around and reared back, hissing at him.

"Oh boy." The forest dweller backed up, pressing his hands against the rock wall.

"Grrr." Ares was growling as he tried to keep the snake away form him, closing his eyes as it blasted him with fire again.

Jessan swallowed, then took a step away from the wall and reached over his shoulder to draw his sword out of it's sheath, wrapping both hands around the hilts and baring his fangs at the snake. "Grrrrwooool!!"

The snake lunged at him and he chopped at it, dodging to one side as it came past him and then turning to follow it and slam his blade against it'sneck.

To his surprise the blade penetrated the snake's flesh, and it whirled around in rage, throwing itself against him, jaws extending wide to bite him. Jessan moved his head and then shoved himself forward, opening his own mouth and biting the snake just below it's head.

It tasted like nothing. He clamped his jaws shut and felt his fangs penetrate the skin, and with a jerk of his head he tore the side of the snake's neckout of it's body and spit it out.

The snake dropped to the ground, writhing. "Yuk." Jessan gagged, spitting the liquid remaining in his mouth out and then turning to see the other snake all over Ares, the god barely holding it's mouth away from his neck.

Without over thinking it, he bolted over and whipped his sword around in a circle, cutting through the snake and then wished he hadn't when it erupted into flame, sending him reeling backwards.

He fell to the ground, his sword slamming the ground.

The impact almost made him drop it, then he squinted his eyes open, feeling scorched. The chamber was full of fire, and as he watched the snake he'd bitten curled up and crisped into black cinders, the last bit it's eyes going through a gamut of colors and ending up like bits of coal before the whole figure dissolved into dust.

He looked across at Ares, who had his free hand held up, repelling the flames from the cut in half fire snake with a layer of cool blue air. As he watched the god lifted his hand and let his eyes narrow and the fire began to fade.

He put his hand palm down and pressed it towards the floor, and as he did, the flames banked and dissipated, going from raging to mere licks until finally they just went out.

"Nice." Ares said, after brief pause, opening his eyes. "Now gimme that whacker back. Next thing that'll happen is Hades'll come back and when he sees what we did to his pups he's not gonna like it."

Jessan got up and shook himself, then went over to the sword of war and carefully picked it up to return to it's owner.

It was incredibly heavy. He put it back in Ares' hand and stepped back, looking around the chamber at the destruction. Far off, he suddenly heard a howl, and when he looked back at Ares, the God of War was chopping rapidly at the stone holding him in place. "What was that?"

"Nothing you want to meet, fuzzbutt." Ares got one leg free and then turned, putting his hand and foot against the rock and pulling hard against his other arm.

With a crack, the rock broke free and a minute later Ares was too, walking over and grabbing the sheath of his sword and covering the blade. "C'mon." He headed for an arched opening. "I gotta start some trouble to distract him."

There was, Jessan had to admit, a little bit of Xena in Ares. In the tone of his voice, and the steadfast arrogance and trust in self. He could imagine Xena here, with him, doing much the same thing, heading off across this sacred ground as though she owned it.

He didn't want to do that. He didn't even want to look around. He only hoped that, like it had been with Xena, he would end up with a chance to leave the underworld and go back where he belonged.

**

Xena picked her spot, tucking her hands under her arms to keep them warm as her opponent took his time getting off his strange steed, and coming over to meet her.

He was big. He towered over her and from the way he moved he had plenty of brawn to go with the narrowed, pale eyes she could see now that they were closer.

There was a ring of torches around them, casting a ruddy light across the circle they stood inside, with both armies clustering closely behind them.

Pinu's men were on the right hand side, watching in silence. Xena's own troops were on the left hand side standing with legs braced, heads lifted in confident stares.

Gabrielle had taken up a spot just to Xena's left, slightly behind her, the bard's staff grounded next to her and her hands wrapped around it.

It was time. Xena flexed her hands and bounced up and down on the balls of her feet, watching her opponent as he drew out his sword and stepped forward.

"You bring your little friend to help you?" The man pointed his sword at Gabrielle.

"Yep." Xena responded. "Since you had your little friends shooting arrows at me on a truce flag , I figured I"d bring someone to watch my back while we're fighting."

"Matters not." He chuckled. "When I defeat you, Xena, your army will turn over it's weapons to mine, and become our slaves. DO they know this?"

Xena smiled at him. "Defeat me first. Then you can discuss it with them." She responded. "When I defeat you your army goes back where they came from and leaves us alone."

The tall figure studied her in silence for a moment. "You truly do not understand what you face."

"No. I truly don't care." Xena dusted her hands off. "Let's get this party started." She drew her own sword and did a little trick with it, tumbling it up one arm and across her neck and down the other, ending with the blade gripped in her right hand facing backwards

Then she waited, legs braced, weight balanced over the balls of her feet, breathing slow and even.

Her opponent took a breath himself, then flexed his hands and came at her.

Xena ducked past him as he came and circled around to the left, turning and raising her sword as he swung around to face her. Their swords crossed and glanced off, and she kept moving, rotating her weapon against his and deflecting it.

They circled each other. He whipped his sword around at her sideways and she turned and met it, the sound of metal meeting metal echoing harshly over the cold ground.

Then she moved forward and attacked, weaving a pattern in the air he had to deflect, taking short, digging steps that forced him backwards a little, her hands moving a little faster than his, her focus on him sharpening.

He broke off and circled her again. She turned to follow him and anticipated the sudden attack from the side, lashing sideways with her sword to deflect his and then taking a step, launching into the air and thumping him in the chest with both boots.

She shoved outwards, sending him backwards and herself as well, tumbling in mid air to land and then leap forward again, disarming him with a hard, fast chop before he could recover.

His sword flew across the ground and bounced. He staggered back wards and caught his balance, staring at her, shaking his hand from the sting.

She walked over and picked up his sword, throwing it to him and moving back to the center of their circle. As she crossed back, she let her gaze travel over the enemy force, giving them a smile and a wink.

Gabrielle stood quietly, also watching the enemy but in her case watching for motions that might mean an attack coming from someone in the shadows behind him, as she knew Xena's troops were also looking closely for.

The fight itself, she let go past her. She could see Xena's relaxed body posture in her peripheral vision and she was far more worried about the people around them than she was the big man in the hood.

He caught the sword and then came at her in earnest, clearly pissed off at the casual mastery he was facing. He used his greater weight and height to loom over her and slammed the sword down right at her head, intending on breaking her defenses.

Xena got her body set just in time, lifting her sword up and setting it crosswise to his just before his blade smashed down on hers.

He clearly expected to drive right through her.

Xena felt her knees bend a little, then her body straightened up and with an uncoiling of her thighs she shoved him back and twisted her hands to slant his sword off to one side, continuing the motion around as he swiped at her with his free hand.

Her blade hit his arm and she felt the crunch of bone as she put her weight behind the blow, sending his hand flying off in the other direction to smack one of his own soldiers in the chest.

She lifted her sword up in a lazy gesture, and her army let out a bellow that rang everyone's ears including her own.

He staggered back and stared at the missing hand, blood spurting out of his wrist onto the ground. Then he looked up at Xena.

"Had enough, little man?" Xena asked, twirling the sword in her fingers

Pinu had ended up standing next to Redder, and now he expelled air from his lungs with an audible grunt.

Redder just looked at him, and chuckled, crossing his arms over his chest.

The big man suddenly let out a yell and bolted towards Xena, lifting his sword up and starting to cut and slash at her with amazing speed and energy. He was mad, beyond thought, and he moved with the uncaring force of the insane.

Xena stood her ground and deflected the attack, feeling a flush of warmth to her skin as the growling tiger inside her surfaced and with it came the energy to reject the fierce strikes again and again as he whacked wildly at her.

She took a step forward and moved from defense to offense, the point of her blade getting inside his guard and starting to slash at the front of his armor. He staggered back, his handless arm scraping at his side going for a dagger uselessly.

Xena slapped his sword aside and reached in, ducking gracefully against his counterstrike as she cut through the front of surcoat, exposing a thick layer of chain mail armor beneath. She ducked again and turned, dodging his swipe and delivering a roundhouse kick into his gut with all the momentum she could muster.

He hopped backwards from the force and stumbled, and she took advantage of that to leap up and kick him again, this time in the throat. He arched over backwards and she tumbled in the air, twisting

and turning and landing over him to drive a knee into his chest as her other leg whipped out and pinned his sword arm to the ground.

Her sword tip settled at his throat.

The sound of the torches surrounding the circle was suddenly loud, as the wind rose and whipped the flames up, and the smell of pitch was pungent and thick on the air.

He twisted his body and surged upward, trying to knock her off, but Xena leaned forward and the point of her sword pierced his neck. "Don't make me wobble." She warned, quietly, reaching down and yanking his helm off to expose his face.

He was human looking enough. He had curly, dark hair and a face that belonged in Olympus, with even bones and a beautiful shape, marred now by twisting, angry lips that pursed themselves to spit at her.

Xena whacked him in the face with his own helmet. "Don't." She was aware of motion at her back, but knew it friendly as Gabrielle's staff set down just behind her knee. "Now, you challenged me and you lost."

The motion behind her became much more intense, and Xena looked around to see her army closing in on them, weapons bristling. She quickly looked back, but only saw the enemy forces standing there, expressionlessly watching .

"Kill me then." The man said, in a raspy voice.

Xena stood up and backed away, kicking his sword off to the left into the ranks of her own troops. "So you can come back at me? You said yourself killing men would only build up Hades' army."

Hands touched her, and she felt Gabrielle press against her side, as the clouds suddenly parted, and the moon shone down on them to temper the red of the torches with a gentle silver glow.

And as the light touched them, the enemy disappeared into mist, the tall giant Xena had just bested dissolving into a dewy outline, then nothing.

Xena turned and looked at Pinu. "Did I pass the test?" She asked, smiling at his now wary look. She carefully wiped down her sword on the cloth Bennu held out to her and sheathed it. "We'll escort you back to your gates."

After a moment, he nodded. "It could be profitable for both of us to be allies, Xena." He said. "What I heard about you was true."

Xena whistled and made a hand gesture. "Make camp." She told the troops. "No one else's gonna die tonight.

Gabrielle bumped against her. "Showoff."

"Pfft."

**

No snow, so no tents. Gabrielle was content to perch behind the now built up campfire, watching the disciplined soldiers from Amphipolis cooking up their stew and breaking out a cask of ale that bore the stamp of home on it' side.

Pinu's force had camped on the other side of the hedges from them, a little downstream, with a definite separation between them and Xena's army. They had rejected any offer of supplies, and if she turned her head, she knew she'd see their guards watching her suspiciously.

Peh.

Xena was just crossing into the circle of firelight, and as she approached they both paused and looked up, where the big, full moon was shining placidly down over them.

"Mm." Gabrielle grunted. "So are we on the plus side of this or not, Xe?"

Xena came over and sat down on the rock next to her, fluffing out her cloak and taking off her gauntlets. "Depends what that charade was all about." She said. "That was a game if I ever saw one. Not sure what it was supposed to prove."

'That you can fight?"

"C'mon, Gab. " Xena tucked her gloves into her belt. "Those soldiers weren't real. Maybe that one who shot the arrow was – probably was that kid of Hades."

"No, that's true." The bard assented. "Big as he was, that yonk didn't have a step on you. But I think I know who he was."

"Who?"

"Actaeon."

Xena half turned and regarded her soulmate. "Never heard of him." She admitted. "Someone I should know?"

Gabrielle accepted one of the two bowls Solari had just brought over. "Probably not. He was some guy from Thebes, who apparently stumbled into a pool he wasn't supposed to and ticked off Artemis."

Xena started drinking directly from her bowl, ignoring the spoon she'd been given. "Ah huh."

"She turned him into a stag, and his own dogs ate him." Gabrielle concluded succinctly. "Kinda gross, and kinda stupid, given all he was supposed to have done was walk in on her naked."

"So what makes you think it was him?"

"Saw a hanging of it in the Academy when I was there and it really looked like this guy." The bard said. "And he had a stag on his armor, and was riding a stag. Kinda seemed like it was pounding the notion through y'know?"

"Mm."

'He was blowing a hunting horn." Gabrielle said. "So who knows? Maybe Hades told him if he beat you he'd tell him where Artemis was, so he could go claim his prize."

That sounded like something Hades would have done. Xena merely nodded in response, as she wolfed down the chunks of venison in her stew. She caught motion out of the corner of her eye and tilted her head a little to watching the approaching figure.

All her scouts and guards were watching him too, as Pinu approached her. "Yes?"

Pinu held his hands out to the fire and rubbed them, looking casually around before he moved slightly closer to her. "My men tell me they hear you have a young boy named Jake with you. Captured, they say."

"Sort of." Gabrielle answered. "We ran into him near some burned out villages. Is he one of your men?"

PInu lifted his broad shoulders slightly. "Men? No. He came into the city as a slave of a trader. The trader died in a brawl and he hung around trying to convince my major domo he was useful."

That rang somewhat true. "We know him." Gabrielle said. "He lived in a village near ours when he was much younger. It was raided by slavers."

"Well then, madame, he tells the same story at least. That he was taken by road men when just a child, and brought up by them as a thief."

"He seemed skanky to me." The bard said. "So, you want him back?"

Pinu carefully kept his face towards the fire. "If you have no use for him, sure." He said, casually. "Did turn out to be a bit useful"

Xena leaned back against the rocks. “Cait.” She called out.

The young Amazon was at her side in an instant. “Yes?”

“Bring your friend Jake over here.” The warrior said. “He belongs to Pinu. Wants him back.”

“Right.” Cait said with a nod. “They have him tied up near the stock wagons. I’ll just go get him and bring him back in a jiff.”

“You have tied him?” Pinu had sidled a step or so closer to Xena. “Did he harm you?”

A few of Pinu’s men had drifted a bit closer, not entering the cleared space they were in but hovering just outside, keeping an eye on their leader. Perversely, Gabrielle found herself nodding at that, seeing a respect in their attitude that sent its own message.

“He was acting strange. Went after one of my Amazon warriors, then told us all about how you were going to kick Xena’s ass when you found out about us hog tying him.” The bard said, with a brief smile. “I think we tied him up more for his safety than ours. Cait has no sense of humor.”

“Unlike me.” Xena spoke up.

Pinu glanced uncertainly from one to the other. “I am sure he meant no insult.” He said, after a pause. “All most of us knew about you was from stories. And I am sure you know how exaggerated those can be.”

Xena started laughing, as Gabrielle cleared her throat meaningfully.

“But you have indeed earned your reputation.” Pinu concluded, eyeing the two women. “Hard as it is for me, a man, to admit that.”

Gabrielle considered that. “So you don’t think women can fight?” She asked. “The Spartan’s didn’t either. Maybe that’s why they got along with you all?”

Pinu stiffened in reaction. “Spartans?”

“The ones who intended to attack Athens via your port?” Xena said, in a mild tone. “We know where they came ashore. You’re damn lucky I sent them packing before Athens realized how they got in.”

Some of Pinu’s soldiers now came closer, visibly listening.

But Pinu shrugged, after a moment. “They paid well for passage, and gave us good coin for supplies. We are not and never have been friends of Athens. Nor were you, from what we heard.”

Xena shrugged back.

“It’s a love hate relationship.” Gabrielle countered, as she spotted Cait returning, with Paladia at her side, a struggling form between them. “In that, they’d love to hate Xe but she keeps saving their asses so it’s hard for them.”

“Here you go, your Majesty.” Cait said, as they came to a halt. “One rotter, tied.”

Jake stopped struggling as he saw Pinu, going still and hopeful. He was still gagged, so he couldn’t say anything but the impression of wiggle tailed puppyhood needed no vocals.

“Like a bad half dinar coin, here you turn up again.” Pinu said, giving the boy a resigned look. “We’ll take him, Xena, and my thanks for it.”

Xena made a hand sign to Cait and the two Amazons frog marched Jake along, past Pinu, over to where his men were loitering. At the last step they stopped and shoved him forward, and two of the men caught him, with none too gentle hands.

“Take him to camp.” Pinu ordered them. “Turn him loose, and if he’s able work him.”

The two men nodded and dragged Jake off. He’d started to struggle again, and he turned his head, looking back at Pinu with a desperate, hurt expression.

Unexpectedly, it touched Gabrielle's heart, and she got a flash of memory of Jacob as a young boy, being shyly fascinated with Xena, trying to live up to his position as first born son.

Just a scared kid. She exhaled. How could she have thought he was anything like Seraphim? Was that only her own dusty conscience rearing it's head? Really? She saw the disillusionment as he was jerked way and felt it, deep in her gut, unexpected and raw.

"Hey." Xena nudged her gently. "What's going on?"

Gabrielle turned her head and tilted it up, feeling the impact now of those eyes gone ocher in the low light watching her with intent concern, all the encompassing attention that kid was looking for – that she'd been looking for – that now was hers.

She turned back to Pinu. "He's had a rough life for a kid. Give him a break."

Pinu stared at her. "It was you had him tied, lady." He said. "Not I."

Cait and Paladia returned, Cait dusting her hands off, and the two of them took up positions on either side of Xena and Gabrielle, looking as intimidating as they were able. "You might have taught him a bit of manners." Cait told Pinu. "If he'd kept his hands to himself he wouldn't have been tied up."

Pinu turned and hooked his thumbs into his belt. "Why should he?" His tone was reasonable. "It's the right of men to take as they please, and populate the world. Surely you realize that."

Cait looked at him, then at Xena and Gabrielle, while Paladia just covered her eyes with one hand.

"In some places, that's true." Xena responded mildly. "Wouldn't try it around here if you want to keep your fingers though."

"I didn't mean any rudeness." The city leader said, and he seemed sincere. "I am just saying what all men know to be true, that this is the natural order of things. That men lead, and women care for the home."

"Except when women lead, and don't sometimes have a home." Gabrielle said. "Like Xena and me."

"Or have a home, and only other women around." Cait said, placidly. "Like the Amazons do."

Two of Xena's men came over and offered them a platter. "Men caught some fish in the crick there, genr'l." The nearer one said. "Got plenty of water, down deep under the ice."

"Thanks." Xena set the plate down and picked up a bit of the grilled fish, glad of it's mild fresh taste. "I thought that way too once, Pinu."

Gabrielle's eyebrows hiked up sharply.

Pinu nodded. "Of course, you would have made a fine wife." He said. "Any man would have been glad of you."

"I got past that after I figured out I liked being in charge." The warrior responded. "I wasn't going to let anyone tell me what to do."

"Well." Pinu smiled a little.

"Until I met Gabrielle." Xena draped her arm over the bristling Amazon queen at her side. "But there's nothing special about men. There's nothing they can do I can't."

Pinu's men laughed, with a nasty tinge to it. "Got one thing you can't." The nearest one said, with a meaning smile.

"Don't be too sure about that." Gabrielle smiled lazily, leaning against Xena's shoulder. "If you're ever over in our neck of the woods I'll introduce you to our daughter." She watched the men's laughter trail off, and they looked uncertainly at Pinu.

Pinu turned and looked hard at them. Xena merely rested her chin against Gabrielle's head, as her partner reached up to twine their fingers together.

“Do you make fun of us?” The big man asked, softly.

“Not at all.” Cait answered. “Although we could, you know.” She added.

“The Spartans said you led those around you into bad thoughts and actions.” PInu said. “That you taught those who followed you to go against nature.”

“That’s horsecrap.” Solari spoke up. “Amazons have been around for a long longer than either of these two have been. We just don’t need men, never have.” She had her hand on her dagger. “Nothing unnatural about it.”

Everyone stared uneasily at each other for a long moment until Xena cleared her throat. “Those Spartans got their asses kicked by me.” She said. “You want to have that experience too? Or just get some rest before we go back to your city tomorrow.”

Pinu stared intently at her, the campfire casting shadows across his handsome face. “Warning well taken.” He said. “We will retreat to our camp indeed, Xena. When we get to my city, we can discuss it again. Perhaps I can show you a different way.”

He lifted a hand in farewell, then walked decidedly away from their fire, motioning his men ahead of him. They turned reluctantly, and moved off, going through the shadows to their own fire behind a large line of wiry dead brush that separated the two armies.

“Bleah.” Gabrielle spoke for them all. “Let’s take your advice, hon. Get some rest.” She hopped off the rock and tucked her hand inside Xena’s elbow. “Though I think we should put a line of guards between our friends there and us.”

“Too right!” Cait said. “What a bunch of weasels.”

Xena nodded. “Bennu.” She stood up, as her captain came over. “Perimeter secured?”

“Aye.” He nodded. “S’all quiet out that way” He indicated the city. “Nothing moving that we can see.”

Xena and Gabrielle retreated to the thick band of hedges that bordered the creek, where shelter had been set up and men and women were quietly settling down to rest.

No privacy in this camp, but neither of them minded, taking a spot near the back between Io’s and Argo’s saddles on their twin set of furs set down on the hastily swept clear ground. Out of the wind and near the smaller fire it was even a little warm.

Gabrielle exhaled, stretching her legs out and crossing them at the ankles. She tugged her cloak around her and relaxed a little, as Xena squeezed in next to her, bringing welcome heat. “Xena.”

“That’s me.” Xena arranged her sword along her thigh, and leaned back. “At least now these guys are becoming the creeps I expected them to be.”

“Mm.”

“If they’d turned out to be white sheep, I think I’d have lost my mind.” Her partner agreed, mournfully. “Nothing we’ve seen so far has been what it seemed, until that little exchange.”

“It’s ratty, but I think he actually believes that.” Gabrielle said. “A lot of people do, don’t they Xe?”

The greatest woman warrior of her generation sighed. “They do.” She said. “You and I make our own reality, and we live with Amazons and people who respect who we are and what we do.” She took Gabrielle’s hand. “Not common. Most places I’ve been women are playthings, slaves or afterthoughts.”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle pulled the furs up over them, making it even cozier. “Look at Potadeia. It’s not even that far away.” She rubbed the side of her nose. “If I hadn’t met you, I’d probably be in some straw hut getting the crap beaten out of me.”

“Ah Gab.” Xena shook her head. “Not you.” She patted her soulmate’s thigh. “Though chances are you’d probably not have lasted long, after going after everyone with a pitchfork.”

The bard was silent for a while, then she laughed softly. “You know, Xe, you’re right. I never told you this, but one day I’d just brought the lambs in the barn and Perdicus came in and found me there.”

Xena waited. “And?”

“And he thought it was a good opportunity to kiss me.” Gabrielle said. “He was older than I was, and I was just like, Oh gross! What are you doing!”

Xena started laughing silently.

“And you know, it sure was a pitchfork I picked up to poke him in the ass with.” The bard admitted. “Freaked him the heck out. He ran away.” She watched Xena lift their linked hands and kiss her knuckles. “I was just glad he didn’t tell my father. “

Xena transferred her lips to her partner’s. “I’m just glad I was walking past that river that day.”

“Yeah me too.” Gabrielle returned the kiss, oblivious to the watching eyes. “I’m glad you took me with you.”

**

It had started snowing again as they approached the port city the next day. Xena found herself and Gabrielle surrounded by the best of her troops, all with weapons unsecured as they rode slowly towards the opened gates.

“Genr’l” Bennu steered his big dun horse closer. “Remember that story them villagers told, of giving them all some drink or potion or some such. Not something we want to trust in there.”

“I remember.” Xena said. “That’s why I had them fill all the water casks before we left.” She studied the city walls, which were tall and well built, stacked stone and capped with guards.

The army seemed disciplined. They rode easily in their saddles, not without sidelong glances at Xena’s troops riding among them.

The Amazons had settled into spots around their queen, and rode with their crossbows laid casually over their saddlebows, shafts ready to be cocked. There was a stiffness to their posture, and an awareness that the city troops kept watching them with seeming disdain.

Xena had her hood down, her dark head exposed to the weather as she slowly scanned the horizon, ears twitching a little. She rode easily though, one hand resting on her thigh, the other loosely clasping Argo’s reins.

Pinu had sent a squad ahead to ensure their greeting. Gabrielle wondered exactly what that greeting would be, and whether the ride would end with a strained, suspicious gathering or all out battle.

The men expected battle. She could see it in them, and truth to tell, she almost felt like she’d rather the fight herself, than the uncomfortable diplomacy they’d been practicing.

“Gabrielle.” Cait angled Shadow over to her and came even with Iolaus’ tall shoulder. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Her queen replied. “Can’t guarantee I’ll have an answer but go for it.”

The young Amazon nodded. “We started out to help the gods.” She said. “But now, they’re all gone, and we’re out here by ourselves.”

“That’s true.”

“Are we still going to help the gods?” Cait asked. “I mean, do we still want to?”

Peh. Gabrielle pondered that for a minute, “I don’t think the gods left us voluntarily, Cait. It could be they’re depending on us to do what we need to do in order to help them.”

Cait looked skeptical. “Terribly sorry, Gabrielle but honestly I think they’re all just rotters.”

“Yeah, I know.” The queen sighed. “Let’s wait to see what happens.” She felt the army gathering closer to her as they approached the gates, and now she could see past them to throngs of curious onlookers watching them.

There was an avidness to the stares that made her spine prickle and she didn’t need to look at Xena to feel the emotional thump that brought her partner’s posture to stiffened alertness.

Without thinking, she reached out and touched Xena’s arm, her fingers clamping down on it as the warrior rose up in her stirrups, the flutter of reaction to her motion traveling down the ranks.

She lifted her hand and clenched a fist and her soldiers halted, making the city troops pull up hastialy and move around them, as everyone started to turn around to see what was going on. The walls loomed over them, and as Pinu himself turned his horse around to face them, there was a sudden motion from behind the gates, and a rush of wind that blew against them.

Then Pinu gave his own signal, and all Hades broke loose.

**

A loud howl made Ares duck out of the hot, fetid corridor they were walking through and into a side chamber that was still, and cold and somehow all the more frightening for it.

Jessan just pressed his back against the wall and waited, watching Ares profile as he stood inside the entrance, his sword gripped in one hand.

“Know what that is?” The god asked, suddenly, as the howl repeated, echoing through the rock walls.

“Should I?” Jessan asked, after a pause.

Ares shrugged. “Depends what kind of stories they told ya about the afterlife.”

Jessan decided to remain silent. The tales told around his home about the afterlife had been… He paused to think about that. What had his mother told him? “We were supposed to come and serve you.” He blurted, unexpectedly.

“Well what do you know.” Ares half turned and spread his arms out. “Here ya are.”

Here he was. Jessan sighed. “I don’t think this is really what my mother had in mind.”

Ares chuckled and poked his head out, then motioned him forward. “C’mon. That was Cerebus, and he’s hunting.” He said. “That means someone’s keeping my uncle distracted.”

Jessan followed him down the hall and raised his arm to shield his eyes as they passed another chamber, this one lit up with lurid red fire. He heard a scream past it, the sound rending his sensitive ears as he hurried by.

Ares halted unexpectedly and retreated, with Jessan scrambling to get out of his way as he shoved his head inside the chamber and with a lazy wave of his sword parted the fire. There was a woman hanging by the wrists from a branch, being blasted with pain and he cocked his head briefly to one side watching it.

“Are you going to help her?” Jessan asked.

Ares let his sword rest against his bare shoulder. “Nah.” He turned and headed down the corridor again. “Just didn’t expect to see that chick here. Thought she was heading up to lala land.” He ducked through another entry way and then went flat against the wall again, as a howl erupted very close by.

Jessan joined him, heart hammering in his chest. “Is Cerebus looking for us?”

Ares shook his head. “He’s not into me. I took one of his whelps and he’s never forgiven me for it.” He waited, then instead of going back into the corridor he crossed the chamber and went out the other side.

This one was empty. It had a tall pole in it with a crosspiece lashed to it, and at the foot of it was a skeleton.

Ares paid no attention to it, but Jessan glanced at it as he passed by, seeing the bones of the hand curled around a whip that snaked itself through the rest of the skeleton, it's end with it's razor sharp spikes resting near a bare kneecap.

He wondered what it's story was, the light too low for him to even really tell if it was a male or female skeleton, though it was small enough for him to be confident it wasn't one of his kind. "What was that?" He asked Ares, as they entered another corridor, this one slanting upwards.

"What?" Ares asked. "That?" He pointed behind them.

"Yes."

Ares chuckled, as he strode along the rock floor. "What's left of whoever let Xena walk out of here." He said. "Seriously pissed the old crank off."

They both stopped as there was motion at the end of the corridor, and it was suddenly filled with a huge creature, with three heads all writhing with snakes. On seeing Ares, the creature lowered one head and growled, eyes glowing bright red and gold.

Ares lifting his sword up and brandished it. "G'wan! Beat it ya mutt!"

Cerberus growled more loudly, his snakelike tail lashing back and forth as he started stalking towards them. All three heads were now baring their teeth, and the snakes that made up the mane around his heads started to hiss.

"Um." Jessan muttered.

Cerberus broke into a lope, and as he neared Ares stood his ground, and extended his arms. "Don't move, fuzzy."

"Okay."

Ares took a step forward as the three headed beast reached them, and as it twisted it's nearest head and opened it's jaws to bite him he smacked it on the head with his sword, reaching out to grab a handful of the snakes and pulling hard on them. "Stop it!"

The left head snapped at Jessan, who edged back away from it.

Ares slammed his hilt on the head and then punched it, his fist hitting the teeth and knocking the beast backwards. "I said stop it!'

Cerberus roared in outrage, his third head whipping around and chomping down on Ares bicep, shaking it back and forth as he tried to drag the god of war down under his clawed feet.

Jessan hesitated, then he used his own sword, still in it's sheath, and whacked the head munching Ares arm with it. The impact made his hands ache, but he did it again, jerking back when the head released Ares and lunged after him instead.

"Stupid mutt." Ares punched the head again with his hand, then drove his elbow into the middle head, hitting the beast in the eyes. "Get outta here! You're supposed to be hunting for someone escaping!"

With an irritated roar, Cerberus released him and headed up the hallway, one head twisting to the side to try and bite Jessan as he passed.

Ares got in the way at the last minute, shoving the beast past them and up the hall. "Careful fuzzy. He bites you and it's bad, bad news."

"Worse than being in Tartarus?"

Ares paused long enough to make sure Cerberus was going to keep going, then he turned and regarded his companion. "Chill out. You're not stuck here any more than I am."

Jessan stared at him, their heads almost on a level. "No?"

"No." The god of war said. "He can't bring morts here and keep em so don't worry about it. You'll get back to your rugrats eventually."

Jessans knees almost unlocked and he grabbed for the wall to remain standing. “I.. I will?”

“You don’t want to?” Ares looked mockingly at him.

“I do!” The forest dweller got out. “Of course I do. I miss my wife.”

Ares rolled his eyes. “Really?”

Jessan looked at him, actually looked into his face for the first time, the terrified intimidation fading a little. “Yes.” He said. “I love my wife, and I want to be with her.” He saw the eye roll again. “Have you had a wife, ever?”

Ares went briefly still. “Not my gig.” He answered finally. “Can we shut up and move now?”

The forest dweller pushed away from the wall. “Thanks.” He said, belatedly. “For telling me I’m going to go back.”

Ares looked bemused. “Ya made the mutt let loose of my arm. Another couple bites and it woulda come off.” He inspected his bicep. “And ya bit the snake. You fuzzbutts are all right.” He motioned towards the sloping corridor. “C’mon. We’re wasting time.”

They started off again, Jessan this time with a much lighter heart. That only lasted a few minutes though, before they turned a corner and came to a halt, as the hallway filled with dark, misty forms, all hissing, all heading for them.

“Thaaats not good.” Are said. “So listen, Fuzzy. Take this.” He thrust his sword at him, hilt first. “I’ll draw these goons off, you get past em up that way, there’s a portal out.”

“But…”

Ares turned and looked at him, suddenly fierce and overwhelming. “Get the sticker to her.” He said, “She’s gonna need it. You got that?”

No need to ask which her. “Okay.”

“Move. Don’t screw it up.” The god of war then turned and bolted towards the dark horde, raising his empty, bare arms and letting out a yell that echoed familiarity in Jessans ears.

The horde rose up in excitement, and a moment later they enveloped Ares, mist gray weapons decending on him over and over again.

Jessan took a deep breath, and broke into a run, the Sword of War tucked between his arm and side, his fingers curled around the hilt. There was a slim open space on the side of the melee and he took it, his ears folding flat against his head as he heard Ares scream out in pain.

This. He kept running. This was what was in the God of War he could worship. Not battle lust, or success in fighting, but this one thing, this willing sacrifice to do the right thing when pressed to it.

In this moment, he understood why Xena believed in him. Not always with good grace, or a fond heart, but with an elemental understanding of what it was to be a warrior in all the sense of that word.

A bold, brave heart. He hadn’t expected to find that. With a burst of speed he got past the last of the creatures, casting back with all his senses a wholehearted belief in Ares, with no restraint, and for the first time in a while was proud of being one of his children.

**

“Stay behind me!” Xena bellowed, lunging past Gabrielle to deflect a spear. “Damn it, Gab!”

“Okay Okay!” The bard jumped behind her, turning her staff in a tight circle as she watched for more creepies to come up when Xena wasn’t looking.

It was a black, shade army. Grim and intent fighters who were going after Xena’s army with weapons ranging from pikes and spears to flint rocks and broadswords.

They were pressed against the city gates, as Pinu's army had scurried inside and slammed them shut against their erstwhile allies, and now were on the ramparts throwing rocks and bricks at them and laughing their fool heads off.

Bad place to be in.

Xena had fought her way to the very front and was methodically hacking her way through ghouls who just kept coming, the smoke black weapons real enough to decimate flesh and send some of Xena's soldiers to their deaths.

The army had collected themselves though and had formed up around Xena in overlapping triangles, grimly defending themselves while the Amazons dodged between them, facing the other direction and firing up at the soldiers on the walls.

The sun was starting to set, and it was easy to see that the shades were becoming more fierce as the light started to fade, and the snow got thicker.

There seemed to be an endless amount of them, and as Gabrielle moved her staff in a short arc to intercept a long hatchet filled hand she realized that this could end up being one of those days.

The shades were ganging up on Xena, many of them gathering around her as the army shifted and realized, and Bennu led a squad over to join their leader, swinging a big battle ax in a ferocious circle as he cleared three of them out of Xena's way.

It made Gabrielle have to take a step back, and she looked around, spotting a dark figure heading right for her Amazons, through a gap in the lines. With a yell she bolted that way, getting to the attackers just as they got to the Amazons.

Cait had turned at her shout, and the young Amazon dropped her bow and pulled her sword, the sword Gabrielle had given her, and she slammed it into the black fighter in the lead, smashing his shield aside and then pulling her hands back as he lunged.

Too far. She let him come past and then plunged her sword into the folds of the figures gut, the metal causing him to buckle just like he would have if he had been normal flesh.

And it had felt like flesh, as Cait yanked her sword back and turned, putting all her strength into a roundhouse swipe that caught another of them in the neck, and then the body was sent sideways by a hit at the knees from Gabrielle's staff.

Pasi and Solari came up next to the queen, swords drawn, and all of them turned as the remaining two shades arrived. Behind them, Paladia picked up one of the fallen bows and pulled an arrow out of the quiver on Cait's back, nocking it and taking aim.

One of the shades looked over at her, and she saw it's lips writhe in disdain. "Makes a good target." She said, as she released the arrow and watched it hit the thing in the kisser. "Keep your head down, nutcase."

Solari was finishing off the last one and then they regrouped, Pasi going over to retrieve her bow.

"This is gonna suck when it gets dark." Paladia said, to Gabrielle, as she wiped the snowflakes out of her eyes. "We're gonna get squashed."

Gabrielle was scanning the lines. "Probably." She admitted. She turned to the walls and saw them clear, then she caught motion and looked to one side of the gates to see a small door closing to obscure the pair of eyes that had been watching them.

They were right up against the wall now, the gates huge and barred over their heads. Gabrielle put her back to the rough wood, then sidled along the surface until she was on the other side of the small door.

It had a ring set in the outside and she slid her staff end into it, getting the staff flat against the wall and herself then a step back into the angle of the gates.

The Amazons bolted over to flatten themselves against the wall on the far side of the door, and then they waited, Gabrielle with her hands curled around the staff, arms tensed, waiting to jerk hard.

**

Xena almost wished she had a staff. The shades were numerous and attacked in groups, though they weren't exceptionally good at what they were doing and it would have been easier for her to start just knocking them down than spending the time to gut them.

Her men had realized it. The faint sense of fear that she'd detected before was gone, and now her troops were formed up in a wedge around her steadily battling through the enemy attackers and holding their lines.

But it was getting dark. Xena suspected sundown would change the equation and she knocked the head off a tall, shaggy bearded shade and took a step back to look around, trying to find Gabrielle in all the chaos.

A motion caught her eye and she spotted her soulmate and her Amazons making what looked like an attack on a rider door at the wall, and she immediately let out a whistle and made a signal with her fist.

Her troops let out a roar and redoubled their efforts, taking short, digging steps forward and forcing the shades back. It attracted all attention, as she'd intended, and she saw heads emerge cautiously from the top of the wall to see what they were doing.

She stooped and picked up a rock, and let it fly, smacking one of the defenders in the face as he blinked into the setting sun.

"Kill em all!" Xena bellowed, turning and jumping back in the fight, getting a two handed grip on her sword and cutting a swath through the shades. "Send em back to Hades! He deserves these useless cowards!"

Her voice echoed back against the walls, and a moment later, the rider door cracked open, to be yanked all the way out as Gabrielle threw her body weight against the staff and pulled it outward.

A figure in black came flying out, tumbling then coming up on to it's feet and raising a crossbow that was knocked out of his hands a moment later as Gabrielle jumped towards him.

He turned and pulled a dagger from his belt and came at her, and she settled her balance and brought her staff back across her body, her shoulders already twisting to deflect him.

She never got a chance. Cait loomed up behind him and got an arm around his neck, and as he turned in surprise she buried her own dagger into his throat, cutting his jugular as she tilted his head back to expose it.

His scream of surprise was cut off sharply as the blade sliced through his windpipe and he crumpled to the ground as she released him and moved past, coming to Gabrielle's side and looking for another target.

"Got the door!" Paladia was yelling, as she thumped against it. "Hey!"

Xena whistled and a squad wheeled around and spotted the opening, bolting for it as soldiers from the city belatedly realized it was open and tried to get it closed, driven back by Solari and the rest of the Amazons accurate bowry as they knelt behind a slight rocky berm just past the wall.

Xena reached the fallen figure and turned it over, already suspecting his identity as the shades they had been facing stopped, and froze in a sudden mileau. He coughed his last as she touched him, and then, on the wind, they heard an unearthly howl.

"Oh boy." Gabrielle was at her side. "That's trouble." She exhaled. "That was Hade's son."

"One thing at a time." Xena pointed at the door "Take it!" She yelled, as with a crack, and rumble the shades disappeared and the clouds overhead filled the sky with an ominous billowing.

Cait knelt. “Did I do the wrong thing, Xena?” She asked, after a breathless instant.

Xena looked at her. “He was going at Gabrielle with a knife. What do you think I would have done?” She asked, pragmatically. “You didn’t stop to ask him his name and I wouldn’t have either.” She reached for the still form, but as her hands touched it the figure dissolved into the ground, leaving a hollow there covered in dark dust.

Ah well. Xena got to her feet and whirled around, watching the light disappear as her army surrounded the small door and battled inside. One problem at a time.

**

The problem with the door was it’s size. Xena took a step back from the wall and looked to either side, then sheathed her sword to free her hands. She let Bennu keep driving inside the small space, and crouched slightly then uncoiled upward and grabbed hold of one of the thick metal studs that protected the gates.

Gabrielle saw her and grabbed Redder, hauling him around and pointing up. “She’s going to open the gates!”

“Ba…” Redder cut off his epithet. He tapped two other soldiers on the shoulder. “Watch t’general!”

Xena got her boots into position and released her hands, shoving herself upward again and then once more until she was near the top of the wall.

She took a breath to get ready for the fight she knew was coming and launched upward again, clearing the top of the gate just as a soldier came up from the other side.

In mid air, she drew her sword and backhanded it, whacking the soldier’s neck as she caught the top of the gate with her other hand, hoisting herself over it and onto the walkway on the back side crowded with the enemy.

The man she’d hit tumbled backwards off the walk and then she was facing them, hemmed in on both sides by momentarily stunned fighters. “Hello boys.” Xena twirled her sword in her hand, giving them her very best cheeky attitude. “Ready to rumble?”

She got her chakram in her free hand and let out a battle yell, and that echoed from below as her troops picked it up and answered it.

There was a stair cut into the side of the rampart to her right, but it was filled with soldiers and the wall to her left was too. Xena had a split second to decide if she wanted to fight her way down, then she simply leaped out into space with arrows flickering all around her.

The soldiers below had no idea what was coming at them. She landed just on the inside of the gates and cut a swath around her with sword and chakram, sending people flying as she made her way to the locking mechanism.

The men holding the door against her army turned as they realized what was going on, and as they did Bennu shoved his way in, along with a dozen of her men. As she reached the turnstile they reached her.

“Get the gate!” She yelled at Bennu, as she turned to defend him. “G’wan!”

He sheathed his sword and obeyed, grabbing the wooden latches and hauling on them, as the rest of the men grouped around Xena who was battling the front of the city forces, all pouring forward to stop them from opening the gates.

No sign of Pinu. Xena hopped up on a crate and knocked it over, then stood on it’s side as she spotted an archer take level on the roof of a building across from them and let loose the chakram at him.

Behind her, the gates creaked open. A roar echoed inside, as her army pulled them wide and poured in, a wall of arrows coming in over the heads of the heavy fighters.

None of the city people were laughing now. All of the civilians had vanished, leaving behind the army to fight amongst torch lit streets now that dark was falling rapidly.

"Take em!" Xena waved the troops forward, as they poured past her and engaged the retreating city men, some of whom had now broken and run. She stayed on her crate as she sensed Gabrielle's presence, and a moment later her partner joined her, curling an arm around her knee. "Hey."

"Hey." The bard said. "That was a cool trick." She pointed at the gates. "But if there's something out there coming at us hon, you probably should get them closed up again. "

"Ah." Xena sighed, and let out a long whistle. "One of those days, huh."

"One of those days." Gabrielle gave her leg a hug. "Hang in there, babe."

**

Jessan found the exit with less trouble than he thought he would. The streams of black shaded warriors racing out of it, of course, gave him the best clue and he waited for a gap to form in them so he could head towards the sweet, amazing smell of fresh air coming in the crack in the rock.

Was it really so easy? He was wedged behind a curve in the wall, watching Hades troops rush out. Was Hades' realm really just this hole in the ground that things and maybe people could just go in and out at will from?

Wasn't what his mother had taught him. It didn't even match the stories he'd heard from Gabrielle. It was just strange and shallow and…

He felt a shudder go through the rock around him, and then in the distance down further from where he'd come from he heard a wild, angry bellow.

"Uh oh." He cautiously poked his head out, and saw the dark stream waver, then dissipate as though they were dust. He heard another scream nearby and after a moments hesitation he bolted from his hiding place, heading for the opening as the shaking walls started to drop rocks on top of him.

There was no way this was good, whatever it was. He reached the opening just as he saw the sides of it starting to snap shut and one last lunge got him outside, the sharp rocks scraping his shoulders as he hit the ground and rolled over.

The gap was gone. In it's place was nothing but solid rock. But in his head, he felt that other sense erupt back into life, flooding his senses with both powerful emotions and the ethereal substance of the world around him.

He felt Elaini, in a burst of perfect, mutual relief that left him shaking a little.

No, shaking a lot. He had to blink a few times and let his breathing catch up to him before he felt like he was back to himself, the world sounding just a little too loud for him for a minute.

He touched the rock he was lying on, and pressed his lips to it, taking that bare moment to savor life, at last understanding something Gabrielle had once told him about never really valuing what you had until it was gone.

She had meant her, and Xena. In so many levels. His life had never had the pain and complexity theirs had, but in this small way, he got it.

He got it.

Jessan got hastily to his feet and looked around, but there was nothing there save dead trees, snow, and an odd, foggy mist. He took a few steps away from the stone wall and then turned his head a little as he breathed in the air and caught familiar scents.

A few more steps and he knelt, finding marks on the ground, touching them with his fingertips as he recognized hoofprints from Iolaus and Argo.

He looked down the path and nodded, heading down it with more confidence as he decided it was the very path he and Ares had been on when they'd ended up in Hades' realm. So not so far at all, really. Xena had sensed something was at the top of the path and as usual, she'd been right.

Now he just had to find her again. He rambled down the icy path as fast as he could, coming around a bend and halting as a dark figure loomed up ahead of him. He almost passed out, until his nose and eyes resolved the outline and he let out a cough of relief. "Eris!"

His stallion came trotting up to him, obviously as glad to see Jessan as he was to see the horse. He threw his arms around the animals neck and hugged him. "Boy am I glad to see you, buddy." He said. "You've got no idea where I've been."

Eris nickered forcefully, shaking his head.

Jessan looked past him, wondering if he'd see the black horse Ares had been riding, but the path was empty as far as he could see down it. He hauled himself up on Eris, glad to find his gear still in place, and his thick cloak still lashed to the saddle.

They started down the path, but every little while he turned his head and looked behind him, a bit surprised when he continued to see nothing following them.

**

They had captured the lower town. Xena had squads out taking possession of the buildings and supplies left behind when the city folk fled to the inner walls, larger and stouter then the ones they'd breached that surrounded Pinu's palace and the upper wards.

The city soldiers had more run than fought. They'd lost several score to Xena's men, and she herself had only lost fifteen fighters and two horses.

Wasn't bad, for an unexpected siege.

It had started snowing harder and now at full dark the army and it's leader were content to consolidate their gains and plan for sunrise. "Be careful of any supplies." Xena said, bracing her weight against a sawhorse table they'd set up for her inside a big stable.

"Aye." Bennu had a bandaged hand, but was otherwise hale. "Don't like to trust any of it, Genr'l." He moved over to the fire they'd built and warmed his hands over it. "Good day, though."

Well, aside from it all going ass over teakettle, Xena sighed inwardly. "Yeah, let's get ourselves settled and ready for the morning. I'm sure those guys will be ready for us."

Bennu glanced at her. "Not sure any could really be ready for you, Xena." He smiled wryly at her. "Sure they didn't expect you to jump all over that wall then. Nor the little hawk to unplug their mouse hole."

His leader smiled back. "Yeah, we do the unexpected No doubt there." She agreed. "But they'll have time to regroup. I almost kept up the attack, but Gabrielle was right. Better to secure the lower gates for now."

Bennu nodded immediately. "Oh aye no doubt, given the things we were fighting off outside." He said. "But what's the truth here, Xena? What were them things? Sounded like they were going after this lot too, from what they said."

Xena leaned back against a hay crib behind her. "What do I think they were? Hades's army. " She said. "They disappeared when Cait killed that archer, who Ares said was Hades' son."

Bennu considered that thoughtfully. "Be trouble, that killing?"

Xena was about to answer but paused when the stable doors opened up and Gabrielle entered, trailed by her Amazons. "What's the word?"

“They’re behind those palace walls, the bunch of them.” Solari reported. “Different kind than the outer ones, yeah? Taller, smoother walls. They got arrow slits.” She held up a bolt. “And a clear area in front they can cover with em.”

“Hm.” Xena folded her arms across her chest. “Seems the person in the castle figured they’d have to defend themselves from their subjects.”

“But… why didn’t they, I mean the people, join us and fight against Pinu?” Cait asked.

Gabrielle had been carrying saddlebags, and now she dropped them in a dry corner and removed her cloak, shaking off the melted snow from it. “Sometimes you stick with the danger you know, you know?”

“She has a point though.” Xena said. “What’s the closest place we can set up a guard station at?” She motioned them over to the hastily drawn map, and Bennu joined her. “What are these, here?”

“Haven’t gone in those yet.” Cait said. “Pally just made sure they were empty.”

“Empty” Paladia repeated. “Stinky too.”

Xena paused with her fingertip on the hide. “Let’s go check them out.” She twitched her cloak into place and started for the door. The Amazons and Bennu followed her, and with a sigh Gabrielle resumed her cloak and took up the rear.

The outer rings of the city were mostly storage and workrooms, now with doors left wide open and snow covering the boxes and bags left behind in haste. They passed a blacksmith’s courtyard, where some of Xena’s men were clearing the area around a pedestal mounted anvil and a long stretch of shoddily made booths that would in better weather have been sales stalls.

All pretty normal. There was a main street that led up to the inner walls, and the crates and boxes had been tidily piled up to give protection to Xena’s guard, and they had used doors taken off hinges and hides to roof the posts to add some shelter.

Xena returned the casual greetings as she moved forward and nodded in approval at the positions. The heavy troops had taken over a second stable and made the horses comfortable, and the support staff were ensconced with their wagons inside a large warehouse near the outer gates.

All in good order, and to the left as she passed she could hear the hammering of swords being straightened and see through windows at archers replenishing their quivers.

Nearer to the inner gates, the streets changed, becoming broader and the buildings to either side rose to second and third stories, their walls more carefully plastered and iron bars set into every window and around the doors.

The windows were covered with shutters, but no chink of light showed through them and each of the buildings had a shield on the front with some insignia chisled into it.

“Y’know Xe.” Gabrielle was observing all this. “People are pretty much people, no matter where they are. Even Olympus.”

“True.” Xena paused at a crossroads. “That where you meant?” She pointed, asking Paladia over her shoulder.

“Yup.”

The building in question was large and blocky, two story, but without any windows to be seen. The doors in the front were more gates, and there was a second set of barred grids that blocked any approach. These now were thrown open, and one in fact was hanging by it’s hinges.

Bennu went forward with two other soldiers and he held his torch up high, to see letters carved above the doors. “Workhouse.” He turned and reported. “Guess them stories were true then, too.”

One of the soldiers shoved the inner door open, theb turned and put his arm across his face as a fetid stench floated out.

“Toldja.” Paladia said, with a grunt.

Xena tipped her head back and regarded the roof. “Well, let’s see what needs to be done to clean it up That’s a good forward watch and I want it.”

Wrapping folds of their cloaks over their mouths, and raising torches, they moved inside.

**

They got just a few body lengths inside, and to the first row of square cells before all of them stopped in mid walk and just stared.

Even Xena, who had seen more in her lifetime than most.

The inside of the building was lined with small stalls on either side of a central walk, and those were lined with dirty straw and each contained a women in rags, most slightly to extremely visibly pregnant.

“Bigods.” Bennu finally said.

“What is this?” Gabrielle added, on the heels of that.

The women in the stalls just stared at them unseeing. There was no reaction to their presence, not even a change of expression.

Xena took one of the torches from Solari and walked in a slow circle, crossing from one side of the aisle to the other, peering inside the compartments before returning to Gabrielle’s side. “Okay.” She said, finally, then paused.

Gabrielle looked up at her. “Speechless?”

Xena exhaled. “Pretty much. I’ve seen harems.” She said.

“Me too.”

“But not a place where women are being treated as sows.” The warrior concluded. “First for me.”

“Ugh.” Solari’s eyes were wide and round.

“Crap.” Paladia added, shaking her head slowly. She walked over to one of the stalls and went inside, waving her hand in front of the inhabitant’s eyes. “Hey.”

Very slowly the woman turned her head and regarded the tall woman blankly. There were chains on her wrists, and ankles, and she was lying on a slanted surface that was padded with leather.

Solari came over to join her and they stood together for a moment, while the woman stared back at them without any emotion at all on her face.

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips. “Okay hon. You got a plan? I don’t think we can just leave them all here like this.” She uttered in a low tone. “At least we can…” She fell silent. “Crap. What can we do?”

Xena reached up and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Honestly? Nothing right now.” She said. “We don’t have the resources to take care of these people. The best thing we can do is beat that damn army and get someone else to do it.”

The bard regarded her for a moment in silence. “Son of a bitch.” She finally muttered.

“Bennu, check access to the roof.” Xena said, walking past the last of the stalls and looking inside a chamber beyond. “There’s fresh straw back here. Get a dozen people in here and rake the dirt out, then put down new.”

“Should I get one of the healers in here just to check them out?” Gabrielle asked “I know we can’t do much.”

Xena came back over, holding a jug. She unstoppered it and sniffed cautiously at it’s contents. “Nice.”

Gabrielle leaned over and sniffed, making a face. "Oh, gross."

"That what they're given em?" Solari came over. "What is it?"

Xena took another smell of it. "Has henbane in it." She said. "Not sure what else."

Bennu came clattering down the steps that led up to a trap door and dusted his hands off. "Got some cover up there, seems sturdy enough Genrl."

Sturdy enough, but not a place she'd willingly lead the troops through. "Let's see if we can climb up from outside." She said. "Less people in here the better." She looked around again and shook her head. "Damn."

The vacant, uncaring eyes looked back at her, lost and turned inward. No matter what Pinu had said, this city had accepted this in their midst and there was no right to it. Not even in her darkest hours, in the worst depredations she'd fashioned in the bad old days would she have done this.

She walked outside with the rest of them and let the cold, harsh wind scour her lungs of the stench as she stood there with snowflakes dusting her shoulders.

Then she turned and regarded the inner walls, seeing winks of light in the arrow slits and knowing she was being watched in her turn.

"Careful there, champ." Solari edged up next to her. "I know you can catch those things but who wants to take a chance in the dark, huh?"

'Yeah." Xena retreated behind the building. "No sense in that." She joined Gabrielle near the door and they both stood together as the soldiers used boxes to build a ramp up to the roof.

"Xe."

"Yeah?"

Gabrielle had her arms folded and her hood up around her head. "I don't want Dori growing up in a world where that's okay." She looked at the building. "So we need to do something about this."

"Yeah."

**

Cait sat up on the wall looking out over the plains they'd fought over. There were bodies out there, but the cold had just turned them into snow covered lumps, and beyond that, there was nothing but empty darkness.

Behind her, there was still activity going on as the army settled in, and spread out between the two sets of gates, finding nothing much alive save a couple of dogs and in the stable, three cats.

"You going to sit here all night?" Paladia shook the snow off her shoulders and sat down on the walk next to her.

"I'm part of the watch." Cait said. "So yes, of course."

"Uh huh." Paladia hunched over and rested her elbows on her knees. "Still freaked out about that dude?"

Cait sat quietly for a while, her eyes scanning the horizon. "I just think its going to be trouble." She said eventually. "I really didn't think about it when I did it."

"Why would you?" Her partner asked, in a pragmatic tone. "You're in the middle of a stupid fight and some dude is heading towards her nibs with a pig sticker. Like anyone else would have stopped and thought about it?"

"No, I know." Cait acknowledged. "Its just all so odd."

“No kidding.” Paladia straightened and leaned back, stretching her legs out. “Freak city. Like that other place” She indicated the general direction of the inner gates. You see those chicks in there? Just breeders.”

“Terrible, really.”

“Seriously screwed up.” The taller woman concurred. “But you know something?” She looked casually around and then lowered her voice even though they were quite alone. “A lot of guys think that’s okay, you know?”

Cait’s eyebrows arched right up to her hairline. “What?”

“Not like that.” Paladia waved one hand in negation. “But the whole idea that the only thing we’re good for is making babies. You know?” She watched Cait’s eyes widen. “Okay, you were raised by wolves. Maybe not. But I was old enough to know something before I left the pit my village was.”

Cait studied her. “That’s what that man was saying.” She said.

Paladia nodded. “That they’re dudes, so they take what they want. That’s how it works most places y’know? The Amazons, and the two of them nibs are like serious weirdsville to places around. Even in Therma, you know? I heard them.”

Cait exhaled. “I know.”

“Even in Amphipolis, those jerks when they were gone remember?” Paladia persisted. “And if any place should know better about kick ass women, it’s that one.”

Cait scratched her ear.

“I mean seriously. Like it’s not enough they got Cyrene, right? Who goes after dudes with a hatchet.” Paladia counted on her fingers. “They got whatshername.. Granella.. who went all stabby on that other chick. They got the Amazons running around all over the place kicking ass.”

Cait smiled wryly.

“And like that’s not enough, they got Xena and Gabrielle, right, who spawn their own babies and do favors for gods in their spare time.” Paladia concluded. “So if they can’t get it in their heads, what chance do dudes like those have?”

“So, you’re saying that’s just how it is?” Cait asked, seriously. “Because that rather stinks, Pally.”

Paladia shrugged a little. “Yeah.”

Footsteps sounded on the walk and they both looked up, Cait putting a hand on her sword hilt. But a moment later they relaxed, as they recognized Gabrielle’s distinct outline. “Hello.”

“Hi.” The bard sat down next to them, and pushed her hood back, exposing here pale hair to the drifting snow. She had a wine skin with her and now she unslung it and offered it to them. “Solari’s right behind me.”

A moment later, Solari did in fact arrive, and took up a spot on the opposite side of the walk. Here, there was an overhang that provided some protection, and the gates themselves blocked the wind. “So.” Gabrielle said, after they’d all taken a swig of the warmed wine. “What do you all think about this whole thing?”

“Which part of it?” Paladia asked, after a brief, awkward silence. “The god part of it, or the weird ghost dudes part of it, or the freak show in a bowl in that building part of it?”

Gabrielle gave her a wry grin. “Good point.” She said. “Let’s start with the battle we fought in front of the gates here.” She patted the wood with her hand. “What did you guys think of that?”

“Those shade warriors didn’t seem very good.” Cait stated. “I mean, none of them did. We spent more time keeping out of their way so as not to get tred on than fighting them. All you had to do was poke them with a blade and they went down.”

Both Solari and Paladia nodded.

“That’s true. Xe was knocking them over by the handsfull.” The bard agreed. “Seemed like they were a distraction.”

“And that lot in here.” Cait continued. “They could have come out and fought against us and helped them but they mostly didn’t. Just shot a few arrows off.”

“Till you got that door open.” Paladia pointed out. “That stirred em up.”

“And then when big X bopped up on the wall, they all took off. She scared the balls off them.” Solari said. “Like, none of them had any fighting chops, you know? Like here’s this big army, and we saw them riding around in all that armor and all that, but the minute they go up against our guys, they poop their pants.”

Gabrielle nodded. “That’s what my problem is with this.” She said. “It all seems fake. Like nothing’s really real and it’s all for show.”

‘But then we see stuff like that barn.” Solari said, with a grimace. “Gabrielle that was seriously not cool.”

Cait nodded. “Pally and I were just talking about that. About how.. “ She hesitated. “Why no one else seems to see us.. ah.. the way we do.”

‘If that’s how they look at stuff.” Paladia said. “I don’t want to help these guys for nothing. Open the gates and let the creeps in, or set the place on fire, or whatever.”

“Gabrielle.” Solari asked, after an uncomfortable pause. “What do the guys in the army think about that? They’re guys.”

Gabrielle sat back, after taking a long swallow from the wineskin. “They are.” She said. “But you know, it’s a little like the Amazons.” She held up a hand when they all started to protest. “Hear me out.”

They fell silent.

“See?” Gabrielle smiled a bit wistfully. “You all listen to me. I’m the queen only because someone died at the wrong time and tapped me on the shoulder. For no other reason.”

“Gabrielle that’s not true.” Solari said, firmly. “We know you. We have literally seen you kick ass all over this part of Greece. There is no doubt in anyone’s mind now that you’re as much an Amazon as any of the rest of us.”

“Now, yes.” Gabrielle had waited her out. “You all know me. You have had personal experience of my leadership, and seen me display those virtues that you all believe are part of what makes an Amazon.” She paused. “I am the real thing.”

“You bet.” Solari agreed.

“Well, it’s the same thing with that army.” Gabrielle indicated the troops behind them. “They have personally experienced Xena’s leadership, and they have seen her display on many occasions the skills and the abilities of being a fighter the likes of which most of them only ever will aspire to be.” She paused, and smiled. “She is, without a doubt, the real thing.”

They were all quiet for a moment. “But they don’t really see her as a woman.” Cait finally ventured. “Do they? “

“That respect they have? Doesn’t go past her.” Gabrielle agreed with a nod. “They don’t respect women. They respect Xena, and, as an extension, me, and because of that, you all. We are exceptions”

“Ugh.” Cait made a face.

“Yeah.” Gabrielle passed over the wineskin. “I was just telling Xe I didn’t really want Dori growing up in a world where what we saw in that building was accepted. But you know, I don’t know if she’s got a choice.”

Solari shrugged a little. “She’ll be an Amazon.” She said. “Like you said, we’re exceptions.”

“Well, that’ll be up to her. “ The bard said. “It just makes me sort of sad.”

The other three women looked discomfited.

“You think she won’t want to be?” Solari finally asked.

Gabrielle lifted both hands. “She’s too young to even know what that means.” She said. “She’s got some of both of us in her. I’m not going to guess what that’s going to be like when she’s a teenager.”

“Ah.” Solari grunted.

“Xena, as a teenager, became a brigand without a conscience.” Gabrielle said. “And me? I ran away from home as a teenager and fell in love with a brigand without a conscience. Dori?” She let both hands fall to her knees. “She might well accept my right and become an Amazon. She could also run off and join a circus and marry a performing bear. You just never know. “

Her three companions chuckled a little.

“Whatever she does, I want her to follow her heart.” Gabrielle concluded. “I don’t want her to be pressured to become anything in particular because of us.” She exhaled. “I’m just concerned that attitudes like what we see in these people are going to spread.”

“Because of the gods?” Paladia asked, after a pause.

“Yeah.”

Cait rocked forward a little. “Gabrielle, is there something we can do to help that? You said there was something with the goddesses, that we were going to try and fix.”

Gabrielle rested her forearms on her knees. “Well..”

Another set of footsteps made them pause and look up, as a tall figure in a borrowed cloak climbed up onto the wall with them.

Solari eyed her, then moved aside and made room on the ledge.

Artemis sat down and folded her hands in her lap, looking at all of them, then focusing on Gabrielle. “Before we started for this place, you had a plan.”

“We did.” The bard agreed. “But part of that was based on Ares, and he’s not here any more.”

Artemis nodded. “Yes.” She said. “He ran away. He was afraid to fight, to lead you with that famous sword of his.” She said, in a placid tone.

“He didn’t run away.” Gabrielle shook her head. “Hades took him. We were there.” She added. “Hades took him, and our friend Jessan. We really hope they’re okay.”

“Do you really?” Artemis seemed amused.

Cait cleared her throat. “But you know, I think she’s right about him being afraid.” She said. “He did seem to be, a bit.”

“He was. But he wasn’t afraid of the fighting. He’s been liking that the whole time. He loves mixing it up.” Gabrielle said. “He’s afraid he’ll fail. That he wont’ be able to lead us to victory.”

Artemis studied her. “Well done. You understand more than either he or I would have credited.”

“Really?” Gabrielle mimicked her amused response. “So you lied to us because you thought we’re stupid?”

“Most mortals are.” Artemis said. “But you know this yourself, since you manipulate them as you do.” She watched Gabrielle’s face carefully. “So now we come to the plan.” She added. “Do you want to be of use? There is a way for you to be.”

“Of use to you?” Gabrielle asked wryly.

“Yes.” The goddess nodded. “You will serve my purpose. But you will also serve your own.”

The bard studied her face for a long moment, seeing the hardness, and the cruelty there and forgetting nothing of how she’d attacked Hercules, and thrown the Amazons to the wolves. “What do you have in mind?”

Artemis smiled.

**

Xena sat quietly on a crate at the back of the stable, her cloak fastened around her and a thoughtful expression on her face. There was a small fire in the brazier the troops had brought in for her, and outside the door a half dozen of them stood guard.

Gabrielle was outside talking to her Amazons, and Xena knew in a few minutes the bard would return, and they’d have a chance to talk.

Maybe have a chance to rest, but based on the activity she sensed around the barn, more than likely not. She hiked one knee up and circled it with both arms, letting her eyes slowly scan around the space, the stalls having been swept clear of straw, and cleared for her use.

Not much better accommodations were to be found. The army had scattered amongst the small hovels and storerooms, and she could hear the soft clink of a hammer on an anvil and the nickers of horses nearby.

The door bumped open and Bennu and Redder entered, brushing the snow off their shoulders. “Found the water sluice into the city.” Bennu said, with a brief smile. “Tunneled off from the creek like, fore it gets brackish. “

“So we can dip into it before it hits that inner courtyard?” Xena pondered that. “We can water the horses off it at least. “

“And boil it for us.” Redder said. “S’good, Genr’l. We can stop her from getting to them if you have a mind to.”

“Mm.. not unless this siege lasts longer than I intend it to.” Xena said. “I want us past the inner walls by sundown tomorrow. “

Both soldiers nodded.

“Find some barrels full of grain.” Xena said. “And some logs.”

“Going to ram the gates?” Bennu said. “Them are stout, but enough banging will take em down.”

Xena smiled briefly. “We want to focus their attention on the gates” She said. “Opens up other options.” She rocked back a little. “Everyone settled in?”

“Aye.” Redder was warming his hands over the brazier. “Got a squad guarding the door to that .. ah… “ He glanced at Xena. “Some of the healers were in to there. Brought some broth and such.” He went on. “Terrible thing, that.”

“It is.” Xena agreed. “For a lot of reasons.”

“Xena.” Bennu came over and sat down on a crate next to hers. “What’s that all for? Never seen anything like that before. Women having babies, sure. That?”

Redder sidled over and leaned against one of the stall partitions. “Was what the men were askin. Like Ben said, I seen that, and I see whore’s dens, but breeding like that?”

“Good question.” Their leader agreed. “They want the kids, but for what? Maybe they’re just breeding slaves. I’ve seen that.”

“Mm.” Bennu nodded a little.

“Be easier just to make older ones slaves, yeah? Got to wait for this lot to grow up.” Redder disagreed. “Plus take care of em. Got me two at home, not an easy thing.”

Xena sighed. “No argument from me. I’ve only got one and if I had to take care of a dozen of her I’d have run screaming to insanity a while ago.” She straightened up and hopped off the crate. “Guess we’ll need to wait and find out what the deal is.”

The outer door opened again and Gabrielle slipped in, pushing her hood back as she entered and clapping her gloved hands together. She crossed to the fire as the two men got up and made for the door.

Gabrielle waited for the door to close, and then she came over and joined Xena. “No one can ever say you don’t have well trained troops, hon.”

Xena chuckled briefly. “Took me an entire career and half a lifetime to find men with tact.” She said. “So?”

“There’s a small closet near the edge of the wall that has a door.” The bard said. “Inside, there’s a tunnel, partially blocked.”

“Ah.”

“Just like Artemis said.” Gabrielle folded her arms.

They regarded each other. “Feel like a trap to you? It does to me.” The bard said, after a long pause. “Small tunnel, only big enough for a few people. Pop inside and rescue Poseidon’s daughter, get out. Sounds easy.”

“Sounds like we’ll end up pushing a door open somewhere and walk into a spear to the face.” Xena agreed. “Perfectly set up to fit our usual mode of doing things, and matching our inclination to do things ourselves and spare the troops.”

“Mm.”

Xena sat back down on her box and waited, as Gabrielle came over and fit herself between her knees, settling her hands on the warrior’s shoulders. “You know what I think?” The bard said.

“I’m about to.” Xena’s pale eyes twinkled gently.

“I think it is a trap. But I think if we’re going to spring it – it has to be us that does it.”

Xena nodded. “She coming with us?”

“She wants to.”

Xena nodded again. “She wants us to go now.”

“Yes.”

“No.” Xena let her hands rest on Gabrielle’s hips. “Tell her no. I won’t go for it. We’re going to attack with the army tomorrow morning.” She met the grave, sea mist eyes watching her. “And we will. If we go down that tunnel we go down in a time of our choosing.”

“Your choosing.” Gabrielle smiled gently. “You’re the brilliant military strategist in the family.” She leaned forward and kissed Xena on the lips. “Artemis is going to be pissed.”

Xena shrugged.

Gabrielle put one hand against her partner’s cheek, feeling the surface under her fingertips move as the caress made Xena smile, and the gentle pressure as she leaned against the touch.

She could hear people approaching but she ignored the sounds, rubbing the inside of her thumb against the skin over Xena’s cheekbone, a faint bit of roughness from the harsh weather there and leaned in again, tilting her head a bit as their lips touched.

It felt good. She took a breath as Xena’s hand moved from her hip to her thigh and welcomed to the surge of passion that heated her skin and drove out the weariness and the chill.

To the side, in one of the horse stalls their hammock was hung. But she was content to stay where they were and continue the contact even as voices outside started to gather and she could hear a conversation being forcefully held.

It was a little insane, to be in here kissing when something could be going on outside. But when Gabrielle pulled her head back a little and looked into Xena's eyes, she saw a mischievous twinkle there. "You're gonna blow your image, sweetie."

Those beautiful eyes went wide in mock hurt. "What image would that be, Gabrielle?" She asked. "I had a couple, y'know. Not all of them involved my skill with a sword."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Oh yes, I know all about that image, darling."

Xena started laughing. "Hey." She gently poked the bard in the stomach. "Given you snared me can you imagine what **your** image in that area might be by now?"

Gabrielle covered her eyes, just as a knock came at the barn door. "C'mon in." She sighed, turning but unable to move away from Xena since the warrior immediately enveloped her with both arms and pulled her back. "Xe."

"Relax. We're married." Xena said, dryly. "They all know."

The door pushed open, and a half dozen figures came inside, agitation evident, and started towards them. Gabrielle sighed, and leaned back, suspecting they were going no where near that hammock any time soon.

**

"She is afraid." Artemis said, after Gabrielle finished her little spiel.

Gabrielle shook her head. "She just has a different plan." She said. "She didn't say it was a bad idea it's just not on the schedule for now, or tomorrow. We have other goals."

They were in the storeroom the Amazons had taken over. It was small and cramped, but it had a defensible door and sturdy walls. Pasi and Solari had cleared space and set up a small fire, and Solari was kneeling next to it, heating up some water.

Amazon gear was neatly stacked in all the corners, and sleeping hammocks were strung about.

"Freeing Lamia should be the only goal." Artemis said. "Don't you understand? Nothing else matters."

Gabrielle had her hands tucked under her arms and now she hitched herself up onto a shelf and folded them in her lap, tangling her fingers together. "Nothing else might matter to you, but you're not in charge of the army."

"Maybe I should be."

Behind her, Gabrielle saw Solari glance up, a wry grin on her face. "Maybe pigs should fly, but unfortunately they can't. The army is loyal to Xena, because she's loyal to them. You couldn't even be bothered to keep the Amazons out of a war they were going to die in."

Artemis glowered at her.

"And we all, including this army, knows that." The bard said, unimpressed. "Why would they, or us for that matter, trust you to lead us?"

Behind Artemis' back Solari lifted one hand with her thumb pointed upward, and winked at Gabrielle. She then got up and went over to their packs, retrieving a small bag and returning to the fire. "Mint okay with you, your maj?"

"Always." The bard responded. "Only thing I'm not fond of is ginger." She returned her attention to Artemis. "So."

The mortal goddess was watching her. "We have never needed trust." She stated. "That's the difference in being a god. If we must rely on you to trust us, what's the point?"

Well, Gabrielle considered that. She had a point, she supposed. There never had been any talk ever of trusting the gods, not in her childhood, and not even in her early adulthood traveling and adventuring with Xena.

Xena never had trusted them. Gabrielle, when crossing into maturity had learned the hard way that trust could lead to the kind of personal desecration she'd suffered and after that, trusting itself of anything had been hard.

The hardest thing of all had been learning to trust herself again. Gabrielle exhaled silently. "No, that's a point." She conceded. "But we're all too close to this, you know? We've seen too much to say yes, I believe in you lightly."

"Therein lies the impasse." Artemis mused, seeming now resigned. "What Zeus said was true. He told us of the twilight, and how we couldn't stop it for the ages. How other gods would steal the minds of men away from us."

Solari was meticulously crushing mint into the cups near the fire and now she looked up. 'Hey."

Both Gabrielle and Artemis turned towards her. "Hey." Gabrielle responded, with a smile.

"So." Solari lifted the pot off the fire and poured the boiling water over the leaves. "You think maybe being down here's not so bad?" She addressed Artemis. "Cause, y'know, we don't have to worry much about all this eternity stuff."

The soft scent of mint filled the small space, carried on the wisps of steam from the cups. Artemis sat down on a box and extended her legs out crossing them at the ankles and clasping her hands together. "You mean, live this time as a mortal, and then, as you mortals do, end it?"

Solari nodded.

"What would it be like to have an ending." The dark haired goddess murmured. "To not have to spend the endless ages descending into obscurity. That might be appealing." She took the cup that Solari offered her, and sniffed it. "But you do know this twilight means never more will you have many goddesses to pray to."

"I remember the one god, and some others." Gabrielle answered quietly. "Amazons will go into that twilight with you." She took her cup and sipped from it. "That's why Xena wants to put a line in the sand here. She wants to take this place, and make the point that what they're doing is wrong."

"Her goals." Artemis said.

"Yes."

The mortal goddess signed. "Have you heard the saying, win the battle and not the war? You will never win this war. Even in Olympus, we are not equal. Even Hera, who has more power than most, bends knee to Zeus."

Gabrielle sipped her tea, her eyes going a little unfocused as she watched the fire pop and snap in the center of the space. "We'll take the battles." She said, finally. "Because if you don't win them, there is no war."

**

Xena walked quietly from stall to stall, the difference from earlier striking. Most of the women were sleeping, but the ones awake were now obviously awake, scared, and very upset as the henbane potion faded and they began to understand where they were.

Her healers had done what they could. The chains holding them had been removed and most of the women bore bandages around their wrists and ankles.

She attracted their attention at once. Three of the women who had been near the back, in a line together came to meet her as she slowed to a halt. "Who are you?" The first one demanded, clutching a light blanket around her shoulders. "These men will tell us nothing."

Xena studied her. The woman was roughly her age, with thick, red hair and freckles. "My name is Xena." She stated. "Most of these men have no more idea how you got here than you do."

The woman took a step backward. "Xena." She repeated. "The warlord?"

"Retired warlord." Xena replied in a mild tone. "Militia commander of Amphipolis now, and have been a few years."

The other two women had clustered close behind her and were staring at Xena with wary, exhausted eyes. They both had dark blond hair, hanging around them in dank locks and looked enough alike to be sisters.

"What's your name?" Xena asked the red head. "Where do you come from?"

"Racha. I am from nowhere. My family were traveling merchants." The woman said. "We came here to market and then… " She looked around, and then down at herself. "Last I remember I was walking to the dock front with my brother Sev. It was summer. "

"What happened to us??" One of the other women asked. "I know of you. My baby sister ran off to join the Amazons because she'd heard of you."

Xena's brows hiked up a little. "You were brought to this place and then drugged." She said, briefly. "Some folks from Philippi came to us and asked us to help them fight back against soldiers from here who were demanding tribute from them."

"Why this?" Racha said, indicating her pregnant stomach. "Where are those that did this to us?"

"Good question." Xena glanced behind her as the doors opened and some of her men appeared, carrying a trunk. "We found some clothes you can use. When we take the inner city, we can get you some answers to go with them."

"Xena." A low male voice interrupted her. Xena looked up and past the women to see one of her healers coming up from the sloping ramp that led further inside the building. "Found something you better see."

That didn't sound good. Xena circled the women and headed for the ramp, hoping Gabrielle was having a better time of it.

**

Gabrielle left the shelter and started across the space between the walls, her boots crunching softly on the snow covering the stones.

As she passed the watch, they all saluted her, and she waved casually back with her free hand, the other curled firmly around her staff.

It was getting late, near mid watch and she could feel her energy draining out as she threaded her way through the streets towards the inner gates.

On either side of the road she could hear the army making preparations, and just ahead of her, on the roof of the .. Gabrielle exhaled. The brood shed. She grimaced as the words sounded inside her mind, but could not come up with a different way to describe it even to herself.

On the roof, troops were setting up boxes and shelter, settling down behind them and stacking cords of arrows, and as she watched one of them took a bolt out and put it in their crossbow, setting the muzzle on the edge of a crate and leaning to look through the sights.

Two soldiers moving in the opposite direction saluted her casually, then slowed. "Pardon, ma'am."

"Really?" Gabrielle gave them a wry look. "Ma'am?"

Both men smiled back at her. "Gabrielle." The one who'd spoken corrected himself. "We were just going past there, coming down the ladder and we heard a crying sound. I think there's someone in the corner there?" He indicated one side of the structure. "Maybe not feeling so good."

“Oh.” Gabrielle looked into the corner, but could see nothing but darkness. “Let me go check it out. Could be someone stayed behind.” She hefted her staff and started across the ice glazed cobblestones, glad she had thickly felted boots on.

The two soldiers trailed after her, staying within earshot, as she approached the side of the building and angled to one side. The torchlight didn’t reach the area, but as she pulled her hood down and turned her head, she heard the soft sound of someone crying.

It pulled her forward at once, and she paused only to remove a fluttering torch from it’s cresset and take it with her. “Hello?”

The crying stopped, replaced with a shuddering sniffle.

Gabrielle took a step closer, holding the torch higher. “Don’t be afraid.” She said. ‘Where are you?”

“Leave me alone.” A voice whispered out of the darkest of the shadows.

It was a female voice, and it sounded young. “Take it easy.” The bard squinted, and just barely made out a huddled form wrapped in a blanket. “Don’t you want to go inside? It’s freezing out here.”

She knelt carefully down, resting her staff against the wall and held a hand out. “I won’t hurt you.”

She could see the faintest glint of light off a pair of eyes now watching her.

“Who could hurt me more?” The voice rasped. “Just kill me. Put me out of my misery.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle rested one elbow on her knee. “It can’t be that bad. Are you hurt? Can I get one of our healers to look at you?” She had consciously gentled her voice, hearing the pain in the other woman’s. “What’s your name? I’m Gabrielle.”

The eyes stared at her. “No one can help this thing in me.” She said. “Don’t even know where I am.”

Gabrielle moved closer and settled cross legged on the cold ground, pulling her boots up under her. She wedged the torch into the corner of the steps to her right and squirmed back around to face the woman. “Well, I can help you with that one. You’re in the port city called Abbas.”

There was no real recognition at the name. “Abbas.”

“Whats the last thing you remember, before coming here?” The bard asked. “Where are you from?”

“Didn’t have no name.” She responded. “Just a half dozen houses, a well, and a paddock we kept the goats in.”

“Goats.” Gabrielle mused. “By any chance were they black goats with white feet?”

The girl stared at her, blinking. “What?”

“Never mind. What’s your name?”

“Gen.. why did you ask me about the goats? They took them all.” Gen said, obviously distracted. “They came and took everything.. and the last thing I remember was burning.. they were running… and… “ She paused and took a breath, scrubbing her face. “I was supposed to be married that night.”

Gabrielle grimaced, a little. “Gen, I’m so sorry to hear that.” She said. “We’ll make sure you get back there, though. Maybe we can find your people.”

“No.” The girl whispered. “They won’t want me like this.” She indicated her swathed body. “Jerrol wont’ want me.”

“Don’t’ be too sure about that.” The bard gently disagreed.

“He paid Da extra for me a virgin.” Gen said, sadly. “Doesn’t want this. Want me. And probably he’s worms anyway.”

Gabrielle fell silent.

Gen sniffled and wiped the back of her hand across her face. “How did you know about the goats? They were black with white feet. Did you see them?” She asked, then her eyes narrowed. “Did you steal them?”

“No.” The bard answered quietly. “One of our scouts brought a herd in, they found them by the old east road. It runs past where we live.” She paused. “We’re from Amphipolis.”

The girl peered at her. “I heard of that.” She said. “Down the river from where my family lives… lived I guess. “ She fell silent. “I don’t even know what happened to them.” She finally concluded, in a soft voice.

“Maybe they just took what they could.” Gabrielle gentled her voice. “You never know… they could be out looking for you.”

Gen looked at her with bruised, disillusioned eyes. “They won’t look for me.”

The bard drew in breath to answer, then paused as she heard familiar footsteps coming up behind her. She held up her hand in a signal, but to her surprise, Xena ignored it and came over to kneel down next to her. “Hey hon.”

“Hey.” Xena put a hand on her shoulder. “Need you.”

Oh boy. “Okay.” Gabrielle said. “Gen, why not let them take you back inside? It’s so cold out here.” She gathered herself to stand, then realized the girl was staring up at Xena, who had stood up ahead of her. “Xe, this is Gen. She comes from upriver of us.”

Xena nodded at the girl. “If you don’t want to go back in there, they’ll find some other place for you, but don’t stay out here.” She said. “Brock, make sure she’s okay.”

“Aye, genrl.” The short, stocky soldier sat down on the steps to wait, as Xena steered her partner away and back towards the opening of the building.

“What’s up?” Gabrielle asked as they approached the door. “I felt bad for that kid, Xe. She thinks she’s lost everything.”

“Mm.” Xena exhaled. “They found a room at the back of this.” She said, as they walked through, the women’s building now with a clean layer of straw on the floor and far better smelling. “It’s not good, Gab.”

“Worse than this?”

“Yes.”

Oh, lovely. Gabrielle sounded the words inside her head, but remained silent. She followed Xena through a set of doors, and then through a cold barren hallway through another set of doors where she could see several figures standing.

Here, she smelt blood, it’s unmistakable copper scent getting into her nose and making her shiver a little. She was about to cross the threshold when she felt Xena put her hand on her back, not to stop her, but in preparation.

In preparation for her sudden, shocked reaction as her eyes took in the two figures hanging from the ceiling, suspended from hooks buried in their skin, bodies covered in dried blood, bruises and scourge marks.

She drew in a breath, as the torches shifted and she could see their faces, and knew that she knew them. “Ugh.”

Two Amazons. Alana’s consort, and one of her guard, two women they hadn’t liked, and one had attacked her, and still. “Why , Xe?”

“Cut them down.” Xena ordered two of her men, who where standing by in grave silence. She stepped to the side to let them get at the bodies. “Sometimes henbane doesn’t work on people.” She said, after a moment of silence. ‘Maybe they took it out on them.”

The soldiers gently lowered the women to the ground, and removed the hooks. One of them looked up at Xena and shook his head. " Suffered hard. Remember these two from the town, had an attitude on them."

"Yeah." Xena sighed. "But no attitude deserves that." She indicated the horrific damage. The woman's leathers were nothing but filthy strips hanging around their bodies, and by the blood between their legs she knew the damage had been internal as well.

"Aye." The man agreed. "No lass does."

Gabrielle went over and dropped to a knee beside the two still forms. She reached out and put her palm against the ravaged face of the queen's consort, almost unrecognizable from the arrogant strength she remembered. "I'm sorry this happened to you." She said. "As an Amazon, I promise you, whoever did this will pay for it."

Xena watched in silence, seeing the nods of her men.

'And I'm glad your Queen was right about you." Gabrielle concluded. "You didn't abandon her. You didn't turn on her. You died a warrior and I'll make sure she knows that."

They waited respectfully as Gabrielle gently closed the two women's eyes, and stood, turning towards Xena.

Her partner took a bit of her cloak and wiped the tears from under her eyes, the both of them standing in silence together while the soldiers waited nearby.

"Change of plans?" Gabrielle said, finally.

"Yeah." Xena responded. "Take them out and burn them." She told the waiting men. "Turn this place upside down to see if there's any evidence of who did this."

"Aye."

They turned and left the carnage behind, walking together in silence through the breeding barn and back out into the courtyard. The girl Gabrielle had been talking to was gone and now Xena stopped in the middle of the space, the wind puffing against her hair.

"We going down that tunnel, Xe?"

"Yes. Get all your Amazons to go with us, and see if Artemis still wants to." Xena replied. "I'm going to stand the watch and tell Bennu what the new plan is."

They separated and went off in two different directions, while the snow continued its drifting fall.

**

A candlemark later the small, cramped closet was full of women, preparing themselves for a fight. Solari and Pasi were wrapping their forearms with hide protection against their bowstrings, bows laid by on a box along with quivers of arrows.

Cait and Paladia were nearest the rough piece of wood covering the opening they were going to go through folding their cloaks up and wedging them behind a dusty crate.

Artemis was perched on a bench in the back, just watching them.

Gabrielle entered, and walked over to the opening, picking up the staff she'd left leaning next to it. She leaned back against the wall and started adjusting the grip on one end, untying the gut holding it and starting the process of tightening the fit.

There was a sense of quiet intent in the room. Cait removed her sword from it's sheath and applied her sharpening stone to it, the soft scraping rasp seeming quite loud.

The door opened and they all looked up, but it was Xena who entered, unclasping the neck of her cloak as she moved over to Gabrielle's side.

She pulled the garment off and folded it, releasing the scent of brass and leather into the air. "The army's all in place. They'll wait for my signal." She put the cloak on one of the boxes and set her gauntlets beside it. "Gonna be a long night."

For a few minutes she tightened up on the lacing of her armor, twisting to either side and moving her arms to make sure she had clearance and nothing was out of place.

The chakram was already hooked at her hip, and she checked the several daggers at the small of her back and near her shoulderblades before removing her own sword and joining Cait in sharpening it.

"So you changed your mind." Artemis spoke up, after a long silence.

"Situation changed." Xena remarked. She wiped down and sheathed her sword, and then she reached over and removed Gabrielle's dagger, applying the stone to that. "Circumstances change, so do plans."

Cait finished her sharpening and tucked her stone away in her belt pouch, then, as Xena had, wiped down the edges of her sword before she slid it into the sheath fastened on her back. "Ready, Pally?"

"Sure." Her partner agreed. "Like you could ever be ready to go yomping down a tunnel with nothing but trouble at the end of it but whatever."

Gabrielle chuckled softly, as she finished re-wrapping her handhold and pushed off the wall, checking her belt pouch and adjusting the waterskin carried across her body. She walked over to where Xena was standing and wrapped her hands around her staff and leaning on it. "Ready, oh love of my life?"

From the corner of her eye, she caught the faint, wrinkle nose reactions from their companions, but her partner only smiled. "Hey people." The bard waggled a finger at them. "If you got it, flaunt it."

"What the duck does that mean?" Paladia asked.

"Hush." Cait poked her hard in the side.

Xena put the dagger back in the sheath at her partner's waist and dusted her hands off, putting the sharpening stone away. Then she casually leaned over and kissed Gabrielle on the lips, pulling back and lightly rubbing noses with her. "Ready."

Paladia rolled her eyes, then squinted down at Cait. "Don't you get any ideas."

Solari laughed, then stepped aside as Xena shook herself to settle her armor, and then pulled her hair back and fastened it. "Ready as we'll ever be, champ. Go for it."

"Okay. Here's the plan." Xena moved over to the opening and removed the wooden cover, regarding the narrow entrance dourly. "We go down it. Then we find out what's at the other end."

"What if what's at the end is a crapload of pissed off guys with swords?" Solari asked. "They could know about this hole."

"They could." Xena agreed. "So we'll end up fighting."

The rest of the women were gathering at her back. "And then?" Artemis asked, as she slowly moved ot the rear of the line. She had a borrowed sword at her side, and a small ax. "What if the end is blocked? You assume I might be tricking you, but really, there's no time for it."

"It doesn't matter if you are." Xena paused with one hand on the edge of the tunnel opening. "It doesn't matter if they're there. We're going to go through this and make them understand what they did to those women won't lie unavenged."

Artemis studied her briefly. "To what end? Why would you bother, for them, who would not give you a single moment's care? We must rescue Posiedon's daughter. That, alone will make a difference. Don't bother with your silly revenge."

Xena shook her head. “You can run when get get to the end if you want to. I’m going to settle that score first.”

“Yeah. We’ll distract em.” Solari said. “Take off if you want to.” She eyed the goddess. “Seems like you all do that anyway.” She shifted her waterskin and secured it. “Let’s go.”

Xena took a breath, then ducked inside the tunnel. “Stay close and be ready for anything.”

“Right.” Cait got in place behind Gabrielle, and Solari and Pasi got behind Paladia. In silence, they disappeared into the dark opening, only the whisper of hide boots against the stone making any sound.

**

It was dark, and very close. Xena forcefully put that out of her mind as she led the way forward, the faint light from the storeroom rapidly fading. She kept one hand on the right hand side wall and moved steadily forward, placing her boots with silent care.

She wasn’t entirely sure where this was going to end up. But she found herself glad to be moving, glad to be taking the fight forward instead of waiting for the morning.

It could, of course end with having her back against the wall and a thousand men chopping at her. Xena paused to listen, then continued on. The tunnel pitched downward slightly, and she felt the tension in her legs as her body compensated for that.

It could, and with a thousand men and who knows what else waiting it could end up a bad day, but where before she’d worry over that obsessively now she felt a sense of acceptance flood over her to whatever it was the fates had in store for them.

Why worry? She was here by her own will, they all were, they had no one in the world to blame but themselves.

The tunnel started to narrow a little, and she turned her body a little sideways so the rough fabric covering her shoulders wouldn’t catch against the stone. After a moment she felt a touch, then the familiar feel of Gabrielle’s hand against her hip.

Not wanting anything, just for comfort. Xena smiled and continued on, taking a breath of the stuffy air in the space, bringing it in over her tongue and tasting woodsmoke and pitch on it, and at the edges, a mass of humanity.

It had it’s own stench. She could detect, somewhere, something roasting and the pungent scent of hot wine, leaking down the tunnel which had now leveled out, the walls becoming more even and wider apart.

Far above, some opening let through torchlight, and it sent deep shadows along the tunnel. She could see the outlines of the walls in the faintest glints of ochre.

They were under the wall, she decided. To her right, she now heard the tinkle of water and she paused, and let the rest of the group come up even with her.

Artemis edged cautiously forward. “This is the water cistern.” She said, quietly. “Ahead, there is a sacrificial font to Poseidon. To the left, entry into the palace.”

“Who made the palace? Not Pinu. He’s new here.”

“No.” The goddess inclined her head. “Abbas once was a place that Poseidon lived, against the agreement with Zeus and Hades. He had this place built and lived here with a host of nymphs and mermen, taking tribute from all the mortals around.”

“Not recently.” Gabrielle said, after a moment. “I’ve never heard that.”

Artemis smiled briefly. “It was eons in your past, mortal. In the times when those of your kind wore skins and could barely read.” She said. “Zeus and Hades came, with the Titans, and threw him and

his people back into the sea, and then my father built a wall out in the water, to protect the city from him coming back."

"I see."

"For many years, none lived there. Until your kind could build and care for the walls, then some were drawn here and have been ever since." Artemis concluded. "For a time, they gave tribute to Poseidon. Then one night a storm came, and killed many, and they blamed him for it."

"Ah." Xena grunted.

"You mortals are fickle." The goddess commented. "You have short memories, and only give us tribute when you want something."

Everyone was quiet for a moment, then Gabrielle shifted a little, leaning on her staff. "That's true." She admitted. "I guess that goes both ways."

"It is." Xena said. "But let's save that for another time." She pointed to the hallway on the left. "Lets go."

**

The hallway stopped at a set of steep stairs and at the top of them was an ironclad door whose wood was ancient enough to come away easily at Xena's touch. She put her hands flat on the surface and closed her eyes, feeling vibrations through her palms.

They were out there. She could hear them, and feel them and smell them, the sharp tang of sweat exuded fear easily recognizable.

"What are you waiting for?" Artemis asked, standing just behind her and next to Gabrielle.

Xena turned her head and smiled with no humor. "Want to go first?"

Even mortal, there was flatness to Artemis' eyes as she looked back at her. "I thought you were in charge. That's what your little storyteller said."

"She wasn't asking you to take over." Solari spoke up. "She just wanted you to put your puss out first if you're so hot for it."

Xena turned and leaned against the door. "There's a force out there waiting for us." She said. "So here's the plan. You archers get back down the steps and use them as cover. I'm going to cut a hole in them."

She turned back around, aware of Gabrielle coming up next to her. "Ready?"

"As I ever am for these things. Be careful, Xe." Gabrielle gave her a one armed hug. "Don't make it be one of those days."

"Those days?"

"You know what I mean." Gabrielle leaned briefly against her. "With all the crap going on no telling where we'd end up this time and hon, I'm really just not in the mood."

"Not in the mood?" Xena studied her partner's profile, chilled and tired and visibly exasperated.

"Not in the mood to have my heart broken today." The bard said, simply. "I want to stay in this world and get through this mess and go home."

"I get it." Xena returned the hug, aware of the watching eyes behind her and not giving a damn. "Stick with me. I think it's gonna be rough out there."

"Like a tick." The bard promised. "Give em heck, Xe, and don't take chances."

"Do my best." Xena drew her sword and reversed it's hold, triggering the latch and kicking the door open.

She was at ground level. There were hundreds of soldiers poised to attack. The walls were full of archers. A huge bonfire was burning in the center of the square open space and she could feel the pressure of sound as the enemy army took a breath to let out a yell.

She beat them to it. With a resounding bellow she leaped out into the first rank of soldiers and got her sword in a two handed hold, meeting the first one and cutting the weapon right out of his hands. "Die, ya little bastards!"

Gabrielle got herself out and in position as the men started to react, belatedly returning the yell and sending a horn call after it.

Though they were evidently waiting for them the reality of Xena appearing and charging into battle had caught them by surprise. Gabrielle dodged a soldier reacting to her partner's presence and shoved her staff into his gut, knocking him backwards.

Cait was behind her. The young Amazon had a dagger in each hand and she used her youth and quickness to evade an attacker, slashing him in the side as he turned with her a little too late. He swung his mace back in the other direction and she dove for the ground, reaching up at the last moment to hamstring him before landing and rolling.

He pitched to one side and Xena kicked him out of her way, sending him sprawling back to Cait's feet where he was gutted by her driving both blades into his side.

Paladia was warily engaging a soldier just to the right of Xena, whacking at him with the battle ax she'd picked up with workmanlike skill, making sure she kept out of the warrior's way as she guarded her flank.

Gabrielle could hear the steady twangs as Solari and Pasi fired their arrows, and the faint breeze as one came past her ear to stick in the chest armor of the man she was facing, and she parried his sword against her staff and then swung upward and knocked his helmet half off.

Solari didn't waste the chance, and the man was dropping his sword and clawing at the arrow protruding from his neck an instant later.

Gabrielle swept his feet out from under him and ducked to the side, her nape prickling as she sensed movement behind her. She took a step back and looked around, then realized where the movement had come from.

Artemis, now standing at the edge of the stairs, just staring at them.

No, Gabrielle reversed her thought. Staring at Xena. She tried to figure out what the expression on the mortal goddess's face meant, but had to turn around again as the battle swept towards her once more.

Xena was plowing through the troops, a dozen men already dead at her feet as she let out another booming yell and bashed a shield aside with her fist as she plunged her sword into the chest of the man she was fighting with.

They couldn't keep up with her. Gabrielle whacked another man stumbling back from her partner's savage attack. She moved too fast, and hit too hard, and though they were vastly outnumbered the space was just small enough that only a limited line could oppose them at one time.

Archers on the walls let loose, and she ducked, lashing out with her staff and knocking aside two arrows, but that was all that got through the flickering blur that was Xena's sword, weaving back and forth in an intricate pattern that sent broken shafts in all directions.

A moment later, arrows came back in the opposite direction, low and gut level and two more of the enemy collapsed.

Xena laughed, and moved her sword in a fast, chopping motion, as three men lunged at her.

Cait was holding up her end of the fight on Xena's left, leaving her sword sheathed and taking up her daggers in the close in work, smaller and faster than the soldiers around her who were unable to get their shields down in time to block her strikes.

Gabrielle took advantage of a gap in the melee to get into position behind Xena, seeing the quick glance over her shoulder as her partner sensed her presence. She ducked a pike and countered it, catching motion in her peripheral vision. "Xe!"

"See him." Xena switched her sword from her right to left hand, as she watched Pinu appear on the wall, his sword in his hand.

His men yelled as they spotted him and let out a horn blast. He was in full armor, a different set than he'd ridden in, this heavy chain and plate, meant to fight and not to be on horseback in.

It would come to the two of them, of course. Xena took advantage of the men being distracted by his presence to cut the head off one, and grab it by the hair as it flew off, leaning back and whipping her arm forwards to toss the head into the crowd.

It bounced once and then went into the bonfire, spitting and crackling as it caught fire and sent brief bursts of burnt blood scent into the air.

She could see how angry Pinu was, and so she kicked one of his soldiers back and let out a whistle at him, waving him over with a casual motion. "C'mere, little man. Come get your ass kicked."

She was hoping he would take the bait. It would make it easier on everyone.

Except Pinu, of course.

The army was clearing space for their leader to come through them and the arrows stopped heading their way as he bolted forwards toward her and his men fell back in relief.

"Good." Paladia let her ax rest on the ground. "Now we're getting somewhere."

Artemis edged out into the open space, watching as the big male mortal bounded into the cleared area and attacked Xena with gusto. He was bigger than his adversary, and he looked powerful and passionate, the embodiment of a warrior born.

He raised his sword over his head and swung at her, letting out a wild yell as he did and Xena met him with a rush of dark energy she could feel even mortal as she was. The swords clashed and sent sparks flying and then they were facing off, trading swipes and blows in a deadly dance.

She had always admired the sword. She had lost interest in the Amazons in fact, when they slowly moved from blade to bow, only the most hard core of them keeping to the art of it. The rest of them hiding in trees and skulking along forest paths.

She had grown envious of Ares, with his armies and gallant warriors. It had been easy to be glad to think he had gone to be with his mortals forever, leaving all those wonderful men to her.

She would have easily defeated Athena for the Sword of War and it would have been glorious. Two for one! Ares dead and if Xena had taken the Sword Zeus would have decimated her – glorious.

But no. That idiot mortal woman had spurned the honor, saved Ares, and then been the cause of her and Athena's utter humiliation.

Well.

Artemis tightened her grip on her borrowed blade as she waited, watching the two.

Ready to act.

Pinu was good, and skilled and unafraid. She could see the strength in his arms, and he had youth and speed.

His sword came down on Xena's in a motion calculated to force her back and down and instead the motion was stopped mid way, Xena holding position just long enough to make the point she could and then she shoved him back instead, legs coiling and releasing like a beasts.

It surprised him. Artemis watched intently as Xena followed that up with a frontal attack, her sword moving so fast it was nothing but blur and had to admit, it had surprised her too. In an eternity of watching uncounted champions fight for her favor, this was something new.

There was something different about how Xena moved. There was a sense of power, and a lack of fear there very uncommon in mortals and as she watched that planed face tensed into a smile as she forced Pinu back again, and again, Artemis saw at last why she'd always held such a fascination for Ares.

Many mortals fought. Most fought for money, for gain, or for their lives having no choice. Ares godhood, though, centered around a sensual joy in battle, in bloodlust and Xena had that, to a complete degree.

She was absolutely loving this fight.

Artemis slowly edged around until she was just behind the two fighters, all the rest having stepped back and formed a circle to watch. She tightened her grip on the sword in her hand, knowing the men of Pinu wouldn't know her from the rest of the Amazons.

Their eyes were fixed on the fight. She looked past Xena and met Pinu's eyes, then she gathered herself as he started working the battle towards where she was standing.

It was going to work. All it would take was one thrust. But it had to be soon because it was obvious to her that ferociously as Pinu was fighting, his opponent was merely having fun.

Relaxed and breathing easily, Xena was running him in circles, the sound of their swords scraping and clashing loud in the otherwise silent courtyard. The torches around the edges lit the fight in fiery gold, the snow falling over them causing the occasional golden flicker.

The fight moved sideways, Pinu working hard to angle his opponent around and then start the motion back towards the Amazon lines.

Artemis waited, her breathing also even and relaxed, her eyes focused on the tall, dark haired woman whose back was moving closer and closer, not bothering to worry about those behind her she was sure of the loyalty of.

Mortals. Artemis smiled. She put one hand against the wall to brace herself and then she moved her sword back a little, twisting her body a little, ready to unleash, and swing, the brass and leather surface now even with her, and with a hiss, she moved and struck.

And the next moment, something smashed into her head with such force she heard a terrifying crack from it just before it all went black, and the stone hit her as she fell flat on it.

Xena watched Pinu's eyes shift and then widen and she stepped forward, aware of the drama at her back as she took a step forward and then launched herself upward, half turning in mid air and kicking out to catch the man on the chest and send him stumbling backwards.

She followed it up in a bound after she landed, kicking his sword out of his hand as he tried to get up onto his knees, sending it flying into the crowd.

"Augh!" He grabbed his wrist, baring his teeth in pain. "The gods take you!"

Xena sheathed her sword and bounded over to him, grabbing his leather surcoat with both hands ad hauling him up to his feet and then off them. She shook him like a rabbit, then threw him away from her and into some of the men, who reacted at last surging forward with angry yells.

She drew her sword again and set herself, as Cait and Paladia came up on either side of her and the crowd rushed them, just as she heard the sound of boots at her back as the rest of the Amazons and their queen arrived at her back.

And then a horn sounded. The Abbas soldiers jerked in reaction and turned as a figure mounted the steps behind them. It was a woman, small, with auburn hair and dressed in a white toga with a dark belt of something that looked like seaweed.

She lifted her horn to her lips again and blew it. "She waits!" She called out after the horn faded. "Men of Abbas, she calls you to bring her sacrifice!"

The men at the back turned and started rushing up the steps, abandoning the field as the rest hesitated, unsure of what to do. Pinu got up and wiped the blood from his mouth, glancing past Xena and then starting to move away from her. "Leave them." He said. "We will come back after the sacrifice, and finish this."

The archers let off one more volley, but most of the shafts went wide, and those that didn't were knocked down by a casual swipe of Xena's sword. "Let's go." She turned and swept the area, as Gabrielle came up to her. "Heard you take her down,"

"She was about to stick that sword in you." Gabrielle said, with an angry look. "Stupid piece of.."

"Yeah, figured she had something going with Pinu." Xena waved the rest of the forward. "Leave her. Let's go see what this sacrifice is."

Solari came up, having gathered handfuls of arrows and replenished her quiver. "Nice, champ." She glanced past Xena. "Got a half dozen of em."

They were starting forward when the all stopped, hearing the sound of a baby screaming in fear splitting the air, followed by a roar of voices and the sound of that horn.

Xena paused. "Cait, you and Paladia go open the gates." She ordered. "We might need what's on the other side." She said. "The rest of you come on. Let's go find out what that was."

"Why do I get the feeling I don't wanna know?" Solari asked, pulling her sword out.

"Yeah, me neither." Gabrielle muttered. She glanced behind her at Artemis's still, silent form, then followed at Xena's heels as they headed for the steps.

**

Jessan had to pull Eris to a halt and tuck behind a thick clump of dead brush, turning the stallion's back to the wind as they both took a breather.

The snow was coming down so hard it was impossible to see. But Jessan had no trouble knowing which direction to go, his own innate senses clearly painting the way towards the city with it's thundercloud of emotions.

But they needed a moment to catch their breaths, and clear the crusting of snow and ice off their faces.

Jessan removed a cloth from his saddlebag and gently did just that for his horse, clearing the coating of snow off the Eris's eyes and ears as the animal pushed his face into his battlecoat, breathing into his fur contentedly.

He could feel the pressure of the wind against his back and he was glad for his cloak, whose hood protected the back of his head from the driven snow, which was now like small pellets rather than the soft fluffy drift from earlier.

Jessan lifted his head and shaded his eyes, but he couldn't see more than three or four bodylengths ahead of them, everything past that just a swirl of snow amidst steadily building banks of the same substance.

He pulled a roll of smoked meat from his saddle bag and chewed it, reaching a weathered apple forward for Eris's inspection.

The big animal nibbled it from his palm without hesitation, crunching it as he blinked his eyes free of a few more flakes of snow.

It would be dark soon. Jessan took a drink from his waterskin and washed his meatroll down, knowing they wouldn't be stopping again likely until they reached the city however late that happened to be.

He let his hands rest on Erin's saddle, gazing thoughtfully at the hilt of the Sword of War lashed to the side of his saddle. It was plain, no more ornate than his own, the hilt heavy and balanced by two flaring guards on either end of the guard and a single gem in the pommel.

Impossible to really see what type of jewel it was, or even the color in the misty gray air but Jessan had a sense that it might glow when in the right hands, or maybe it was something he was remembering from when they were in Hades realm.

Except he really didn't want to remember that, or think about what might have happened to the Sword's owner. He touched the hilt with his finger, studying the metal of it, not silver or gold but something with grayish matte finish that showed no signs at all of wear.

He didn't feel anything, touching it. After a moment he finished up his snack and took another drink, then pulled himself back up into the saddle, settling his cloak around him and letting it drape over Eris before he guided the horse out from behind the brushy drifts and back out into the storm.

They were only traveling a few minutes though, before his ears caught galloping hooves coming at him from behind, and he drew his sword and turned Eris, letting out a growling roar of warning.

From the snow came a figure on horseback, right at him without any sign of stopping. Jessan let out another bellow and leaned forward, tightening his knees on Eris's sides as he felt his stallion rear up a little and prepare for battle.

He could see the outline of the rider, and a raised arm with what appeared to be an ax in it. Jessan braced himself and angled his sword to meet the strike, feeling a shock as it impacted and the ax blade slid down his with a screaming grate.

He caught it at the guard and shoved back, sensing a dark and malevolent intent in the figure attacking him. They closed again and exchanged strikes, and Eris swiveled as the figure passed, and struck out with both hind legs at the attacker's horse.

The beast screamed in outrage, and bit at Eris's shoulder, but Jessan whacked it in the head with his sword hilt and as his enemy swung at him he released his reins and swiped across the figure's body with his claws extended, catching on cloth and leather as he ripped past.

He heard the suddenly indrawn breath and then saw the hand coming back, reaching for the sword hilt strapped under his right knee. He grabbed the reaching fingers and clamped his hand closed, at the same time shoving his sword hilt back towards the stranger and pushing him backwards

The stranger tried to yank himself loose, but Jessan clamped his knees down and resisted, suddenly pulling the arm closer to him and ducking his head to sink his fangs into the wrist of the hand he was holding.

His opponent let out a yell of surprise and tried to slam his ax on Jessan's head but he was released too quickly and his blow overbalanced him on his horse, who plunged away as Eris reared and came down with his big hooves smacking the man's leg.

Jessan spat out his mouthful of flesh and shifted his sword to his other hand, turning Eris and backhanding the weapon across his opponent's neck as he struggled to regain his balance.

He felt the blade bite in, but the man shifted frantically and got away from it, then spurred his horse hard and headed back off into the storm.

Jessan debated chasing him, then decided getting a move on himself was a better idea. He unhooked his waterskin and took a mouthful, swishing it around and then expelling it with a cough, ridding his tongue of the sharp copper taste of human blood – always richer and stickier than any other prey.

“Pah.” He got Eris pointed towards the city again and urged him on. “What in Ares’ codpiece was that, Er?” He asked the horse, who snorted. “One dude? Just out here in a storm?” He shook his head and spat again. “Of course I’m just one dude out here in a storm, right?”

Eris snorted again, and sped up, as the wind shoved hard at them from behind.

**

Xena vaulted to the top of the steps, sword ready, and swept her eyes around as she started to move down the other side into shallow space that extended towards the sea and a square pit surrounded by torches.

The city people were all clustered around the pit, the soldiers running full tilt towards a set of steps going downwards.

Gabrielle caught up to her. “What’s going on?”

“Beats me.” Xena hesitated, debating whether to follow the soldiers or not. Even the archers had abandoned the walls, leaving them alone and unregarded.

Nuts.

They heard a baby’s scream again, “That way.” Xena pointed with her sword and they took off after the soldiers, towards the broad steps leading downward again into the entrance of what seemed to be a temple.

As they reached the top of the steps the door at the bottom opened, and the soldiers running stopped and scrambled out of the way as Pinu appeared, a bundle in his arms. “Make way… I’m coming!”

“What the Hades?” Solari peered past Xena’s elbow. “Does he have kid there?”

Pinu was bolting up the steps, ignoring the presence of the women, ignoring the soldiers, focused on the path to the pit where now there was white clad figure and beside her, a tall man also in white carrying a horn.

Behind them, the pit yawned, and after a moment they heard an animal sound come from it, screaalling and wild and unfamiliar.

“What was that?” Gabrielle asked.

Xena bolted forward. “Don’t know but I think he’s gonna pitch that kid into whatever it is mouth.” She jumped from the edge of the square plateau onto the steps, and lunged after Pinu who was almost at the pit.

“Stop her!” The soldiers now realized what was in their midst and they turned and started to get in the way. “Quickly!”

The women charged through the crowd, battling their way through the first line of soldiers who were turning to stop them while the front lines closed around their leader.

Pinu rushed up the wide steps as the man standing near the pit blew the horn again, and as he did, a greenish light lit up the depths of it, and out of that came a long, sinuous, speckled tentacle.

Xena yanked her chakram from her hip and took two steps, then leaped up into the air and while airborne and elevated above the crowd let loose of it, sending it spinning towards the pit. It sliced through the tentacle and curved back around.

A high pitched keening immediately sounded, making Xena grimace and most of the crowd reach hesitantly for their ears. Pinu stumbled to a halt and looked down into the pit, then raised the bundle he had in his hands over his head.

The chakram, curving tightly, struck him in the chest as he was about to let go and sent him tumbling backwards, it’s sharp edge embedded in his chest.

The woman in white screamed. The man with the horn turned, and then scrambled back as another tentacle emerged and writhed towards him. The keening turned to an angry scream and now the crowd started to panic, running and jostling each other.

It gave Xena and her team a chance to move forward and they did, the warrior reaching Pinu and his squalling bundle at the same time as the tentacle whipped towards them, turning it's underside over and exposing heavy, sharp spikes.

"Xena!"

"Got it." Xena leaped over Pinu and brought her sword down on the appendage, feeling the shock as her blade struck the creature and turning her head as she cut through it and it released a burst of foul liquid that splattered across the stone floor, drenching the woman in white.

She screamed in pain, a sound that got louder and louder and more frantic as the seconds passed.

Xena landed and rolled to one side to avoid the creature, coming back up onto her feet and bolting in the other direction back towards the Amazons. She paused only long enough to grab the bundle that had fallen from Pinu's hands and kept going, hearing terrorized screams now all around her

Gabrielle was, predictably, yelling her name.

The Amazons were kneeling and shooting past her and when Xena got to them and vaulted over their heads, somersaulting and twisting in mid air to come down facing the pit she knew why.

The creature, for it was a creature, had poked a large, liquid eye over the edge of the pit and was glaring around, one tentacle wrapped around the woman in white, who was now limp and unresponsive.

'That stuff get on you?" Gabrielle asked, checking her over.

"No." Xena hastily sheathed her sword and opened the bundle, finding an infant inside, tiny and squalling, with a pale cap of hair and sturdy fists. "He was going to sacrifice this kid to that thing."

They heard running boots behind them and Xena turned to see her army bolting up over the steps and onto the plateau.

"Xe." Gabrielle said, abruptly. "Did I just put this together right? They're breeding those women for this?"

Xena handed her the infant. "Hold onto this for a minute. I'm going to… " She stopped, as the creature reared itself up and a gap opened in it's front, a beak really.

The city people started running away, but as they did the creature spit up a wave of black liquid at them, and the scent of sharp acid rose as it splattered everywhere.

Those it touched went down in agonized thrashing and it started spreading outwards, rolling over the ground like a sludgy fog.

"Get back." Xena ordered, tapping Solari on the shoulder. "Everyone back! Back to the gates!"

The creature hauled itself up again and spat, this time up into the air and in a half circle as it thrashed back and forth. As the liquid touched the stone it started withering, and as Xena and the army escaped across the plateau and down the opposite stairs, it flowed after them and also down the steps where Pinu had come up from.

The stone itself was dissolving.

"Xe.." Gabrielle glanced behind them. "it's going down there."

"Can't help that." Xena put her hand on the bard's back. "Run, babe. We can't stop this."

They reached the gates and then went through them, and up the slope to the outer wall. The army slammed the gates as they went past, and on the upper slope they stopped and looked behind them.

"Xena, the lassies." Bennu gasped, coming to a halt next to his leader. "Can we get them?"

Xena drew a breath in, as Gabrielle reached out ot her and heads turned to focus on her intently. She looked at the oncoming sludge, and the slope, and the door and took a mental moment to just stop, and understand that the only reason she was getting that question was because these people had come to expect that of her.

Not so much because of Gabrielle's stories, or because of her building an army, but because over the years she had truly become something different from what she'd started out to be. "Move fast." She directed them. "We don't have much time."

Two dozen soldiers bolted for the room where the women had been chained. Another dozen support people were getting places in the wagons ready while they all watched the walls start to crumble under the acid's assault.

"Xe." Gabrielle pointed.

A dark bulk was rising up over the wall, it's beak foremost as tentacles curled around the buildings and decimated them.

"Oh, that's not good."

'Neither's that." Gabrielle grabbed her and turned her, pointing to one side of the slop leading up to where they were. In the falling snow there was a limp figure near the wall, right in the path of the creeping black goo and the creature that was making it. "Xe we can't let her die like that."

No, no they really couldn't. Xena sighed and ducked her head, kissing her partner on the lips. "Wish me luck." She said, just as she exploded into motion, coming up to full speed as she headed for Artemis' still body.

Could already be dead, she told herself as she ran, gauging the advance of the goo and the tentacles that were now writhing towards her as the big empty eye spotted her. The beak opened and a spurt of sludge flew through the air, but this close the clumps were large and she could avoid them.

But the creature now sped up, slithering over the top of the rise and through the gates and starting down the slope at a frightening speed. The tentacles raised up and stiffened and the spikes appeared heading right towards her.

She heard a yell behind her, and then the sound of running boots. "Gabrielle, stay back!" She returned the yell. "Don't make me have to carry both of you!"

Spikes.

Goo.

Xena reached Artemis a half step ahead of the sludge. She reached down and grabbed the mortal goddess and jerked her body up and onto her shoulders and then leaped up as the acid poured where she had been lying.

She reached the wall and kicked off from it, uncoiling up and away and sensing the closeness of the creature as she twisted and turned in mid air, coming through the coil of a tentacle as it started to close around her.

Damn it. Xena clasped Artemis' hands in one of hers and drew her sword with her other hand, placing herself in time and space as she slashed out and back and cut through the coil just as the points of the spikes touched her.

Then she was through and turning and tumbling and cutting as she went down, wrenching herself savagely upright and looking down to make sure she was going to land on snow covered rock and not black goo.

A flash of color came into her peripheral vision and she landed, almost going sprawling as the snow left her slipping and sliding forward through a cluster of women all working hard to get between her and what was behind her.

"Shoot!" Solari was bending bow herself, aiming at the creature's big round eye.

Bennu and Redder caught Xena out of her slide and kept her upright. “Take the woman, Jax! Quick like, get ‘er on the wagon.” He patted Xena on the shoulder. “Think we should get out, Genr’l. There’s no good here.”

The Amazons were backing away from the creature, who was squalling and lashing out with it’s tentacles, save the one that had been cut in half and the end of which was flopping around on the ground spurting fluid.

“We got all the women?” Xena asked, wiping her sword down, as she started walking backwards. “Amazons! Back up!”

“Don’t got to tell me twice.” Paladia’s eyes were large as duck eggs, and she had hold of Cait’s cloak as she joined Xena in retreating. “C’mon, nutcase!”

The troops and wagons were already on their way out, and the scouts formed up around Xena as they acted as a rear guard. The creature slid down the first part of the slope after them but then halted, spitting up a huge blob of good that struck the ground and, if it had been less covered in snow, would have spattered all of them.

As it was, it just steamed through the ice and started eating through the stone, and they slammed the outer doors shut and started away from the city as fast as they could travel.

For just a minute, before the guard started sounding their horns, and whistles lifted up, in a shrill frantic tone.

“Xena, troops ahead!” Redder came riding back to where Xena and Gabrielle were mounting up. “Looks like those darkies again.”

Xena sighed and urged Argo forwards, with Iolaus right behind her “Gonna be a long ass night.” She shook her head. “Son of a bitch.”

“Maybe we can chase them off again.”

“Maybe Hades has another kid out there.”

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Xena got the army in place and ready in a rush of thundering hooves and soldiers yells, putting the wagons up front and getting every archer behind them.

The dark army was about on top of them when they heard, behind them, a thundering boom and as Xena turned, she saw the walls of the city shatter into chunks, the burning fluid rapidly making mush of them as it poured out towards them.

Biting off a curse she sent whistles up, changing her plan as she ordered the center of the army to split and turn back on either side, rapidly opening up the center. “Move move!” She let out two shrill blasts and bolted for the far side of the lines, where Gabrielle was herding the Amazons.

Men were running now, hauling on reins as they got out of the way, order turning to chaos as arrows started to fly, coming in waves from the onrushing shades, all dark gray shafts, with glittering arrowheads and black feathers starting to land on the ground, in wagon sides, and sometimes in bodies.

The dark army came thundering through the hole in the center of the lines, bowling over the few stragglers and started to turn and engage them, not realizing the dark ooze was anything to worry about until they hit it.

The screams of the horses lanced through Xena as she watched them stumble and go down as the substance ate their hooves out from under them.

It was painful to watch, and so she turned and directed the troops instead, making sure her own men and horses were well clear of it.

“Xena!”

She whirled Argo in place, the mare rising up on her hind legs and turning in her own length. The enemy army was flailing and stumbling in place and the creature reared up and threw itself forward, landing on two score of them amidst screams of terror from men and beasts.

"Keep moving!" She stood up in her stirrups and bellowed. "Move! Move! Bennu! Take the right half and move north! Get behind them! I'll take this half!"

Bennu signaled with his fist then their army bolted, streaming away from the city on either side, Xena's half of the troops moving headlong back towards the river they knew was somewhere out there in the snowy dark.

But then the creature retreated, and the dark shades got themselves under control and split apart, leaving behind the port city and going after Xena and her troops.

Behind them, they left a plateau of horror, and broken stone as the creature slithered back up the slope in an anxious hurry, and as Xena turned her troops to meet the attack, keeping control of men and beasts by sheer will the clouds broke apart.

Through the hills due east a layer of pearly fog was suddenly visible as behind the cloud cover there was a glimpse of light, and the air went from black to gray as dawn came abruptly to the scene.

The dark forces dissipated just as abruptly, fading into the mist as the snow lessened, and with a thunk of hooves against cold, hard ground, Xena's troops came to a standstill, there on the plateau now looking desolate and horror struck.

The city walls were silent. They were crumbled and broken, the buildings inside were likewise. No living thing was seen anywhere, save themselves.

The wind was blowing at their backs and Xena was glad. She could see the lumps of fading flesh that once were horses, their riders escaping back into Hades' realm untouched but leaving them behind.

The black goo settled, seeping into the rock and staining the ground before the walls, the last flapping of the creature's limbs echoing back softly as it went back to where it had come from.

From across the ground, Xena saw Bennu starting to lead his portion of the troops back towards them, carefully skirting the stained ground as the sun rose from behind the far hills, revealing a dull gray sky, and shell shocked faces.

**

The army was scared, and Xena knew it. She'd kept everyone moving towards the river, but between the storm overhead and the long night without sleep the edges were starting to show. The one bright spot was that the horses were rested, having just been hobbled after they got into the city earlier the preceeding night.

Soon she'd have to decide if they would stop, or keep them going, marching back along the plateau to the woods and beyond, before the sun fell below the horizon again.

Ugh.

She could see Gabrielle with her hood up and her staff in her grip as she guided Iolaus around the struggling support staff, all of them bundled up and with hands on the wagons, helping to move them.

Then there was Artemis int here, somewhere.

It was one of the few times in her life that Xena felt utterly at a loss, really unsure of how to direct her army and where she should lead them.

Go home? The idea was highly appealing. She could feel the sense of relief in her guts when she thought about it, imagining them riding through the pass and onto the old east road that would take them first to Jessan's valley…

And here she stopped.

Now she had to imagine going back there to get her daughter, and having to explain to the tribe, and to Elaini that she'd left Jessan behind.

NO matter that she had no piece in his disappearance. No matter she had no idea where he'd gone, or where he was now, or even if he'd been transported somewere else entirely.

Was he even alive, or did they take him someplace else, maybe even up to Mount Olympus as she and Gabrielle had been brought by Zeus's whim.

"Xe." Gabrielle had ridded over and was now at her side, reaching over to touch her knee through the heavy leggings she was wearing. "Here, you look chilled. Put your gloves on."

Xena smiled to herself and obeyed, taking her gauntlets out and pulling them on, the warm fur lining easing the chill in her knuckles. "Gab." She shifted a little in her saddle, leaning closer to her soulmate. "I think we should keep heading home."

"No argument from me, WP." The bard responded instantly. "But? What's the catch?"

"Does there have to be a catch?"

"Xena. I have known you all the years of my adulthood and there is no person in the world, not my family, not my daughter, that I love more than I love you. You know that."

"I do."

"You have never in all the time I have know you run from something. You're not going to run from this."

Xena smiled faintly. "No." She agreed. "If for no other reason than I need to find out what happened to Jess." She said. "So I'd like to send Bennu home with the army, and you and me and the Amazons will see if we can figure it all out."

"And the Amazons?"

"I want them with us. I think it's important." Xena said, in a quiet voice. "And Artemis if we can make her stay."

Gabrielle eyed her. "Really."

"Really."

"Why?" Gabrielle asked, in a mild, straightforward tone of voice. "What's the point of that, Xe?"

There had been times in their lives together when the question would have frustrated Xena to the point of stomping off, not ready to allow another person to question her judgement.

Long, long past water gone under the bridge on that these days. "No reason. No point." Xena answered honestly. "Just what my gut's telling me to do."

Gabrielle thought about that as their horses matched paces, the cold air buffeting them. "I think we should all go home." She finally said, after the silence had started to become a little uncomfortable. "I know where you're coming from, I just don't think it' the right move this time."

The wind whistled around them as Xena thought that over, her eyes scanning the path they were on, in a random, restless motion.

"That's what my guts telling me." Gabrielle added, after a few minutes. "I will follow you to Tartarus and beyond, Xena. But I think we're on the wrong path here. This isn't our fight." She paused a moment more. "We need to get out of it."

She glanced over at her partner's profile as she said it, and watched Xena's jaw shift, and the muscles of her face tense, and the posture of her body alter. It told it's own story. "Let's go with them." She said. "Then at the forest we can stop, and go see if we can find Jess. "

Xena turned and regarded her, both hands leaning on the front of her saddle. "All right."

Gabrielle smiled wryly, understanding everything in the tone of that voice. “Besides, sweetheart, do you really think that army’s going to march off and leave you behind?”

Xena sighed. “Not really no.” She admitted “You know what the problem is, Gabrielle? I’m starting to want to act they way you write me in your scrolls.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “Oh please. You were acting like that when we met. I didn’t make you out to be anything you really aren’t so give it a rest.”

Xena drew breath to protest, then just grunted. She really didn’t think that was true, but she also really didn’t think having this argument at this moment with this woman was going to be helpful in any way to either of them.

She let out a long, loud whistle, and then waited, as Bennu and Redder and Jax wheeled their horses around and headed in her direction. The three soldiers were watching all around as they came over, and even when they settled in at her side, their eyes were roving.

“Xena, d’ya know what that thing was there?” Redder asked. “Never seen anything like it.”

“Matter of fact, I’ve seen one before. When I was out at sea.” Xena told them unexpectedly. “It’s a creature that lives in the depths. A giant squid.”

Everyone stared at her. “Is that what that was?” Gabrielle said, after a moment. “I remember someone telling me a story about one.. that it dragged a whole ship down under the water off Crete.”

“Yes.” Xena said. “But that’s not what I called you over for. Let’s start curving back towards the road. I want good traveling.” She told Bennu. “Sooner we get out of Thrace, the better. That squid can’t come after us, but there’s no telling what else’s in there, and that thing did what we came to do.”

Bennu nodded. “Men’ll be glad to hear it.” He said bluntly. “Jax, get em moving round – wagon’s will do better up on t’road.”

“Aye.” Jax looked profoundly relieved. “Heard there was some caves up just over the ridge past the forest like – we make them for night we’ll have shelter and can defend it.”

“Send the scouts ahead.” Xena nodded. “Let’s get moving.”

Jax turned his horse and sent it galloping down the lines and as he passed the word, Xena could almost see the morale perking up in his path. She eased her boots in her stirrups and turned towards Gabrielle, who was frowning.

“What’s up?”

Gabrielle took up her reins. “Which wagon did they put Artemis in?” She asked Bennu. “I have to ask her a question.”

“I’ll take ya, little hawk.” Bennu said. “Redder, set them scouts to be ready to split off for t’caves.”

They all rode off, leaving Xena to bring up the rear by herself. She turned in her saddle and looked behind her, to see the snow falling so hard between them and the city she could no longer make out the outline of it.

Was leaving it behind really right? Xena thought about the squid, and it’s beak, and it’s acid effluent that killed everything it touched.

She turned back around. “What in the Hades was I thinking?” She uttered audibly. “Gabrielle’s gonna get more than nutbread for that.”

**

The caves were there, on the far side of the forest, tucked back in a outcropping of stone and they’d reached them just before sundown much to everyone’s relief.

Now they were tucked inside, away from the screaming wind and the snow, with the wagons blocking the entrance to the caves and the space inside more than big enough to accommodate all of them.

In a corner of one of them a fire was crackling, and two soldiers had hauled in a large stack of dead wood, damp now, but already drying nearby.

There was hum of conversation, as the soldiers dried out their gear and sorted out provisions and the sense of lightening and relief was palpable.

Cait and Pasi returned casual waves as they moved past the campsite and headed for the watch stations by the wagons outside. "That was pretty cool." Pasi was saying. "That tunnel and all, those guy's faces when Xena hauled out of that door and started whacking on them."

"It was. " Cait agreed. "Until that creature started in, and all that. Didn't like that much."

"No me neither." The young warrior said. "You cant win on something like that – arrows weren't doing squat."

"No." Cait pulled her hood up as they moved across the brief slice of open space and then entered the sheltered area of the wagons.

They had gotten them lashed up together, and the lower parts solidly blocked with crates, a lashing of hides on the inside edge providing escape from the weather to the watchers. More crates had been set out to sit and work on, and most of the soldiers there were sharpening weapons and picking locations carefully that they could watch from.

"Good thing to be under cover. " One man was saying, as he settled his crossbow on a wagon hitch and sighted down it. "Made a good pick, Xena did. No sense keeping at it."

"Got sense she does." The man next to him agreed. "Though it was a good fight before, and them going in to pop those gates. Like that, I did."

The first man chuckled, turning and giving Cait and Pasi a wave as they arrived. "Her climbing up that wall and jumping over? No way they expected it."

"We didn't expect it." Cait remarked. "It was quite lovely though. Wish I'd been other side to see their faces."

Both men laughed. "Ah, but it's good to be heading back." The first man said. "Xena proved her point. Don't think the port's going to be heading our way any time soon."

'Strue." One of the other of the watch said. "Just hope they keep them monsters to themselves. Horrible thing, that was."

They took up their positions behind the wagons, putting waterskins on wooden pegs pounded into the side of the wagons, empty now of their cargo of supplies and the women they'd rescued from the city now tucked inside one of the caves.

The snow was still coming down, and the tracks they'd made coming into the caverns were well and truly covered deep, no sign of their passing on the empty stretch of land now between them and the road.

Cait took a seat on one of the buckboards and laid down her bow, her feet swinging off the ground. She was glad of the hide shelter and the thick wood blocking the wind and behind them she could hear the stew being dished out and knew she'd have some soon.

She nodded a little and braced her elbows on the wagon, pulling her hood more forward to block out the light and let her eyes adjust to the darkness. It took about a quarter candlemark but then she could see across the plain, and sort out the faint gray shadows.

Only to realize one of them was moving.

Towards them.

Fast.

**

Xena was seated on a rock ledge, her legs extended out in front of her, and her arms stretched out along the uneven stone wall behind her. Across from her Gabrielle was talking to Solari, the bard having doffed her cloak since the fire between them had created enough warmth to.

They had, she figured, a fifty fifty chance of getting some rest. The other option was being attacked by Hades' forces, but so far they hadn't seen any sign of them.

She stretched her body out and resettled herself with a sigh, mentally plotting the route back to the pass and wondering if they could make it back by daylight if they went by forced march.

The army would be in favor of that, she knew.

A scuff of boots against sand made her look up, to find Artemis entering, One whole side of her face was bruised and she paused to give Gabrielle a dour glare as she moved past.

Gabrielle half turned to face her. "Glad you're up and about. I have something I need to ask you." She followed Artemis over to where Xena was. "About Posiedon's daughter."

"Yes I have recovered myself. No help from you." Artemis said. "Since I am told it was you as put me in such a down state."

"I did." The bard agreed. "You were going to stab Xena, you scum sucking little piece of trash."

Behind her Xena's eyes widened.

Artemis stopped walking and stared at Gabrielle. "You forget who I am."

"No. I just don't care who you are. I'm out of omigosh right now."

"You're lucky, actually" Xena let her head rest against the stone. "If she hadn't clocked you, and I'd caught you coming up behind me I'd have probably cut your head off."

Artemis sat down on the rock. "Would you really have?" She asked. "I was only looking to disable you and take over the fight. Become the city's patron."

Xena rolled her head to the side and regarded her. "I would have. When you're in battle and everythings in motion, you don't stop to consider motive when someone's coming at you with a knife."

"I had a pact with Pinu. Now I suppose he's dead, and it's all for nothing." Artemis said "Fools the lot of you."

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips. "So when exactly were you going to tell us that creature was the chick we were supposed to be rescuing?"

Xena's eyes popped wide open again. "What?" She said. "That was Poseidon's daughter?"

"I'm glad one of us reads scrolls." Gabrielle said. "Once you told me it was a squid I figured it out. She demands child sacrifice, by the way." She sat down next to Xena and leaned back against her. "Those poor women were raped and forced to bear children that they were going to throw into that thing's maw."

"Really?" Xena whispered in her ear.

"Really." The bard assented. "Ask her." She looked over at Artemis. "That's why they were kidnapping women of bearing age. Not to be slaves."

Artemis shrugged. "And?" She said. "Yes, that was Poseidon's child, born in the depths of the sea. He loves her greatly."

'And we were supposed to rescue her?" Xena's voice lifted.

“No. I was supposed to rescue her.” Artemis chuckled dryly. “Wasn’t it your idea that we act godly? Win back our adherents? I know how to defeat her and send her back into the sea. They would worship me for that.”

“And we would end up… ?” Gabrielle’s brows rose.

“You were attacking their city. Not only would I have saved them, I would have defeated you as well, and in agreement with my uncle, the city would be a temple once more.” Artemis’ smile held no humor.

“Feel free to go back there and give that a go if you want.” Xena closed her eyes and folded her hands over her stomach. “If there’s anything left.”

“Now which one of us is arrogant?”

Xena opened one eyeball and regarded her. “Nothing arrogant about it. I’m done here. We’re going home. If you want to go back there and salvage the city, have at it.” She crossed her ankles.

“Do you not wish to know how she can be defeated?” Artemis just seemed amused. “You who know everything?”

“Nope.” Xena closed her eye and twiddled her thumbs. “All yours.”

They were all quiet for a brief time, then Artemis stood up just as a loud whistle pierced the air bringing both Xena and Gabrielle to their feet and heading for the entrance to the cave before the goddess could take a step.

Xena was a step ahead of her partner as they bolted between the cave and the line of wagons, seeing archers pouring out of the cavern behind them heading the same direction.

They ducked under the hide in a bunch and the archers went to the line while Gabrielle and Xena swerved and went to where Cait was standing, motioning them over. “What’s up?” Xena hopped up onto the buckboard next to her.

“There.” Cait didn’t waste time, she just pointed.

Xena leaned past her a little, scanning the open space on the other side of the caverns. “Oh.” She exhaled in relief. “Why didn’t you just say it was Jess?

Cait peered into the shadows, then back at Xena. “Is that who it is?” She asked in surprise. “All I can see is a dark blob moving. My gosh you’ve got eyes.”

“It’s Jess?” Gabrielle grabbed onto Xena’s armor and hauled herself up. “Really?!”

Xena could clearly see the outline of their friend in the dark gray shadows and silver highlights, his size and Eris’s shagginess very evident. She felt a sense of relief flood through her, and it felt like the weight of the world lifted off her shoulders. “Jess!” She let out a yell, then followed that with a whistle.

Immediately, a whistle came back, and then a flurry of motion started around Xena as the soldiers started to pivot one of the wagons around to let Jessan through.

Xena felt Gabrielle throw her arms around her and hug her, making a little, happy grunting noise as she squeezed.

Best moment she’d had for sevendays. Xena hopped down and stepped back, as the wagon moved and Eris came barreling through, slowing up as soon as he came inside the lines.

The soldiers quickly shoved the wagon back in place and the guard got back to guarding as Cait scrambled back and took hold of Eris’ bridle as his rider dismounted.

“Jess!” Gabrielle bounded over to him. “Are we ever glad to see you!”

The forest dweller pushed his hood back and exhaled. "Right back at you guys, but hold up a sec because you might end up changing your mind." He glanced behind them. "Can we talk somewhere quieter?"

"Uh oh."

Xena took him by the arm and pointed at the rear cavern. "Want a drink?"

Jessan made a groaning noise.

"Wine's mulling." Gabrielle caught him up on the other side and they crossed from the front lines and into the shelter of solid stone.

**

Gabrielle poured Jessan a mug of mulled wine and handed it over as he took a breath from his storytelling and accepted it with a wry grin. "Hey." She grinned back. "I've been there. I'm glad you didn't have to deal with that for long."

Xena was standing a few steps away, arms folded, staring at the cloth wrapped bundle leaning against the rock. "What am I supposed to do with this?" She finally asked, half turning and eying Jessan. "What did he say?"

"Not so much." Jessan took a mouthful of his wine and savored the heat and the spice of it as he swallowed. It was one of the mountain reds, brought by the last wagon train with some of the harvest herbs steeped in it. "We were running through .. uh… down there." He said. "Next thing I know Ares went to go fight with something making a lot of noise and he handed it to me and said to get it to you."

"To me."

Jessan nodded. "I didn't argue." He said. "I was so scared I was shedding. He pointed me to the way out and I went." He looked around. "I missed a lot, huh? "

"Why didn't he just come with you?" Gabrielle asked. "Then he could wield his own sword. Not have Xe do it for him? I don't get it."

"Me either." Xena said. "I don't want this thing. We're heading home. The port city's infested with … " She looked at Gabrielle. "You wanna tell him?"

Gabrielle sat down, picking up a bowl of soup and handing it over. "Where do I start." She muttered. "I guess I'll start when you disappeared."

"I thought you disappeared." Jessan said, mournfully. "Then I realized where I ended up." He paused, staring into the fire. "Not a really cool moment."

Gabrielle reached over and put her hand on his arm, her expression altering to one of compassion. "No, I know." She said. "It's so hard, when you think you've crossed that line. I've just been lucky enough to have gotten past that a few times."

"Yeah. Really just sucks you know?"

"I do." The bard answered, quietly. "We both do." She reached out and felt Xena clasp her hand.

Jessan regarded her somberly. "Gabrielle, I don't want to live your life, y'know? I figured that out in there." He took another sip of the wine. "Anyway, Ares didn't come back with me because some things came after us, and instead of running with me he gave me that thing and went to fight them without it."

Both Xena and Gabrielle were silent.

"I heard him screaming." Jessan added, after a moment. "Kind of made me glad I'm one of his believers." He said. "I wasn't so sure up to them. He was doing some kinda… um.."

"Jerky things?"

Jessan made a face. “Yeah. But this wasn’t, you know? He was all right.”

Gabrielle patted his arm “He’s got his moments.” She admitted. “But you know, he is a god.” She said. “So I’m sure he ended up okay.” She passed over one of the bowls of soup to Xena. “After you left, we went up to the top of the ridge there, and we found an opening to Hades.”

Jessan nodded. “Pretty sure that’s where I came out. Eris was right down that path, pretty much.” He explained. “No sign of Ares’ horse though.”

“Horse probably went back to Hades realm where he came from.” Xena commented. “Ares said he stole him from there.”

Jessan nodded. “He was sorta creepy.”

“Xe and I kinda meandered around, and decided we really didn’t want to go in there.” The bard went on. “So we were going to leave, and then Hades showed up .”

“Showed up after you said you wanted to talk to him.” Xena was slurping her soup, trying hard to ignore the tall, doublehanded broadsword leaning on the wall next to her. “We were going to leave, but no. “

“Hush.” Gabrielle poked her. “So we talked to him. It was weird. He told us that one of Poseidon’s daughters was being held hostage in the city, and we should rescue them. He said he was on Zeus’s side and all that stuff.”

“So where were you then?” Jessan asked. “Still up on the mountain?”

Xena nodded. “Just Hades was there, and Cereberus.”

The forest dweller grunted.

“So after that, he just left, said he had to go back to his wife inside.” Gabrielle said. “Did you see him in there?”

“Ah, yeah.” Jessan exhaled. “He came in and yelled at us.” He said. “There were snakes.” He paused. “I killed one when it was attacking Ares.”

“I’m sure he appreciated that.” Xena said, in a dry tone.

“He did.” He agreed. “He was stuck in a wall. He was pissed. I helped chop him out of the rock after the snakes left and he told me I wasn’t really dead after that.” He paused, then glanced at Xena.. “Kind of made my day.”

Gabrielle patted his arm again. “Sorry, Jess.”

He took a sip of his wine. “That part was kinda okay.” He admitted. “I mean, you don’t get to fight at the side of the god of War all the time, you know?”

“Mm.”

“So what happened in the city? “ The forest dweller changed the subject. “You’re heading back home now? For real? It sure sounded to me like Ares thought you’d need that. “ He studied Xena. “Aren’t you going to rescue that princess?”

“Yeah well, we found Posiedon’s daughter.” Gabrielle said. “Not.. quite the princess.”

“Oh?”

“Turned out to be a giant squid who killed everything around her with caustic goo.”

“What?”

“Yeah, and took infants in sacrifice.” Xena chimed in. “We found them breeding women so they could pitch them at the thing. Not a good scene all around.”

“Uh…What??”

“We were all invested in rescuing the princess. We were going to liberate the captive, with an all woman force to prove a point.” Gabrielle sighed. “The only point was the one on the top of our heads. Scam all the way. Took us like newborns.”

Jessan looked from one of them to the other.

Xena had her chin resting on her fist. “Yeah. So if anyone expects me to take this thing and go liberate that freak show sorry, ain’t happening.” She said. “We’re done. We’re going home. I’ll keep this and hand it back to him soon as he shows up again. “

Jessan’s brows creased. “This is really screwed up.”

‘This is really screwed up.” Gabrielle confirmed. “This is about as screwed up a situation that we’ve ever been in, I think.”

“No think. Is.” Her partner mournfully agreed. “There is no win. I don’t think there’s even a draw. I don’t even know what losing would look like at this point. So we’re going back. Take you home. Pick up our kid.”

“Go get some of mom’s beer.” Gabrielle concluded. “We’ll just deal with whatever the fallout is. It’s less dangerous than mixing it up with pissed off gods and that squid.”

“Right.” Xena drained her soup bowl and put it down. “My one hang up was trying to find you, so thanks for making it easy.”

She stood up and went to the Sword of War, clasping it below the hilts on the sheath and lifting it. It came away from the stone easily and felt to her lighter than it should.

This was the Sword of War, after all. A weapon that was more than a weapon, being the focus of Ares godhood and something that had rippled around her mortal life on more than one occasion. The last time she’d touched it was on the rim of the valley of her nightmares, and it had left a mark on her palm that been a very long time fading.

She uncovered the hilt and examined it, aware of the other two in the room watching her.

It was a beautiful thing. There was a deeply colored stone in the hilt that she could faintly see her own reflection in, and as she looked into it, she thought she saw a sapphire light ignite in the center.

It called to her, but that was natural. This was the very symbol of war, and she was, without a doubt, a person who understood what that was at a very deep, very gut level.

Called to her yes, but Xena found she had no real urge to draw it.

After a moment she covered the hilt up again and turned, pausing when footsteps sounded and Artemis came in, halting in shock as she saw what Xena was holding.

“Where did you get that!” The goddess barked. “Give it to me.” She held out her hand imperiously, and advanced on Xena.

Gabrielle reached for her staff but Xena made a hand signal to her, and then easily extended her arm cradling the sword, offering it hilt first. “Take it.”

**

Jessan was caught in mid motion, inhaling in shock as he could only watch as Artemis strode forward and reached out, grabbing the hilt and drawing the Sword of War from the sheath tucked along Xena’s forearm and braced against her ribs.

He could feel the ripple of power, and the excruciating, reverberating emotional scream he wasn’t sure of the source of as the weapon flashed into brilliant light, and then dropped to the ground as Artemis uttered a verbal scream to go with it.

She thumped to the rocky surface, unable to keep hold of the hilt as it smashed violently against the bones of her hand, crushing them with an audible crunch.

Xena knelt and slid the sheath back over the blade and lifted it up, standing and letting the sword slide the last bit into it's holder. "I don't think it's likes you."

Slowly Jessan removed his hands from his ears, where they'd flown in unconscious reaction as the audible and inaudible screams faded, and his Sight flared instead, washing out the cavern in tints of silver and gold.

He took a stuttering breath, almost a hiccup in his chest.

Gabrielle moved, and the buttery gold energy he always associated with her moved as well, meshing with the shadowed silver of Xena's, rippling together and matching the brilliance surrounding the longsword now once again cradled against the warrior's body.

Artemis was still on the ground, but he could see nothing around her. No energy. No aura he could detect and as he watched the woman writhing in pain he suddenly wondered what that really meant.

Then he closed his eyes and consciously suppressed his Sight, as the light faded and Xena's voice replaced it, it's resonant undertones making the bones of his ears itch.

He was afraid, suddenly. Afraid of being so long past his ability and involved in so much more than he knew what to do with that it made him just as suddenly ashamed.

"Ares sent this to Xena." Gabrielle's lighter voice cut through the wash of emotion. "And that must have been for a reason because he wouldn't have let it leave his hands otherwise."

"You know nothing." Artemis gasped, cradling her broken hand in her other one. "That is not for her. Not for you. You are no Olympian." She glared at Xena. "I am a daughter of Zeus – that should be mine. He should have sent it to me!"

Xena regarded the sword. "I was kinda hoping he had." She sighed. "Jess, did he say anything else about it?" She turned to look at Jessan.

The forest dweller hesitated, then shook his head. "He just said.. " He cleared his throat. "Get it to her. She's going to need it."

Gabrielle turned and studied him intently. "He didn't say Xe's name?"

"No.. but he didn't need to." Jessan replied. "I knew who he meant. I… " He looked quickly at Artemis, and then away. "I felt what he meant." He looked over at Xena, licking his lips suddenly dry. "There's a.. uh.. "

"Connection between them?" Gabrielle offered, gently.

He exhaled a little. "Yes."

"You are no blood of ours." Artemis said, in a bitter tone. "He's said it himself. He swore it, to Zeus."

Xena went over and put the sword down on the rock ledge, then she sat down next to it and rested her elbows on her knees, exhaling in wry resignation. "Yeah. I was hoping you grabbing that thing would pop you back upstairs and get you all out of our lives."

Artemis went quiet, studying Xena's angular profile.

"Anyway. Let me get my kit and put a bandage on that hand." Xena started to get back up again, then stopped when the alarm whistles sounded once more. "Ah crap." She picked up the Sword of War and tucked it under her arm. "Let's go see what's going on now."

Ares the wolf came bounding in, screeching to a halt when he almost crashed into Xena, frisking around her boots as she stepped over him and continued out into the night.

Gabrielle sighed, then picked up her staff and started after her, shaking her head with an insistent, frustrated motion.

Jessan and Artemis were left there, unexpectedly and awkwardly alone together. "Sorry about your hand." He said, after a long pause. "I should go help them." He got up and gingerly skirted around the seated goddess, who was looking down at her crushed fingers.

Surprisingly, Artemis was crying, though she didn't seem to realize it. Tears were dripping down off her expressionless face, splashing her skin with erratic droplets. As he was moving past she looked up at him. "He truly gave it up to her?"

After a moment of hesitation, Jessan nodded. Then he hurried past her and chased out into the dark and storming night, moving into a nervous crush of human bodies all clustering behind the wagons and trying ot look past him. "What is it?" He asked.

"Water." One of the soldiers told him. "It's rising." He added. "From the city."

"Posiden's rising." Artemis had followed him out into the crowd and was standing next to him, cradling her arm under her cloak. "He breaks the rule. He's challenging Zeus."

Jessan looked at her. "Why doesn't he come and stop it?"

"He can't. It's told. We were supposed to champion him in this, the battle renewed." Artemis said, after a sigh. "We cannot. He is hoisted on his own standard. He made my sister and I mortal. Hercules is turned from him. Ares is held by Hades. " She paused. "Aprhodite is of no use in this. Apollo has turned. We are lost."

A motion ahead drew Jessan's eyes and he saw Xena vault to the top of the wagons, a brief flash of torchlight showing the double profile of two swords slung at her back, one much longer and wider than the other.

With a curse, he started to push his way through the troops, understanding a little too late a little too much.

**

She could hear the roar on the horizon, like a thousand surfs crashing against a lonely shore. Stepping ahead of the torches she put her hand up over her eyes and focused her ears, trying to reconcile the noise and the shadows into reality.

She could see motion out there, and sucking in breath she caught the strong smell of salt and iron, seeing the white plains darkening as the sound and the rush headed their way. The hills were on a rise, but with the speed the water was coming that was no protection.

Not good.

Xena started to take a step back, then paused as she heard motion behind her, and looked around to find Gabrielle scrambling up onto the top of the wagon, with Jessan a moment behind her. The bard turned as she stood up and held her hand out, and someone below threw her staff up for her to catch it.

"What's going on?" Gabrielle asked, as she came up next to Xena and looked out. "What's out there? Sounds like water."

"It is." Xena agreed, leaning her elbow on the bard's shoulder. "It's the ocean rising and coming after us."

Gabrielle was silent for a moment. "Oh crap. Like those waves?"

"Sorta."

"Xena." Jessan had gotten to the top and joined them. "Artemis was saying it was Poseidon." He said, glancing past her. "Is it…. Oh." He could hear the rush, and smell the salt. "What is that out there?

"It's bad news." Xena said. "Looks like he's flooding the plains."

"Why?"

They stared out into the shadows as several more troops and some of the Amazons climbed up with them, and the wind started rising, pushing against their bodies.

Xena focused her vision into the distance and sorted through the shifting motion to something on the horizon that was erratic, blocking other barely seen shapes. "Squids need water." She finally remarked.

Oh crap. "Should we get moving?" Gabrielle asked.

"We can't outrun the water." Xena pointed. "Look."

They all looked at her in question. "At what?" Paladia asked. "The big black blob or the little black blobs?"

Xena exhaled. "There's water rising across the plains and the edge is past us already. Only reason it hasn't caught up to us is we're on a rise." She said. "We need to start seeing if there's a way out in those caverns." She raised her voice on that last sentence. "Scouts!"

"Heading that way." Cait went to the edge of the wagon and simply leaped out into space.

"Oh crap." Paladia rambled after her. "Hey nutcase! You're not Xena!"

"Get ready to move." Xena ordered. "Get as far back and far up as you can!"

The army burst into motion and Xena watched for a moment, then she turned back and looked back into the darkness.

Gabrielle came up next to her. She could now see the leading edge of the water and understood what Xena had long before. "We can't outrun this Xe."

"I know."

"Do we have a plan?"

Did she have a plan? Xena was aware of the crossroads she was in the middle of. The water would be here soon, and on it's heels that damn creature who would spit up caustic gunk on everything around her unless something stopped it.

Unless someone stopped it.

"Xe."

She could hear the knowledge in Gabrielle's voice, a husky rasp on the fringes of it she knew down to the last note. "I think I have to use this thing to stop it." She finally said. "I can't let everyone here die the way those horses did."

"What does that mean, if you use it?" Gabrielle took hold of her arm. "What will that do to you? Artemis couldn't even lift it."

"I've picked it up before."

They were both silent for a long moment.

"I don't know what's going to happen" Xena finally said. "But he sent me this thing and told Jess he knew I'd need it."

"He does things for his own reasons, Xena You know that as well as I do." Gabrielle said, forcefully. "And he has never, ever denied those reasons included getting you away from me and to his side."

Xena turned and put her hands on her partner's shoulders. "That is true, my love." She said. "But this thing's coming after us, and I can choose to do nothing, or choose to use my own weapons, or use the Sword of War. You tell me what's likely to make a difference to all of us?"

They stared at each other in tense silence, all the activity going on behind them and all the noise and shouting whipped away by the wind.

“What should I do, Gab? “ Xena asked, gently. “They put me in a place where only I can do something. I know it’s a trap, you know it’s a trap but they haven’t left me a way out.”

“Damn all of them.” Gabrielle uttered bitterly. “Xena this could take you somewhere I can’t go.”

Xena sighed, leaning forward and touching her head to Gabrielle’s. “Should we just stand here and let it take us together?” She asked, finally. “Tell me, hon. I’ll do it if you want me to. Just let this be the end for all of us.”

“Oh Xe.” Gabrielle answered softly, on a shaky, indrawn breath. “We can’t do that.”

Xena exhaled.

“Please don’t leave me.”

Xena put her arms around her partner and hugged her close. “Never.” She enunciated the word carefully. “Let me just go do the best I can, sweetheart. Trust me. We’ll get through this.”

“Be careful.” Gabrielle returned the hug and they parted slightly, then kissed. “Be good.”

Xena kissed her again, blocking out the howling wind, and the roar of the oncoming surf and the knowledge of what was coming behind it. She ignored the weight of the sword of war on her back and the sound of the army in motion.

All that mattered to her in that moment was the two of them, and the connection they had to each other, and the understanding that this was the most important thing in her life.

She would take that knowledge and use it. Believe it. Cloak herself in it.

They reluctantly separated, and walked to the edge of the wagon together, standing there hand in hand, facing the wind as a blast of lightning shot through the clouds and they could briefly see to the horizon clearly.

Black waters and whitecaps were rushing toward them, and there in the back, arms stretching up, was the creature.

“Here we go.” Xena released her and took a step to one side to clear some space. The creature let out a scream as it spotted them, and in a flash the water surged their way and hurled itself at the wagons. “Get everyone back.” She yelled.

Gabrielle looked behind her and found the army filing into the caverns, and climbing the walls and then she turned back around and braced herself, jamming her staff into a block behind the traces and tightening her hands around it.

Xena focused on the water and reached over her head to take hold of one of the two hilts behind her head. She knew by touch which one her fingers curled around, and she felt the powerful jolt as she drew it out of the sheath.

Lightning flashed again as she lifted the Sword of War easily over her head, and sucked in a breath, about to release a battle yell when something, somewhere, inside her spoke quietly and clearly and she knew.

“Xena!” Jessan had scrambled back up oto the wagon and he dove across the top of it just as the waters reached them. He grabbed Xena’s leg and rolled over as she looked down at him, a glimmer of light from the hilt of the sword reflecting in her face. “You’re his Chosen.” He said.

“And now his Champion.” Xena answered, with a wry smile. “Let me go an get down, Jess. It’ll be what it is.”

Jessan released her and rolled away, ducking past Gabrielle and letting himself drop off the wagon to help carry the wounded up past the edge of the cavern where froth was already lapping. He splashed through it and into the cave, putting his burden down as he turned then to help Benny push crates in the entrance. “Won’t stop it.”

“Nah.” Bennu said. “She will.” He said, confidently. “Tis no doubt, now.”

He turned and picked up a sack of supplies and started up the path into the cavern's interior. Jessan paused to watch the wagons, which started to shift and move as the water roiled past them, and then he heard Xena's voice in a clear bellow of challenge.

With a moment's more pause only, he put his hands on the top of the crates and vaulted over them, racing back through the foam towards the oncoming force.

**

Xena could feel the power of the sword, it made her palms tingle and there was an itchy sensation reaching down her forearms to her shoulders. "For Olympus!" She yelled, as the creature neared her. "For Ares!"

The water rumbled and rushed at her, and as it did, she took a deep breath, then swept the sword down and pointed it at the waves, willing them to stop.

It was the most frightening, most exhilarating thing she'd ever felt, the sudden explosion of sensation and sound as her will focused the power and directed it with only bare instinct to lead her.

A flare of light emitted from the sword and arched towards the surf, striking it and freezing it into immobility as she swept from one side to the other, turning the green to white and the roar to a high, musical tinkling.

The creature screamed.

Xena hopped from the wagon to the ice, holding the sword before her as she advanced towards the squid, it's long, barbed arms extending several times her height into the sky. It saw her coming and lashed it's arms forward, whipping towards her as she leaped up into the air and swung the sword across her body.

Had the sword laughed? Xena thought it had, as she sliced through the limb trying to impale her and felt it part before the weapon as though it was nothing but air.

It struck at her, screaming in outrage, and she ducked and slashed again, feeling an overwhelming backwash of energy as the sword caught her ferocious spirit and reflected it.

Behind the creature, she could see suddenly ships of war, with men on the rails coming towards them but all she could feel was exultation as the sword carved through the creature, the water freezing around them as she willed it so and reflecting back at her the unlimited power of the passion of war.

She let out a wordless battle yell, and the creature screamed back at her, and from behind her she heard suddenly the raised voice of her own army responding to her call.

The great single eye of the creature curved and craned down at her, it's beak opening up to spill death over her.

This time, she did hear the sword laugh.

**

Gabrielle felt like she was being set on fire. She had both hands wrapped around her staff and was barely standing upright, overwhelmed by the sheer force of what she was sharing through her connection to Xena.

She could feel the chill of the ice shoved up against the wagons, and it was almost even hard to breathe as she blinked hard to keep Xena's figure in focus, the normal fighting passion amped up almost past bearing as she fought to understand what her partner was doing.

Xena had always done things just that much out of the ordinary, but this was different. This was her wielding power in the way a god would, and yet, with the cool mental focus that was very much her own.

She could feel the connection between them, very solid. It was Xena out there, not some crazed being under the spell of that sword and she spared a moment to be proud of her soulmate. Proud of her strength and the intent will that would hopefully win the day.

And then?

Gabrielle refused to think about then. She pulled herself upright and moved stiffly to the front of the wagon, then she went to step onto the ice, as she saw the creature rise up over Xena's body and behind her, heard the roar of the army swarming back over the wagons in response to the warrior's yell.

She jumped onto the ice and followed, helpless to resist the call as they ran over the shifting, restless ice crackling and popping under their boots.

Archers and spearmen skidded to a halt and launched their weapons, striking the squid as it started forward to attack the woman standing in front of it. It's beak opened and the black liquid gushed out, but Xena lifted the Sword of War over her head and pointed it at the flood, a blast of energy coming out of the tip.

It hit the liquid and exploded it back into the creature's face, and it screamed, lashing out at Xena with four of the six legs that held it up.

Xena kept the defense up but released one hand off the sword, and drew her own as the legs came flying at her, using it's sharp edge to repel the creature's flailing. Chunks of squid flesh went flying and then the army was there, thrusting swords and spears into the creature's side.

She sheathed her own sword and leaned forward, then unclipped her chakram and let it fly right at the eye of the creature. It hit square on, and without warning, the eye exploded, sending a wash of gore to rain down on all of them.

Xena turned the Sword of War sideways and swept it over her head, projecting in her mind the idea of a shield above them just barely in time to have it become real, sizzling the gore into mist, feeling the ice shift under her as creature flailed and fell over, collapsing onto the ice edge in a watery lump of bleeding flesh.

The water surged up and came at Xena in a wall, and she clasped the sword and pointed it, willing it to part as it came at her. She closed her eyes and held her breath, sensing the approach of it and reconciling herself to feel the chill and the wet.

Posdeidon, she was sure, wanting to take revenge.

She remembered what Hades had said, about power. And how neither he nor Posdeidon held sway on mortal Earth because it wasn't their place.

Wasn't Zeus's place.

But it was Xena's place. She let out a wordless yell and thought hard about how the water didn't belong. How Posiedon's place was the sea, and how his power should remain there, not here. She bore down as she felt the cold rush coming over her, the roar of the water blocking out all else.

Then she was falling as the ice vanished, and the ground was coming up fast. She bent her knees and caught her balance, as the water rolled itself back and away, taking the ships and the men and the creature's carcass with it.

Xena sucked in a breath and looked around, the light still shining from the sword lighting the faces of men and women picking themselves up off the ground and turning to face her, letting out a yell of triumph that made her skin prickle.

Slowly she lowered the sword as she spotted Gabrielle dodging through the soldiers. She put the Sword back into its sheath as her partner arrived next to her and grabbed her.

"You okay?"

Xena felt her knees start to shake. "No."

“Oh sheeps, Xe.”

“I feel like I could eat a sheep right now.” Xena wanly admitted, as the army surged around her, getting up from the ground and chanting her name. “Gimme that damn staff.”

Gabrielle got her arm around her partner’s waist, feeling the faint vibration as she pressed her skin against the sheathed Sword of War. She pulled Xena’s arm over her shoulders and felt the exhale as she leaned against her.

“Xena! That was totally amazing!” Cait came running up, with the rest of the Amazons at her heels. “My goodness! That ice! And the black stuff exploding!”

Xena literally felt like she was going to just fall down. However, with the army chanting her name around her she really felt that would not be good form, and so she stood quietly, lifting a hand in acknowledgement until her body stopped shaking.

“No doubt, genr’l!” Bennu was soaked, and shivering, but happy. “Y’done squashed em!” He said. “We got the stock all back in the shelter there, now that’s gone. It’ll be back?”

Xena felt cold and suddenly exhausted. “Dunno. Let’s go back and get some rest if we can.” She said. “Hope Poseidon got the message.”

“Me too.” Gabrielle looked past them, out into the darkness. It was dark and very empty now. She could no longer smell the sea, or hear it’s sounds and it was hard to believe really that what they’d just seen had really happened.

She looked up at Xena, and after a moment, Xena looked back at her, with an expression of overwhelmed wonder. “Good job, hon.”

“I did that.” Xena said, in a low tone.

“You did. I saw you.” Gabrielle responded. “C’mon.” She started forward as the rest of the army did, everyone talking about how amazing Xena had been, and how there was nothing their general couldn’t do.

And that now was true. Xena did have that power. She’d wielded the Sword of War as Ares might have, and spurned Poseidon and his spawn, forcing him to retreat. What really did that mean?

“Here’s one good thing..” Jax was there, with Redder, holding a crate. “Genr’l, y’scared the fish out of the water, yah? We’ll eat good tonight.” They displayed the box, which was in fact full of fish. “Got a dozen more, to the side there.”

The men started whooping in delight.

Xena finally felt like normal sensation was coming back into her body. She wasn’t shaking anymore, and her steps felt steady. She was, however, starving. “Damn good thing.” She said. “Save some for me.”

“Some? Genr’l, first and biggest plates yours!”

**

It was a strange euphoria. Gabrielle carefully turned the fish she’d prepared, and listened to the almost giddy chatter of voices coming from the caverns around theirs.

It felt like anything could happen. If she turned her head slightly, she could see the Amazons standing guard in her peripheral vision, bodies stiff with pride. Even Paladia, who was busy hunched over a parchment, sparing brief glances at the inside of the cavern as she sketched.

“Hey Gab?”

She looked over her other shoulder. “Yeees?”

Xena was watching her intently. “Those things have to be cooked all the way thorugh?”

“Honey.”

“I already ate two trail bars. I’m starving.” The warrior complained.

“Just hang onto your boots a minute. “ Gabrielle turned and pulled the fish off onto a wooden platter, then she stood up, adding some trail bread and two baked tubers she’d grabbed from the central bin and brought it all over to where her soulmate was sitting.

They’d put down a set of furs on the rock and with the large fire it was warm enough for them to take off their cloaks and Xena her armor. She had a long sleeved woolen shirt on and leggings, and both her sword and the Sword of War were laying on the rock ledge behind her head, polished and sheathed.

“Doesn’t need sharpening.” Xena indicated the Sword. “Damned glad with that blade.”

Gabrielle put one of the fish and a tuber in front of her. “Here, starving thing you.” She picked up the two mugs of tea she’d made and set them down on the rock as well, as Ares the wolf came over and sat down expectantly. “I don’t think you’re getting any of mommy Xena’s fish today, buddy.”

Xena picked up a piece of the trail bread and bisected her fish with her dagger, scooping up some of it and depositing it onto the flat surface. She then folded it over and took a bite, chewing thoughtfully. “Should I worry about where these fish came from?”

“A little late for that, hon.” Gabrielle took a cautious bite of her own. “Tastes fine.”

“You cooked it.”

Gabrielle smiled, watching from the corner of her eye as her partner wolfed down her food. “Feeling better now?” She leaned back against the stone, casually laying her hand on Xena’s knee. Where earlier she’d felt a rolling tension in her, now she seemed relaxed, and she could feel no agitation under her hand.

“Yeah.”

“Xena.” Cait had come in a step. “Excellent news. The snow’s stopped.”

Xena lifted a hand and gave her a thumbs up, since her mouth was full of fish. She swallowed and then washed the mouthful down with the tea. “That is good news.” She said. “Hope that holds so we can make good time home tomorrow.”

Cait returned the thumbs up and then went back to her guard post.

“You don’t think they’ll be back?” Gabrielle asked, after a moment. “I mean, I think you probably pissed off Poseidon and all that.”

Xena leaned back and extended her legs, crossing them at the ankles. “After that?” She asked giving her partner a wry look “No clue what happen next. That’s why I want to start heading back at least into ground we know.”

“Could be a downside to that.” Gabrielle chewed her fish, and swallowed it. “We bring all this back home with us.”

Xena sighed.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I want to get rid of that thing.” Xena said, suddenly. “That’s not coming home with us.”

Gabrielle regarded her in slight surprise. “Did it hurt, to do that?” She asked. “You seemed okay.”

Xena looked at her. “Didn’t hurt at all. I just don’t want to get used to it.” She said, in a calm tone. “That’s not where our future is.” She carefully folded more fish into her travel bread and started to chew it, in a somewhat mechanical way.

“Ah.”

Really, there didn't seem to be more to add to that. Gabrielle had felt what that felt like, and she understood what Xena was telling her. "Glad you've grown so sensitive and self aware in your old age, hon."

That brought a smile to Xena's face. She drained her tea and stood up, dusting the crumbs off her tunic before she went over to the fire, and warmed her hands with it. After a moment she turned them over and inspected the palms, finding pale, unmarked skin.

Not like the last time. She clenched her hands lightly then shook herself and walked to the entrance of the cavern and beyond, emerging into the open air that was now quiet, and wind free. The sky had cleared and overhead she could see stars.

She walked to the wagons and looked past them, aware of the excited pleasure of the guards on either side of her. "Finally got some good weather, huh?"

"Thanks to you, ma'am." The soldier on her right said. He was a youngster, and didn't flinch at Xena's sharply raised eyebrow. "Never seen the like of that. My da told me give up on the gods, yeah? They just didn't do nothing. But that was something."

"I'm no god." Xena said. "I just borrowed that from a real one."

The boy looked at her, with a little smile on his face. "As you say, gen'rl." He replied mildly, then moved past her, and hauled himself up on the wagon, walking to the front of it to look out.

Xena sighed, then felt a presence next to her and turned to find Jessan there. "Glad you stuck around." She said. "Bet youre not."

"Bet you're wrong." Jessan smiled, showing his fangs.

Xena sighed again. She put her hands on the top of the wagon buckboard and pushed herself up onto it, getting to her feet and walking over to the front of the wagon. She turned her head from side to side as she felt Jessan coming up behind her and listened intently into the darkness.

It was very quiet. She could almost hear the stars twinkling overhead and just ahead of the torches that outlined their guard post she could see bare ground, scoured by water and as yet untouched by more snow.

She could remember what it felt like to turn all that water into ice. Remember the flow of power across her skin and that moment of insight into what it was to be a god and wield that force and how she now sort of understood just a little what that Sword meant to Ares.

She turned her head. "Tell me again what happened before you left Hades?"

**

Gabrielle had no real idea if they were going to end up getting to rest, but she got out their hammock and found two cracks in the rock wall to hang it up between, tugging on it to make sure it was secure. Then she lined it with their set of double furs and patted them with affection, finally letting the exhaustion of a very long day affect her.

Too much exertion. Too much emotion. She picked up her second cup of tea and went to the hammock, sitting down in it sideways and rocking herself back and forth a little.

Above her, on the ledge, the Sword of War rested quietly and in solitary splendor. Xena had thrown her sheath belt over her shoulder before she'd wandered out, with her own sword snugged against her back.

Curiously, Gabrielle lifted her free hand up and touched the hilt, running her fingers over it. The metal felt cool and smooth and she could see no responding light in the big pommel jewel nor did she expect one.

But the sword didn't scream either, it passively accepted her touch. Gabrielle wondered if that was because the weapon knew she had no designs on it or whether it recognized her relationship with it's current wielder.

Then she wondered if it wasn't a little out there to be ascribing sentient thoughts to a sword. She gave it a little pat, then withdrew her hand, looking up as she heard toenails and saw Ares the wolf entering the cavern.

The animal trotted over and hopped up into the hammock, turning around twice before he settled down next to Gabrielle, laying his jaw along her thigh. She stroked his head, then scratched him around his ears, which twitched as his yellow gold eyes angled to watch her. "Hey boy."

"Grooo."

"Hey your maj." Solari entered, carefully carrying a pot swinging from her hands, which were gauntleted. "Got some mulled wine here. Thought you'd like some."

"I would." Her queen agreed. "Some day, huh?"

Solari settled the pot on the hook over the brazier, then pulled off her gauntlets and set them aside. "Well. Yeah." She said. "Plenty of weird." She removed a ladle from the pot and dipped some wine into one of the two cups nearby. "The whole thing with the water was freaky."

Gabrielle accepted the cup, then waited for Solari to get her own and take a seat on the rock ledge. "Yeah, it was." She agreed quietly.

They both took a sip, then paused, as footsteps from further in the caverns came to their ears, and a moment later two of Xena's troops emerged. "Ma'am." One greeted Gabrielle. "Got some really strange noises coming from inside there."

"Uh oh." Gabrielle handed Solari her cup, then got out of the hammock and retrieved her staff. "Let's go check it out."

Solari put her own cup down and followed at her heels, motioning Pasi to come with her as the other Amazon rounded the corner. "Trouble."

"Nothing but on this trip." Pasi checked her dagger and grabbed one of the crossbows on the ledge as they entered the inner cave where most of the army was taking shelter.

It was crowded and dusty, and a little smoky inside, pungent with the scent of roasting fish. Gabrielle followed the soldiers through the crowd, catching sight of the small area where the injured were and spotting the cloak shrouded form of Artemis on one side, hand cradled in a sling.

The goddess spotted her as well, and for a moment their eyes met. Then she turned her head deliberately away and didn't watch them as they went by.

Hm. "What kind of sounds?" She asked the soldiers.

The closer of them just shook his head. "Not like some we'd heard before, little hawk" He admitted. "Bennu said to see if Xena would come listen"

"She's out at the outer guard." Gabrielle sighed "But she'll come if we need her. Let's see what we got first."

"Hope it ain't a bear." Solari muttered. "I like that rug you got but not that much."

"Mm."

**

The caverns twisted and turned, and as they picked up more torchbearers Gabrielle had the faintest sense of familiarity as the rock floor started to slant downwards. She took a breath of the air coming at them and then she slowed, and came to a halt. "Hold on."

"It's just past this bend." The soldier said. "You can hear it there, not quite up here. Jax was looking to see if there was maybe a spring there he thought he heard water."

Gabrielle advanced slowly. The soldiers went to her side immediately and Solari nearly collided with them as she and Pasi jumped forward. "Easy guys."

They eased around the curve in the rock and halted, all of them falling silent. The light from the torches flickered and spread into the dark, the harsh floor falling away into a sloping distance. "Now listen." The soldier said.

Gabrielle took a step forward, then she turned her head and focused on the sounds trickling up to them. "Water." She agreed, after a moment. "I can hear it trickling."

"Aye." The soldier nodded. "We heard that." He paused. "And that."

Gabrielle frowned as she tried to analyze the sound that now overran the whisper of the water, an odd, chuckling, gargling noise that grated on her ears with unpleasantly. "Oh."

"Aye."

"What is that?" Solari asked.

Gabrielle drummed her fingers on her staff. "I don't think I've ever heard anything like that before." She admitted. "Sort of like an animal or something?"

Solari eyed her. "If you've never heard it, what makes you think I would have?" She asked, plaintively. "But you know what? I don't really want to know what that is it sounds gross."

"What she said." Pasi stated firmly.

"Aye." The soldier rounded out the opinion. "Problem is don't know if it's going to come closer."

"Yeah." Gabrielle sighed. "Y'know what?"

"We need Big X." Solari suggested. "Right?"

"Right." Gabrielle closed her eyes. "Hang on." She felt out along that odd and intermittent link between them and in silent sympathy her free hand closed and pulled up next to her throat in a gesture of beckoning.

No true answer, but a pulse of emotion came back at her, brash and raw and she exhaled, opening her eyes and letting her hand fall. "She's on her way."

Everyone was staring at her, with widened eyes. "Wow." Solari said, after a moment. "Never saw you do that before.

Gabrielle took a breath to answer, then paused, as the sound down in the dark started up again, and she had the impression it was getting louder. "Let's go back into the other cavern." She said, shooing them ahead of as they moved away from the darkness and back towards the firelight.

As they reached the edge of where the camp was Gabrielle spotted her soulmate making her way towards them, and as Xena reached her she turned to point towards the back of the cavern. "Xe, we can hear…. Oh crap."

In the darkness beyond the curve, they could suddenly see glowing eyes looking back at them.

"Mm." Xena grunted in response.

The glowing eyes were surrounded by tiny other eyes, and Gabrielle suddenly saw the hairs on Xena's arm lift up in reaction, and her skin show goosebumps that matched the feeling of cool air on the back of her neck from her own nape hairs rising

"Ohhh Xe." Gabrielle took a step backwards out of instinct, bringing her staff up across her body as Ares trotted into the cavern, clearly in search of Xena. "Ares, stay."

The wolf spotted the creature and his ruff shot up with an almost audible crackle. He growled and lifted his lips, exposing his fangs.

Jessan came rambling after him, hauling up as he spotted the glowing eyes. "Uh oh."

Xena sighed and started forward, waving back the surging horde. "Stay here."

“No way.” Gabrielle was at her heels. “That thing’s creepy.”

“Didn’t mean you. “ Xena approached the darkness, reaching behind her and drawing her sword, her own sword, which rang softly as it came out of it’s sheath. “Hey you.”

Gabrielle felt fear clench her guts, looking at it. She could see the size of it, and the waving, glowing eyes surrounding those, and as the air moved past it towards her she could smell a dusky, damp scent.

“Hey wait!” Jessan said. “I know that thing. It’s Cereberus.”

A lot of things happened then. Ares bolted past Xena and threw himself at the creature. Xena let out a yell and tried to intercept him. Gabrielle saw the creature start to lunge for Ares, and her partner, and got her staff in there between all of them, feeling a horrible jolt as teeth clamped down on her weapon and ripped it out of her hands. “Yow!!!”

Xena grabbed the staff and yanked it back, then turned and kicked the creature hard as it went for Ares. “Ares, get back!”

The wolf shifted, ignoring her, as he snapped his jaws, shoving himself between the creature and Xena meeting teeth with teeth as the creature tried to swallow his head.

It’s mouth was that big. Ares clamped down on it’s lower jaw, as a dozen soldiers rushed forward with torches and arrows.

“Stop!” Xena ordered, as the light flared and she got a good look at the creature. “Jess’s right! It’s Cereberus!” She grabbed Ares by the tail and hauled him backwards. “Leave him alone!”

Jaws agape, Cereberus swung his nearer head over and stared at her out of those fire colored, ageless eyes. The snakes around his heads hissed, and he reared himself up, until he towered over both Xena and Jessan, letting out a roar that shook the cavern and brought rocks down all around them.

Xena sheathed her sword and pulled out the Sword of War, getting a grip on it as she took a step towards the three headed dog and lifted the weapon ahead of her. “Don’t do it, buddy.” She warned. “You’ll go through me to get to them.”

Ares stalked up next to her, stiff legged, ruff fully extended.

Gabrielle put her hand on Xena’s hip and as she did, she sensed something coming up behind Cereberus. Before she could move a black, visible wind erupted into the cavern, and a moment later she was sucked hard against Xena’s body as they were pulled forward.

Xena slammed against Ares, then got her leg over him and braced it, slicing hard at the ribbons that were circling around them and winding them together. The Sword of War sizzled as it cut through them, and there were screams from behind them as the ribbons whisked past and started grabbing anything they could.

Cereberus launched himself forward and galloped directly at them, veering at the last second and standing up on his hind legs to snap with all three heads at the ribbons, catching them and crunching them as one set of eyes watched Xena for her reaction.

“Atta boy.” Xena bumped him lightly. “Keep your head out of the way.” She slashed free of the winding sheets and felt Gabrielle press against her back, as they felt themselves being pulled slowly towards the dark passage.

“Xena!” Jessan was braced against the wall and extending a hand and in the next moment Xena had reached out and caught it, Gabrielle had wound her arm around Xena’s waist, and then the pulling force suddenly overwhelmed them.

Gabrielle heard Cait let out a shout, the felt something grab her belt just as they all were yanked off their feet and sucked into the opening, with a loud growling howl that ended with an even louder resounding crack.

The wind stopped.

The people left in the cave went silent, seeing a clean slate wall where a moment before there had been a gaping opening, the only sign something was different was the absence of their leaders, and the presence of a three headed dog.

For a moment it was very quiet.

"Oh crap." Solari finally said.

"Booh." Bennu let his sword arm drop, the tip of the weapon smacking the ground.

Cereberus seemed as stunned as they were. He reached out with a paw and clawed the wall, then bumped his closest head against it, backing away with a bewildered expression on his faces. He sat down and turned all three heads around, looking at them.

Paladia walked over and smacked the mace she'd picked up against the rock. "Son of a bitch."

One of Cereberus's heads turned and regarded her.

"Now what?" Pasi wondered.

Bennu lifted his sword up and let it rest against his shoulder. "Now we sit for a while." He said. "I ain't leaving without them."

Everyone was nodding. Cereberus licked his lips.

"And wait for the damn rock to open?" Paladia asked. "Well if we're gonna just sit here I'm gonna make a hole in that thing." She shortened her grip on the mace and whacked the wall again, breaking off a few flakes of the rock.

The snakes had gone to sleep around Cereberus's head and now he turned one of his heads towards Paladia and watched her efforts with seeming approval.

Solari put her sword away. "Lemme go find a pick. " She turned and went back into the front of the cavern, as the soldiers stirred.

"We going to break into Hades?" Jax asked. "That's where that went, right? Since that .. uh… " He looked at the three headed dog. "I mean, that's the one from all the stories, right?"

"Can't think there'll be more than one." Bennu agreed. "Lass there's got a good idea. Ain't no telling how long it'll take em to do nothing but why not try?"

"Why not." Jax agreed. "I'll setup some shifts. Aint' got a lot of space back here."

The stunned surprise faded, and the troops started sorting themselves out, adjusting to what had just happened, and the sudden absence of their four comrades.

Paladia kept plugging away at the wall, sending tiny rock chips flying. "Stupid bullcrap." She shook her head. "Shoulda kept on going, get our asses out of here, leave these jacktards behind." She muttered. "Crank assed nutcase."

Cereberus regarded her solemnly, his amber, ageless eyes reflecting the torchlight. After a moment he moved his head over and licked her arm, nearly making Paladia levitate and drop the mace.

"Hey!" She recovered. "What was that?"

Cereberus stood up and then launched himself up on his haunches, slamming his clawed feet against the rock and sending some chips flying as well. He let out a weird, echoing howl, and paused, but there was no response and he went back to digging.

Paladia edged to one side. "Yeah, thanks." She muttered. "Can't you just snap your fingers?"

Cereberus paused and regarded his paw, then looked at her.

"Nevermind."

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The sound of the wall closing echoed and echoed as they all slammed against the wall then unexpectedly pitched downward as the floor tilted under them and sent them into the depths of Hades.

Gabrielle felt the strangeness of it, and she clamped her fingers down on the hold she had on Xena's belt, grimacing as they bounced against the stone and it sent jolts of pain up and down her body. "Ow!"

"Hang on." Xena had managed to get the Sword of War into it's sheath, and she turned in mid roll and got herself wrapped around Gabrielle, attempting to shield her against the hard surface. "Jess! Cait!"

"Ugh!" Cait managed to answer. "This is a bit rotten." She had gotten her cloak wrapped around her as they tumbled helplessly.

"What she said." Jessan responded unhappily. "I just got out of this place. Didn't really want to go back."

"Oof. Sorry Jess." Gabrielle felt more than a bit guilty, understanding at least a portion of what it was her friend was feeling.

She, herself, did not have that issue, since her soulmate was wrapped around her and solidly present. "Xe, can we stop somehow?"

Then abruptly, they did. They came to the bottom of that endless rock ramp and slammed against an equally hard rock wall, but after a long, breathless moment they stayed still.

It was very dark. The air seemed breathless to them, lacking the energy of the world outside and tasting harsh and dry on the back of their throats.

Far off, there were screams and moans, and the sounds of flame and the closer silence was broken by a coughing grunt and the sound of toenails on stone.

Xena scrambled to her feet and turned around, getting her hands up just in time to intercept the furry form hurtling at her. "Hey!" She barked, then recognized the thick, wiry coat against her hands. "Ares."

"Four legged one, right?" Gabrielle was getting to her feet. "Though I'd love to see the other one right now."

"Me too." Xena dusted herself off and looked around. The walls, to her eyes, glowed faintly in green, and she could see shadows moving past and around them, brushing against her almost like a breeze. Above them she could see the steeply slanted surface they'd just fallen down.

The wall they had collided with was just that, a rock wall, and it backed into a corner. So the only reasonable route they could take was the one to her left, where all the hideous sounds were coming from.

Of course.

Xena sighed. She turned and started to climb up the slanting ramp, her boots getting some purchase on the stone until it abruptly dissolved under her, becoming a blank, stone wall going straight up. She fell back and caught her balance, and as she did, the corridor beyond where they were standing started to glow very faintly.

Footsteps then commenced, heading in their direction, and they all gathered together turning to face that direction.

"Lets get this over with." Xena hesitated, then she started into the hallway, the green light outlining her as she strode towards whatever was coming at them. After a moment, they all followed her. "Since we don't really have any choice."

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Solari had found a battle ax, and she was standing shoulder to shoulder with Paladia, with two of Xena' soldiers next to them chipping away.

The sound of the weapons hitting the rock was high pitched and incessant, as they worked steadily at getting their way through the wall.

It was crazy Solari acknowledged. Nuts that they thought they could dig through a mountain like that but it gave them something to do, and soldiers and Amazons were lined up behind them waiting to take a turn at it.

It was accepted by all that they would stay there, until either they made their way inside the tunnel, or their leaders returned.

Solari certainly wasn't going anywhere without the queen. She wasn't going to go back to the village, and face Eph, and said she'd just walked away once Gabrielle had been sucked into Hades.

No, no way.

Cereberus was sitting on his haunches, digging at the rock industriously with claws that seemed to be made of steel, so little impact did the stone make on them.

The three heads, huge and seemingly unbalanced pursued three different missions, one watching the stone, one watching Solari and Paladia and the other looking around randomly while all three tongues lolled out panting.

He made Solari squirm a little. The snakes that ringed his heads were somnolent and hung limply, and she peered cautiously at one when his attention was elsewhere.

Looked like a small garden snake, she decided, as the snake she was studying opened one eye and peered back at her. It's mouth opened and it's tongue protruded, tasting the air.

Hastily Solari shifted her attention to the rock wall, and brought her ax down on the walls surface, holding the weapon close to the head to control it's fall. There was, perhaps, a hand depth indent from her work so far and her shoulders were starting to ache.

"Would you like to swap out?" Pasi seemed to read her mind, lifting a pickax and hefting it.

"Sure." Solari stepped back and out of the way as the younger Amazon took her place, and started pounding determinedly on the surface.

Paladia didn't hesitate though, and kept on beating the wall.

Solari watched for a moment, then she turned and went back into the main cavern, detouring through the milling soldiers to where she'd left her gear. She picked up her waterskin and uncapped it, taking a long swallow of the chilled liquid as she sat down on a boulder.

It was cold. She felt that through the hide leggings she was wearing and briefly wished they were home.

She was tired.

She was more than a little worried about her friends now stuck behind blank stone and probably facing danger and scary stuff there in Hades, even though she knew it probably took a lot at this point to scare either Gabrielle or Xena much.

And Xena had that sword.

"What are they doing?"

Solari looked up with a start as Artemis entered, her hand wrapped in a bandage. "Huh?"

The goddess sat down, her face pale. "What are they doing in the cavern? That noise?" She repeated. "It is making my head ring."

"Oh." The Amazon sighed. "Xena, Gab, our Cait and Jessan got sucked in a cave, and it sealed, and we figured they're in Hades realm now."

Artemis blinked at her in silence.

"So we're breaking the wall down to go help them." Solari concluded. "But yeah, it's tough. Hard rock and all that. Sorry about the racket." She sat down next to her gear and fished inside it, pulling out some dried venison and a withered, wrinkly pear.

"What good would that do?"

Solari bit off a bit of her jerky and chewed it, slicing into her pear. "Might end up helping them out." She offered. "They're friends of ours, you know?"

Artemis sighed, leaning gingerly and resting her elbows on her knees. "No, I really do not." She admitted. "I know pain, and exhaustion, and a dozen things I wish I never would have experienced. "You mortals live in the insanity of the world and it tires me to no end."

Solari studied her from the corner of her eye. The goddess did look knocked around and exhausted, there were bruises across her face, and the bandaged hand looked really painful. "This kinda sucks for you, huh?"

Artemis looked over at her. "Yes." She said, after a long moment. "At first I was horrified, then outraged. Then furious." She exhaled, her eyes shifting to her hand and then back to Solari. "Now I would like to just go home."

"Yeah, us too." Solari dug in her pack and offered Artemis a hunk of venison. "We'll get there."

The goddess stared at her blankly, then, after a long hesitation, she reached out and took the dried meat. "I don't know if I will." She said, with a visible sigh. "I'm not sure my home even exists anymore. Olympus could be empty. "

Solari nodded. "We've had times like that." She admitted. "When we went to war, a few times. You never knew what you'd come back to. Whole village coulda been burned out. We went through some places on the way here that were."

Artemis thought about that for a while, chewing the venison with a thoughtful expression. "Hades has taken your friends. He wont give them back." Her voice was mild, though.

"He won't be able to hang on to Big X and our queen." Solari duste her hands off and stood up. "And maybe he'll open up that tunnel again when he realizes he left his dog outside." She headed back through the cavern, leaving the goddess behind.

Artemis had stopped chewing. She stood up carefully and eased after the Amazon, passing through the crowd until she was inside the inner area the sound of rock breaking was coming from. She slipped into the space and put her back to the wall, staring at the small group in the back chipping at the stone, and the ungainly, three headed figure working next to them.

**

It seemed like the corridors were dark and endless, filled with smokey stench and screams that made their ears itch but never got any closer. "Any idea where we're going?" Gabrielle finally asked, as Xena paused at a crossroads of two dark paths.

"Not really." Her partner said, selecting one of the two tunnels and striding off into it.

"Xe." Gabrielle caught up and slid a hand through the crook of her arm. "Would you consider going back to where we came in? Maybe we can find a way out?"

"Look behind us." Xena answered, as they felt the floor start to slope downwards.

Gabrielle did, sucking in a breath as she saw nothing but rock wall at their heels. "It's chasing us."

"Herding us." Xena agreed. "So faster we find out where we're supposed to go maybe the faster we'll get out of here." She glanced at the other two with them. "You two okay?"

Cait was right at her heels, her eyes wide as she looked around them, and her breathing faster than normal. "Not really, no." She admitted.

A loud scream stopped Xena from responding, and she whirled and reached over her head as the walls opened in front of them and then they were pitching forward and falling into a cavern full of flames and agony.

Xena twisted in mid air and grabbed hold of Gabrielle as the ground came up at them. She bent her knees as she landed and shoved them both back against the wall, dodging as Jessan and then Cait fell past them.

There were pools of smoking liquid around them and it was only pure luck that let them avoid them. Xena pulled Cait back against the wall as Jessan hopped over the nearest pool and joined them.

The light flared, and the walls stood out in stark relief, writhing bodies pinned to them being lashed with flames that seemed more like whips than fire.

"Xena, is this…"

"Yes."

Gabrielle sucked a breath in, tinged with an acrid stench. "Ah." She turned as Cait edged closer to her, the Amazon's eyes wide and terrified. "Easy, Cait." She patted her on the arm. "It's just Tartarus."

"Just?" Cait whispered.

"Just." Xena slowly looked around the cavern. The way they'd entered had closed, and there was no obvious way out. The walls rose over her head, and the ceiling of the cavern was lost in darkness, the air stifling with rank heat.

It was like it had been her first time here, and yet not. She could remember being tormented here, but now she was a bystander, watching others rip their heads back and moan in agony, their bodies twisting in pain.

Why was she here now though? Xena searched the faces, but none of them seemed familiar to her. Was she supposed to free them? Fight them? Run? Climb out?

"Xe." Gabrielle grabbed her arm. "Look."

Leave it to Gabrielle. Two figures of fire detached themselves from the far wall and approached them, and the heat increased as they moved forward.

Xena took a step in front of the rest of them. "Stay back."

For once, everyone listened to her, even Ares, who was cowering behind Jessan's legs. She braced her own legs wide and reached behind her head, curling her fingers around the Sword of War and taking hold of it's hilt.

She could feel the pull of it. The desire to draw it and feel it's power was almost sexual in it's intensity and she came within a heartbeat of succumbing to it, when she paused, her arm going still as a sudden internal warning made a ball in her gut.

No! She could almost hear the word in her head, echoing strongly enough to override the roar of the cavern around her.

No.

This was, after all, Hades realm. With a slight exhale she shifted her grip and pulled out her own sword instead, feeling the familiar weight of it as she brought it around in front of her, and readied herself as the two flame figures suddenly rushed forward at her.

The wash of heat nearly made her pass out, but she gathered energy and met the sweeping lash of fire coming at her from the first one, feeling a gigantic shock as her blade cut through the lash and split it in two.

It blasted to either side of her and she yelled a warning to get down as she engaged both sides, whipping her sword into a figure eight and slicing through the flames, ignoring the buzzing shock in her hands and the pain that accompanied it.

She thought she heard something scream. A wash of heat blasted across her and she ducked her head, glad she'd pulled her hood up as she closed her eyes in reaction and half turned, as the air itself seemed to ignite buffeting her hard.

"Xena!"

She went to one knee from pure instinctive reaction, and felt something pass over her head, then heard a searing crack of rock splitting.

Not good. She got her eyes open and shielded her face with her free hand as she came out of a crouch just in time to see a fireball coming right at her. "Stay down!" She yelled, as she got both hands on her hilt and carved the air with the blade, feeling her whole body tense as she tightened her grip and sliced through the ball of flame as it came into her range.

The pain was shocking and incredible, but she let it pass through her, focusing only on the swift, tight motions as her sword disrupted the sphere of energy as it scattered in a dozen pieces and sloughed off to both sides of her.

Then she squared her body to the oncoming bodies of flame, straightening up and tossing her head to throw her hood back, daring them, staring insolently into the eyes of the nearer one - pits of fire that were only marginally brighter than the body around them.

A blast of heated air came at her, blowing her hair back as she spread her arms out, getting as much of her body as she could as extended as she could between her and the rest of friends as the two figures spun up fireballs between their ephemeral hands and raised them over their heads.

Much bigger. Xena winced internally at the pain she knew was coming. "G'wan you little pieces of Hade's crap!" She bellowed at them. "Prove how worthless you are! No wonder no one worships you!"

A moment later, from the corner of her eye though she saw Jessan step forward on one side of her, and Cait on the other, both with swords drawn, taking courage from hers.

Then as the flame creatures came at them Gabrielle stepped past Xena and held her hand up. "Stop!"

For a moment, everyone did.

"We don't belong here." The bard stated, calmly. "We are not of the dead. If you hurt us, you break your own laws."

For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of fluttering flames as even the screams of the tortured faded out.

Then the fire faded, and the cavern they were in was just moist, and dark, lit now just by torches in chinks in the rock.

Xena let her arms drop. "Glad you read that scroll, Gab." She said, after a moment of awkward silence. "What laws were those again?" She sheathed her sword and ran her hands through her hair, feeling the residual tingles of pain ease from her skin.

"Have no idea." The bard leaned back against her. "I made that up."

Everyone swiveled around and stared at her.

"Hey, it could be true." Gabrielle managed a faint smile. "You never know. Right?"

Xena chuckled, giving her partner a brief hug. "Wouldn't be the first time you invented something that became real." She remarked, with a wry smile of her own.

Cait put her sword away, not without some shaking hands. "Gosh." She exhaled. "I think I'd rather dozens of smelly guys in leather coming at me."

"Me too." Jessan said. "I hate this place."

"Me three." Xena let her hands drop. "Sorry. Pretty sure this is my fault."

Gabrielle patted her on the side. "Let's get out of here, huh? There's a tunnel over there in the corner." She pointed. "I guess we didn't see it when all the fireworks started."

Xena flexed her hands a little. "Or it wasn't there." She started to cross the cavern floor, now thankfully free of firepits or pools of scalding liquid. It was dank and dark and looked mostly just like a cave floor thousands of which she'd walked over before.

The walls were just cave walls and even the torches seemed like normal workaday torches, their flickering giving off the distinct scent of pitch.

All very normal. And yet, Xena reached back and drew her sword again, as they approached the tunnel entrance and passed through it, hearing a set of soft crackling sounds that made them jump, and turn, and find a solid rock wall at their backs where the entrance to the fire cavern had been.

"Figures." Gabrielle sighed.

Then they were in total darkness, in air so cold it hurt to breath it. Xena sheathed her sword quickly and put her hand out, pulling Gabrielle back as the other two moved in from either side, and the wolf scooted between her legs, growling.

"Gggosh." Cait chattered.

"Just stay still." Xena's voice sounded from the darkness. "Stay close. "

Everyone moved towards her, except Gabrielle, who was already wrapped around Xena's body. She was shivering, the change from heat to cold penetrating their clothes and cloaks, and as she breathed, Xena could feel the hairs inside her nose freezing.

She wished she had a light. She knew if she drew the Sword, it would light for her, and even as she thought that, her hand was moving towards it.

No. She forced her arm back down to her side and blinked her eyes instead, trying to force them to focus in the shadows.

"Xe, I think we have to do something. We're all getting frostbite standing here." Gabrielle uttered. "Sheeps it's cold."

Instinctively, Xena reached for the sword again, and again, paused before she touched it. She cast her mind back to her first sojourn in Hades Realm and remembered how miserable it was, and how much she hurt, and how she couldn't so much as close her eyes.

She couldn't not see the faces of all those people she'd killed, all screaming at her, telling her how horrible she was, and how she'd ruined their lives.

She remembered the heat of the flames burning her. And she remembered how, in self defense, part of her refusing to submit to the torture, she'd concentrated her mind on something she remembered that denied the absolute knowledge those voices had about what she was.

She couldn't be so completely without merit if she had that one thing she'd done, that one person who had, for whatever reason, cared about her. Who had reached out her hand in friendship in so unlikely a way.

And the voices had laughed at her, hearing her thoughts, taunting her with the accusation that even in this, she'd been evil, and caused Gabrielle so much pain that it was certain the girl was really glad she was dead.

They screamed at her. Daring her to say they were wrong. Sure that they weren't. Calling her coward for thinking anything else.

But of course, though she was and had been very many things in her lifetime, the one thing she had, that she'd been born with for good or evil was that ephemeral thing humans called courage.

Coward she wasn't and never had been and she had the arrogance and pride in self to know it.

So she used that courage to reach out and find out if that was really true, seeking out her friend on the other side, hearing Gabrielle's thoughts loud and clear as a bell.

In that moment, Xena remembered vividly, everything had changed, even though nothing about who she was had. She had, being true to herself, ignored all the horrible things she'd done, and the countless people she'd killed and focused on this one present problem.

This one present, pungent grief she'd caused, this one surprising prize she saw within her grasp to claim.

This unearned gift of the heart, that the mercenary in her had lunged for, setting aside the bawling shouts of Hades that told her to deny it, set Gabrielle free of her, let her find a peaceful life because in her supreme arrogance she'd shouted back that Gabrielle wouldn't want that.

Gabrielle wanted her, regardless of what the future would bring the both of them and that – Xena smiled faintly into the darkness – that was still true for both of them.

She looked down to find Gabrielle looking back up at her. "Think good thoughts." Xena spoke up. "All of you. Think about who you love, and what's good about your lives."

"Easy for you to say." Cait sighed.

"Brrr." Jessan added. "She's got a point, Chosen"

"Tell yourself it isn't cold." Xena gently rebutted. "Convince yourself you're not here. You're there, with them, just like I'm here, with Gabrielle." Her voice lifted a little. "Will it!"

Gabrielle was quiet, but Xena could feel her smile as she buried her face against her chest.

"Want to be out of here." Xena let her voice lift up. " The only torture this place can do to you is what you LET IT!" She ended the sentence in a yell, hearing her voice echo against the rock she now could sense around them. "NO ONE HAS TO BE IN TARTARUS!"

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"What are you trying to do?" Artemis finally spoke up, edging over closer to the work.

"Get in there." Paladia answered, shortly. "Find those idiots."

"They're not idiots, they got sucked in." Pasi objected. "C'mon now."

Cereberus had swung one of his heads around hearing Artemis's voice, and a pair of his golden, ageless eyes were watching her.

Two more of Xena's men came up and tapped the two women, hefting axes in their hands. "Give us a go." One of them said. "Got some cider mulled t'back."

Reluctantly, Paladia and Pasi exchanged places, and cleared out of the way, putting down their tools and dusting their hands off.

"That's insane." Artemis spoke up again. "You'll never get through that wall, and if you do…"

"They will." Bennu appeared behind them, offering cups to the two Amazons. "Take long enough at it, nothing'll stand up to us." His voice had a calm confidence, and he gave Cereberus a pat on the back as he edged past him.

Artemis rubbed the bridge of her nose with her uninjured hand in a very human motion. "Do you truly wish to enter Hades' realm?" She asked, with a sigh. "Truly? All of you wish to risk your mortal lives going after a few who might be already lost?"

"Surely." Bennu sat down on a bit of rock ledge. "Would go to Hades for 'em every time." He looked around the cavern, where a dozen of Xena's troops were waiting to take their turn, the rest of the army outside sorting out supplies and fixing wagons that had taken damage in their travels.

Artemis sat down next to him. "Why?" She asked, seriously. "Because she holds the Sword of War? Is it that you pledge to?"

Everyone fell silent waiting for Bennu to answer, only the sound of the axes hitting stone sharp and clear on the air.

"Nah." Bennu said. "Don't much care about that." He let his hands rest on his thighs, big, rawboned fingers bruised and cut visible in the torchlight. "Been a fighter all my life. Started when I was maybe ten? Twelve? Something like." He turned one palm upright and looked at it. "Never knew why until I met her."

Artemis frowned "What?"

"Fights for a reason, Xena does." Bennu said. "Hard as horseshoe nails, yeah? But a heart big enough to share a bit of it with us."

"Aye." One of the young soldiers, standing by with a pickax nodded. "Kin follow her and know if you die, ain't because she wasted you."

Artemis's brow was still furrowed. "Is this some mortal insanity?" She asked, hesitantly.

Paladia had sat down on a rock with her cup, her skin covered with rock dust. "Probably." She stared morosely at the wall. "Caring about people makes you crazy."

Bennu chuckled and so did a number of the soldiers. "S'true." He nodded. "Aint nothing I wouldn't do for Xena. She took my heart first time I saw her."

"But why?" Artemis persisted. "What is this mortal that you worship her as you should us?"

There was a long silence as everyone sort of looked at each other, save the four workers hard at it against the stone.

"Oh." Paladia finally said, in a surprised kind of tone. "Well, that's easy. She gives a crap. You don't." She looked at the goddess. "We are crazy but we ain't stupid. Freaking minotaur be charging at you and both those wingnuts would step in front of it for ya. You do that much?"

Artemis stared at her in complete silence for at least a thousand heartbeats. "You would have something from us?" She finally asked.

"Sure. What's the point otherwise?" Pasi spoke up. "I mean like, what do you think all those offerings are for? You know?" She rubbed her palms on her leggings. "My mam prayed her voice out to the lot of you, and still watched all my brothers and sisters die and her after. S'how I ended up an Amazon. Had to find me another family."

"Strue." Bennu agreed. "All them years praying for good crops and healthy babes – and nothing from it. No matter the carcasses or t'wine bottles, got to know we had to make our own luck. Never got nothing from the lot of you."

Artemis seemed completely nonplussed. "But we could destroy you." She pointed out.

"And we should worship you for that?" Paladia asked. "Nice."

The goddess remained silent for another thousand heartbeats. "You will never get through that wall." She finally said. "Hades has made it inaccessible."

"Thanks." Paladia took a sip of her cider. "That's useful."

Artemis stood up, carefully cradling her hand. "But I know of an entrance you could use. I will take you all there if you wish."

Cereberus's ears perked up. He left his digging and came over to her, sitting down and watching her expectantly, as though she was going to produce a treat for him.

"It is Persephone's gate. How she joins Hades in the wintertime." Artemis said. "You all are mortal and can pass it if you wish, and those who take that path can return."

"Near by to here?" Bennu asked, after a brief pause.

"In the heart of this mountain. " She responded. "I will lead you there. Will you follow?"

The soldiers all looked at Bennu, and the Amazons looked at Solari.

They looked at each other. "Yes." Bennu said. "If that's the way to our friends, yes." Solari added.

The goddess nodded. "Then come. Perhaps I will find a way home as well."

**

They stood in a huddle, arms around each other, eyes closed. If anyone had been there to watch there would have been a mist coming off them, rising a crisping into frost.

A rumbling started over head.

"Xe?"

"Keep thinking." Xena said, on an exhale. "Think hard, Gab. We're somewhere else. It's warm. There's sun."

Gabrielle remained silent for a moment. "Is that how you did it, then?" She asked. "It's so cold."

'Yes." The warrior answered. "I had to be somewhere else."

Somewhere else. Gabrielle felt that memory surface, felt again that flutter of her heart and impossible to suppress surge of hope as she opened her eyes in that mist and found her heart's desire in front of her.

Somewhere else. Gabrielle took a breath and released it, then she concentrated on the caves and trees of Jessan's valley, hearing in her mind the rush of the waterfall and the thunder of horses running and the sound of children laughing.

The echo in her head expanded, and she drew in another breath, convinced she could smell the forest dweller's cookfires, and the green scent of the trees, and in her mind she called out for Dori and knew she heard her daughter's voice calling back.

"Mama!"

Clear and precise, and as she took another breath, the air was getting warmer, the sounds of the valley more clear.

Then there was a horrendous crack, and they were falling, Xena's curses sounding loud and distinct as the cavern around them vanished and they were tumbling through the air into a different place.

They hit the ground hard, and scattered apart, Xena recovering first and getting to her feet, hand on her sword hilt as she bounced forward and got in front of the rest of them. "About time you bastard."

Gabrielle hiccupped as she got to her knees, one hand going out to Ares who was at her side, licking her face. "Okay. Okay." She looked around to see who Xena was talking to, and realized where they were. "Ah."

"Ugh." Cait was getting to her feet.

"Ugh." Jessan echoed. "I don't think we ended up where she wanted us to."

"No." Gabrielle exhaled, as she got to her feet and looked around. They were in a vast hall, this no cavern or crudely carved place but instead a chamber full of white alabaster walls and columns, at the end of which was a mounted dias and two massive chairs.

Hade's hall. She limped over to where Xena was standing, brace legged, facing the figures seated there. Faced with a faint sense of familiarity, it still took her long moments before she realized why. "Just like Olympus."

"Yeah." Xena looked around at them. "Might be a good idea for all of you to stay back here. Let me go face him."

They all looked at her, even Ares.

“Okay. Never mind. Let’s go.” Xena waved them all forward. “All or nothing.”

**

It was remarkable how fast the army got ready to march. Jax and Redder were settling Artemis on the front of one of the wagons, as the mounted soldiers were forming up on either side of it. The support staff had gotten rest while they waited, and everyone seemed glad to be wrapping themselves up and moving on.

It helped that they were still on the road to home.

They turned their backs on the coast and started off in the early morning light, dawn just breaking in the east and making the sky a pale grayish blue.

Cereberus was stalking next to the wagon Artemis was riding in, his shoulders almost reaching the top of the seat. The horse team pulling it were eyeing him uneasily, and the rest of the horses were keeping their distance but so far the three headed dog was keeping to himself and behaving rather mildly.

Solari was glad of that. She was mounted on her horse, and had just come back from where the spare mounts were, more than usually aware of their increased numbers. It was odd to see Argo and Iolaus there, and Cait’s mount Shadow in line with the bulk of Jessan’s big, shaggy Eris.

But being on the move was good. She tugged the ties on her hood a little closer, blinking into the cold damp air as they moved along the road, heading along the line of the hills towards a break between them they could just see.

That’s where they would turn, Artemis had told them. Then they’d see a stone lined way up into the heart of the mountain that would lead them into Hades Realm.

Pasi came up next to her, seating a dagger into one of her boot sheaths. “Y’know what?”

“What?” Solari was glad enough to be distracted.

“I was just thinking about being back home, y’know? Back in the village.” Pasi said, re settling her boots back into her stirrups. “And listening to the queen tell everyone this story.”

Solari grinned briefly. “Everyone’s gonna croak.” She said. “I just wish we were on our way back with all them with us already.”

‘They’ll do it.” Pasi said. “You see Xena with that sword? Splatting that big thing? That was so cool.” The young Amazon looked around then back at Solari. “You think she’ll keep that thing?”

Solari shrugged. “I don’t think she wants to.” She mused. “But you never know. I think she’d rather give it back to his nibs - that kinda thing ain’t nothing but trouble.”

A horn sounded and they both looked up and past the wagon, to see one of the scouts galloping back down the road towards them. “Ah, now what?” Solari clucked her tongue at her horse, and started towards the front.

“Troops ahead!” The scout yelled when he was in distance. “Comin fast! Look to cut us off from the pass.”

Bennu let out a whistle, and the cavalry surged forward, stringing out ahead of the wagons and moving their pace from a canter to a full out gallop.

The archers and foot soldiers broke into a run themselves, moving in a group and readying weapons as they went.

**

There was a small dais at the foot of the steep stairs up to the thrones and Xena climbed up onto it, followed by her little gang, including Ares the wolf. She paused at the front of the platform and looked up at Hades, her hands coming to perch firmly on her hips.

Hades and Persephone gazed coldly back at her. "You seek to disrupt my realm." Hades said. "This I will not allow."

"Fine." Xena replied. "Send us back where we came from. None of us asked to be dragged back in here again."

Persephone rose and walked down the stone steps, approaching them. She was very tall, and pale skinned, with beautiful eyes and an oval shaped face and a faint glimmering followed her, illuminating the pedestal as she reached them.

Gabrielle shifted as she approached, coming to stand next to Xena and letting a hand rest on her shoulder in silent support.

"So you are the renegades." Persephone said, studying them. "And you, who have that which does not belong to you."

"It does belong to her." Jessan spoke up, quietly. "Ares gave it to her."

Ares the wolf looked up at him in question.

"It was not his to give." Persephone told him. "That is a thing from beyond time. He only may carry it as befits his title. He cannot give it. He knows it. He suffers for it."

She circled them.

Cait just closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing, her knees shaking under her. She could feel Ares leaning against her, and Jessan's near presence, but she wished for nothing more than for this to be over.

Hades' realm terrified her, in a way that battles and near death never had. There was a miasma of fear that she could almost taste, and it was hard for her to believe – admirer though she was – how oblivious Xena was to it all.

"If Ares sent me this sword, he did it for a reason. " Xena said. "So let's cut to the chase, and put our cards on the table. What is it you want from us?"

Persephone stopped and stared at her, making intense eye contact with the dark haired woman on the pedestal.

Her head was even with Xena's, so tall was she. "Be glad it is not you we wish anything of." She said. "That least thing we want is for your continued presence here. "

"Good." Gabrielle spoke up. "Then we're done here. Put us back."

Persephone slowly shifted her very cold eyes from Xena to the bard, her hand twitching a bit. But after only a moment she looked away. "Gladly. But the mortal who put blade to our son stays."

Cait felt her breathing hitch.

"No." Xena said, in a calm voice. "He was killed in battle, fairly."

"You do not make the rules here, Xena" Hades said. "We will have our price."

Xena put her hand on Cait's shoulder as Gabrielle and Jessan moved at the same time to enclose her in a circle of mortal flesh. "No." She repeated. "You said it yourself, Hades. Your time is over."

"Cait's family." Gabrielle said. "And your son was attacking me. "

Xena lifted her hand and clasped the hilt of the Sword of War. "C'mon. Let's see if this thing belongs to me or not." She let out a yell and drew the sword, hearing her own voice echo out against the rock walls and down long, dark corridors.

**

Solari kept her sword sheathed and lifted her crossbow up instead, as they galloped around the bend in the road that would lead up to the narrow pass Artemis had directed them to.

Ahead of them were troops, engaged in battling their scouts, pinned down behind a tumble of fallen rocks to one side of the snow covered road. Solari released an arrow, and quickly reloaded, as the enemy reacted to their oncoming force.

It was hard to see faces, they all had helmets on and the bulk of them were pouring up the path that led up the mountain and a hail of arrows came at them as Solari and the rest of the cavalry thundered in.

Bennu was in the lead and he galloped right into the front lines, leaning over from his horse to smack one of the enemy in the head with a mace.

The army was right at his heels, and in the next few moments they were all engaged. Solari had pulled her horse to a halt near the rockfall and jumped off, thumping to her knees next to a scout and aiming past them.

Pasi came up on her left hand side, and they fired together, then reloaded in almost the same motion. The enemy were easy to tell apart from Xena's troops – they were all in gray overtunics and their helmets were silver, where Xena's fighters wore their black half armor with the yellow hawk's head bold on the back.

Convenient.

Solari saw one of her arrows catch an enemy soldier in the eye socket, and he went over to the side, grabbing at his face.

"Nice." Pasi complimented her. "Who are these guys?"

"No idea." Solari fired her last arrow, then slung her bow on her back and drew her sword. "Ready to get in close?"

"Almost." Pasi fired the last of her arrows into the melee, then she drew her sword and joined Solari in scrambling past the rocks and heading for the fight.

One of the enemy soldiers jumped into her path and Solari swung her sword to meet him, and then they were battling fiercely, blades crossing and crossing again, sparks flying off them to either side. Solari ducked a brutal backhanded swipe, and as she did a spear came over her shoulder and into her opponents gut.

"Augh!" He grabbed at the spear but there was force behind it and he toppled over backwards, the weapon swinging up into the air.

"Thanks." Solari turned, to find Paladia coming past her, reaching for the spear to pull it free. She took a moment to regard this onetime enemy, who now had a cloak around her with Xena's hawk on the back of it.

"No problem." Paladia put her boot on the downed man's chest and yanked the spear free. "Sooner we get past these yonks, sooner we get this over with." She half turned as a soldier came at her, swinging the spear at him almost like a staff.

It hit him in the neck, and he stumbled to one side and Solari took the opportunity to bring her sword down and sever his hand, sending it and the blade in it's fingers clanging to the ground.

He grabbed his arm and then Paladia ripped his helmet off and punched him in the face, just as the archers and footmen came running up behind them and the surge of Xena's soldiers shoved the enemy back.

But it was going to be a long, tough fight.

**

They went from on a pedestal to running in a blink of an eye, as the chamber filled with bolts of fire, and creatures lunged at them from every side.

“Over there!” Gabrielle spotted a tunnel and headed for it, with the rest of the chasing hard on her heels as Xena brought up the rear using the Sword of War to deflect the bolts as best she could. “Son of a bitch.”

Persephone had vanished from their side and appeared back up on her throne, as Hades raised his hands and brought the roof down on top of them. “Challenge me?” He’d roared. “You have stepped too far, Xena!”

Xena leaped over a writhing snake heading her way and sliced downward, cutting it’s head off, before she whirled in mid air and intercepted a raptor, talons stretched to grab hold of her.

She closed her hands tightly around the hilt and focused her will along the blade, shutting her eyes as a bolt of iridescent light exploded from the weapon and sent the attacker into many different pieces across the room.

She landed and caught up to the rest of them, as they dashed into the corridor, and as she turned, she saw Hades lifting his hand in her direction and quickly brought the Sword up again, exasperated and angry at the never ending persecution.

That focused and erupted through the Sword again and intersected the stream of red fire heading her way, splitting it and sending it to either side of the tunnel entrance as the bright, white light ripped across the chamber and struck Hades in the chest.

It surprised him. It surprised her, and seeing him reel back and his throne tumble off it’s high place backwards wasn’t what Xena was expecting.

Persephone stood in shock for a moment, then she hurried over and leaped off the platform and out of sight as he had fallen.

“Oh boy.” Jessan muttered. “I don’t think that’s good.”

Xena stared at the sword, then at him, then she pushed him back into the hallway, almost knocking over Cait and Gabrielle. “Let’s go.” She said. “While we still can”

“Xena.” Cait reached out and took hold of her. “Should I just stay with them? If they’ll let you go?”

“No.” Xena, Gabrielle, and Jessan answered at once, as they all started down the dark corridor again. “Listen.” Xena said, after a moment. “I refused to stick around here when I was dead and legitimately in Tartarus.”

“Maybe you weren’t really..” Jessan started.

“I was dead. I crossed over.” Xena overrode him. “But I belonged here when I did, and I got out. Don’t think you’re gonna volunteer to take my place.” She had her hand on Cait’s back, as they hurried along. “Forget it.”

Gabrielle concentrated on the path ahead of them, having nothing really to add to her partner’s statement. She lifted her head up a little and sniffed the air, convinced she could smell cleaner air. “Xe?”

“Yeah?” Xena sounded frustrated and exhausted.

“Up to the left?”

A pause. “Yeah.” The warrior agreed. “Smells fresher.”

They got several paces further along, when suddenly a blare of light brought them up short, and something appeared in front of them.

Xena squirmed her way through and got in front, lifting the Sword just as the flare faded, and the figure left behind was just faintly glowing, but recognizable.

“Aphrodite!” Gabrielle said, startled.

The Goddess of Love hopped forward a little, looking around her. “I need your help.” She said, without any preamble, and lacking her usual casual attitude. She was dressed in what appeared to be a dress of silver scale, which rippled with a faint light of it’s own. “Please.”

“What’s wrong?” Gabrielle asked, stepping forward towards her, drawn by the obvious distress.

‘Gabrielle, hold on.” Xena lifted her free hand. “Can we get out of here first, then help you all you want?” She asked. “We’ve got half of Hades realm on our asses.”

“No.” Aphrodite reached out and touched her fingers. “We’ve got to get Ares out of here. He’s fading.” She looked intently at Xena. “Please, Xena.”

For a long moment, they looked at each other. Then Xena sheathed the Sword of War, and nodded. “You know where he is?” She asked. “And if the goblins start coming at us you gotta help me.”

Visibly relieved, Aphrodite nodded. “This way.” She pointed down the other corridor. “Follow me.”

They did, but Gabrielle gently caught Xena’s arm as they rambled down further into the earth, away from the fresh air she’d smelled. “Xe.”

“Have to.” Xena muttered softly back at her. “We owe her.”

“We do?”

“We do.”

**

Solari scooped up the last of the grounded arrows and went to earth behind a rock, selecting one and setting it into her crossbow. She rested the weapon on the stone and sighted down it, releasing it to sink deep into the chest of on of the gray clad enemy.

It was a mess. She rearmed her bow. It had started snowing hard again and the melee was one big morass of churned up half frozen earth, the footing becoming perilous and most of the horsemen dismounted to keep their animals from having to negotiate the slippery ground.

So it was hand to hand. The grooms had squirmed up past the fighters and captured the frightened animals and now the archers had settled behind the lines to pick off what enemy they could.

The ground was littered with bodies. More gray than black coated, but Solari had seen Jax fall, and his body was under two enemy dead so she had no idea if he was as well. Bennu was holding his own with his back to a boulder and there were a half dozen men around him fighting off an equal number.

She shot another enemy in the head, finding a good attack point in the space between the headpiece of their helmet and the plate covering their jaw. The body slumped sideways and was kicked aside, tumbling into the snow covered churn and immediately stepped on by two fighting men.

A surge of Xena’s troops came up along the path, a score of heavy fighters who went up against a block of enemy that was holding the path upward. With a yell they plunged into battle, and Solari could see the face of the enemy closest to her, his helmet knocked off his head by a blow from a mace.

He was starting to take a step back, holding an arm up to protect his head, and then, as Xena’s troops forced their way upward the soldiers they were fighting against melted back, turning and scrambling back and to the side to get out of their way.

Bennu let out a bellow of triumph, and pointed, whistling loud and long as all of the troops he led shouted out in response.

“Getting somewhere now.” Pasi was at her side, wrapping a long cut on her arm with a bit of cloth. “Damn it’s cold.”

Solari stayed where she was, methodically removing arrows from her quiver and picking off enemy soldiers.

“You’re pretty good with that.” The younger Amazon noted. “Safer for us, yeah? Those guys are rough.” She settled down with her own crossbow. “They got a lot more armor than we do.”

Solari saw two of the enemy clamber up onto the rocks and leap for Bennu together, long daggers out. She aimed and hit one in the side of the neck, but the other escaped Pasi’s shot. “Benny!!!” Solari let out a bellow. “Ware!”

Bennu wrenched around and saw the danger, and he jumped aside, swiping his sword downward and to the left as the second man reached for him, knocking aside the dagger. “Ya bastard!” The big soldier kicked the man in the head, sending his helmet flying and the man standing next to him turned and whacked his skull with an ax.

Shattered bits of bone littered the freshly laid snow as Solari and Pasi got up and went around the rocks, coming up behind the lines as the enemy stumbled and fled, Xena’s troops following them and cutting them down from behind.

“Brooh.” Bennu shook himself, watching them retreat. “Sure is easier to do this when the Genr’l’s here.”

“Got that right.” Solari agreed. “She’s always right at the front.”

Bennu regarded the scattering of friendly bodies. “Aye.” He said, after a moment. “Draw’s the worst of it to her, she does. We paid for that.”

“Bring the horses up!” Redder yelled, wiping blood from a cut on his head. “S’go and get up there for we get covered in t’snow!”

Troops started dragging aside enemy bodies, blinking in the thick downfall, and there was a rumble and creak as the wagons started to come up the road behind them. Healers were already coming into the lines with their carrybags over their shoulders.

Pasi drew her cloak around her and looked around, then nudged Solari. “Here comes her nibs.”

Solari looked up from her task of picking up arrows. “Ah.” She straightened, as Artemis climbed slowly up the path to meet them. The goddess was muffled in her thick cloak but she put the hood back a little with her good hand as she reached them. “Is the way clear?”

“Pretty much.” Pasi said. “Once they move all the bodies.”

Artemis nodded. “The entrance is halfway up the path. You can see the edge of it.” She pointed. “That dark crevice, there.”

Bennu had come over and was looking up to where she pointed. “Narrow, that.” He judged. “Tough getting all the kit up it.”

“Yes.” The goddess agreed. “It is the only way, though.” She edged past. “You must hurry.” She started up the path, stepping over the bodes growing cold and stiff with frost.

Solari exchanged glances with Bennu, then shook her head. “We taking the horses up there with us?” She asked, as one of the grooms led Shadow over to her.

“Can’t leave em here.” Bennu regarded the path. “Wide enough for a wagon t’go. So let’s get em.”

**

After a few minutes walk they were at a crossroads in the dark, uniformly torchlit halls and Xena halted in the center of it, reaching out to grab Aphrodite’s shoulder to stop her. “Wait.”

“There’s no time.” The goddess objected. “Honest, Xena.”

“I believe you.” Xena said, turning to look at the rest of the group. “But I want to get these guys out of here first.”

“Whoa.” Gabrielle inhaled sharply.

“Not you.” Xena cut her off with a gentle motion of her hand. “Hades is after Cait, and Jessan’s got something on the outside he needs to get back to.”

“Xena.” Aphrodite quickly glanced around. “There’s really no time for this!”

“We have to make time. I want them out of here safe.” Xena looked past them at the way they’d come.

“Xena, wait. I don’t want to leave you here. “Jessan objected. “It’s been what it is. I can take it.”

“I don’t want you to take it.” Xena told him. “I want you and Cait to get out of here.”

“But.”

“Don’t argue with me. Either you’re under my command or not.” Xena’s voice deepened a little, and took on a tough tone. “Which ways’ out?.” She directed her next statement to Aphrodite, who pointed back the way they’d come.

“That way. Up the path I found you on there’s a door just a little ways away. It’s that place you were outside of.” She said. “During your chat with Hades.”

“You heard that?” Gabrielle asked.

Aphrodite gave her a look.

“I know where that is.” Jessan said, reluctantly. “On the top of the ridge?”

“Yes.”

Gabrielle moved closer to the goddess. “Aphrodite, will they be safe going back there?” She asked. “I don’t want them to jump out of the frying pan into the fire.”

The woman gave her a wry look. “A lot safer than we’re gonna be going the other way, for sure.” She exhaled. “C”mon, peeps. Make up your mind we’re running out of time here.”

Xena nodded, and put her hands on Cait’s shoulders. “Find the army.” She told her. “Get them as far away from here, and towards home as you can.”

Cait merely nodded, her jaw muscles tense.

“Don’t wait for us.”

Cait was shaking, a little. “They won’t go without you, Xena.” She managed to get out. “And I won’t either. Don’t ask me to do that.”

Xena studied her, then simply patted her cheek. “Okay. Go.” She said. “Just get out of here.”

“Xena.” Jessan took a step closer, then stopped when the warrior’s pale blue eyes met his. “C’mon Cait.” He put his hand on Cait’s back as Xena released her, and they stood there watching as the other three started quickly down the hallway, until they disappeared from sight.

Cait sighed.

“C’mon.” Jessan guided her upward, taking a breath as a puff of air brushed against his muzzle, bringing the scent of the outside world to him. “Something’s just not right about this.” He muttered. “I don’t like it.”

“Yes.” Cait agreed softly. “But I’m glad they sent us away.” She admitted as they started to climb up the slanted pathway. “I just don’t now how to be brave here.”

The forest dweller looked at her with wry compassion. “Trust me, Cait. I’m shedding like a skunk in spring in here.” He said. “Creeps me the heck way out.”

“I can’t even think about fighting.” The young Amazon agreed sadly. “I’m just scared. I’ve never felt like that before.”

Jessan thought about that, as they climbed up the slope in a passageway far quieter and far emptier than he remembered it being from the last time. "Im glad we're going too Cait." He admitted. "I want to feel my world again."

They could feel the cold air coming in now, harsh and moist but along with it there was light, and they turned a last corner and saw the opening, empty and outlined in gray with a thick blanket of white coming down like a curtain.

Cold and unpleasant. They emerged into it with mutual relief, then stopped at the sight of snow so thick it came up to Jessan's kneecaps.

"What was that about fire and frying pans?" Cait asked, after a long moment. "Goodness, we could do with both."

**

Solari pulled her hood around her more closely and got her hands up against the wagon, leaning her weight against it as the horses struggled to draw it up the slope.

The snow had started falling so heavily it was impossible not to breathe it in, and the ground was fast becoming slick and iced, making climbing up the slope harder by the minute.

There was no shelter. There was no other way to go, no turn offs, no stands of trees to break the snowfall for them. "Brr." Solari was glad to be behind the wagon. "This is crazy."

"It's crazy." Pasi agreed. "I've never been so cold in my life."

The soldiers were all leading their horses, huddling with them as the animals blew and shook their heads, annoyed with the snow. They were clustered around the wagons and the foot soldiers and archers were behind them, helping to move everything upward.

"Shoulda kept hacking at those rocks." Paladia had come up next to them, and leaned her weight against the wagons. "This is crap."

"Woulda taken us forever."

"This won't?" The taller woman asked. "We're gonna freeze solid."

Well. Solari was forced to agree with that. The plan, which had now cost them a score of dead, was rapidly starting to become something everyone was sort of regretting.

Starting with her. At least back in the cavern, they could have all taken turns keeping warm and hacking at the wall. "Eh." She felt her boots start to slip and grabbed the edge of the wagon to keep her balance as she felt it jolt. "Hey!"

"Easy lads." The driver of the wagon coaxed the team. "Ben, need to give em a break. Put the chocks in for a bit."

Bennu unwrapped his scarf from his face and regarded the path. "Flat up ahead, we can stop there." He indicated a spot just up the slope. "Send some scouts forward there."

He passed the word back and as they eased onto a slightly flatter part of the slope the other wagons clustered up next to them, men and animals coming together in a thick cluster that blocked out the snow and provided at least a little warmth.

"Why are we stopping?" Artemis was on the third wagon. "There isn't much time."

"Need to give a rest." Bennu told her. "Get some rations!" He called out, leaving his horse near Solari and starting to edge along the lines.

Solari turned around and leaned against the wagon back, tucking her hands under her arms and appreciating all the warm bodies that surrounded them. "Nother candlemark or so." She said to her fellow Amazons.

“Until we get to the doorway to the underworld.” Pasi said. “Not really sure I’m looking forward to that. My mam used to tell stories about it.”

“Some of our friends are in there. We need to find them.” Solari contradicted her. “And then, we can tell stories about it that are like, real.”

Paladia nodded. “Gotta get that nutcase out of there before she does something crazy to it.” She rubbed her arms. “Probably be warmer anyway.”

Pasi leaned next to her, unslinging her waterskin and bringing it out from under her cloak, uncapping it and taking a sip. Solari joined her, chewing on some venison jerky as she watched the snow pile in drifts all around them. “Crazy.”

“Persephone.” Artemis had dismounted and walked over to them, cradling her injured hand in it’s splint. “She brings winter, when she enters the underworld.” She looked around at the snow and shook her head a little. “The land becomes barren until she leaves Hades, and returns to Zeus’s gardens.”

“Is that really true?” Paladia asked.

Artemis looked at her, then indicated the snow, as her eyebrows lifted. “Do you not see the cold coming every year?”

Paladia studied her for a moment “Yeah, but I heard stories about places where they don’t got winter.” She said. “Gabrielle talks all about that. She’s been those places.”

A small silence fell over the group of women, as they furtively watched each other and waited for Artemis to answer.

“Yeah, actually.” Solari finally said, as the goddess remained silent. “I remember her telling those too.”

Bennu appeared and leaned his arms on the wagon. “Scouts went up the path a bit. We don’t move on now, we aren’t.” He said.

“So we should move.” Solari answered, after a quick look around. “Don’t want to freeze solid here, Benny. I can just picture her nib’s face when we all tromp in there like snowmen.”

That got a brief smile from the soldier. “Right you are.” He stripped his gauntlet off and put his fingers between his teeth, letting out a loud, piercing whistle.

Solari pulled her hood closer and tied the fastenings around her throat more securely, then she shifted her cloak, and got as much of her covered as she could before she put turned and put her hands against the wagon, ready to start pushing again.

Artemis, standing there quietly holding her broken hand, looked profoundly thoughtful. “I remember when Hades kidnapped Persephone.” She remarked conversationally, as the other women started to sort themselves out to move. “He fed her some of the food of the Underworld, and his law was, anyone who ate of that, belonged to him. “

“But?” Pasi got her gloves on.

“But Hera was so unhappy, they made a deal. That Persephone would spend half the year in the underworld, and half the year on Mount Olympus. And that half would bring winter to the mortal lands.”

Paladia settled against the wagon as it started to move. “So does that mean those other places just don’t buy into you all?”

Artemis walked along side them, as they all moved upward. “You know.” She finally said. “That’s an interesting question.”

**

They walked downward and inward and the further they got, the more Gabrielle thought that what they were doing wasn't going to end well. She exhaled quietly, keeping tight to Xena's heels as they followed Aphrodite.

She was glad Xena had chased Cait and Jessan out. She would have been even more glad if they'd joined them. "Hey, Xe?"

Xena reached over to clasp her hand in a natural, unconscious motion. "Hang in there, sweetheart. I know how you feel."

Gabrielle smiled a little. "Do you?"

"Yup."

"Its not a lot further." Aphrodite said, glancing back at them. "I'm glad I found you guys. I've been looking all over for you."

"Aphrodite." Gabrielle said. "Can I ask a question?" She went on without waiting for the Goddess of Love to answer. "Why do you need our help?"

"Duh."

"No, really." The bard said. "You're a goddess. What do you need us for?"

Aphrodite gave her an exasperated look. "Because I can't get him out of here." She said. "Believe me I'da rathered you kept going and us along with you."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged looks, then shook their heads in identical motions. They sped up and caught up to the almost running goddess, as the path they were on started to slant more significantly downward.

Still were nondescript walls, still torches set at regular intervals, but now sounds started to drift up from the direction they were heading, screams and moans and the scent of death.

"H'boy." Gabrielle muttered. "That can't be good."

"Mm." Xena glanced behind them, and almost stopped.

"Don't look back." Aphrodite warned, grimly. "Just keep going forward. Uncle's pissed. At you, me, the rest of the family and everyone else."

"Why at us?"

"You knocked him off his pedestal." The goddess said

"He yanked us in here!" Xena protested. "He should have left us where we were damn it, Aphrodite! We were going home!"

Gabrielle was about to turn around, but felt Xena's hand gently grasp her neck, keeping her head from moving and in the next moment they were coming around a bend and under an arch of rock and they all came to a halt.

"Oh piss." Aphrodite exhaled.

They were facing a chamber that had no floor, just a bubbling surface of noxious liquid that stank, and no way to get across to the other side.

"What's the point of this?" Xena asked. "More petulant crap from the gods? We're over the games." She put a hand on Gabrielle's back, and briefly looked behind them, to see a dark, solid black wall at their heels giving them no route out.

"Well." The goddess sighed. "What can I tell you Xena. We've been fighting with each other for an eternity. " She walked forward and put her booted feet into the liquid, and grimaced. "You think you've been doing the sword thing for a long time?" She looked at Xena. "Babe, you're an eyeblink."

"What is that?" Xena asked, pointing at the liquid.

Aphrodite shrugged.

“Will it hurt us?” Gabrielle followed up the question with one of her own.

The goddess shrugged again. “Screw it.” She said. “I’m pretty tired of this too.”

With a lift of her head she plowed into the depths of the bubbling stink, with every step going deeper and deeper into the pool, a fetid mist rising up around her and making Gabrielle clap her hands over her mouth.

“C’mon.” Xena took a step forward, then paused, as she felt .. something.. from the goo now sloshing around her boots. As Gabrielle moved to her side she turned. “Hang on.” She put her arm around the bard’s shoulder then picked her up, cradling her in her arms.

They regarded each other solemnly.

“If you have to fight this is going to be gross.” Gabrielle said, as she pinched her nose closed. “I’d rather take my chances, hon. Let me down?”

Xena shook her head and started walking forward, shivering as the liquid soaked through her leggings, making the hair on her arms stand up straight and her guts knot. “Ugh.”

“What’s wrong?” Gabrielle’s eyes searched her face. “Is it hot? Does it hurt?”

“Feels like I’m walking through long dead bodies.” Xena’s face tensed in disgust. “Like on top of maggots.”

“Oh Xe.”

“Yeah. Glad you’re missing it.” Xena muttered, but kept going, resisting the urge to throw up.

Gabrielle seemed to realize it, and she reached up to put her arms around Xena’s neck releasing her own grip on her nose. “Easy.” She murmured, feeling her own jaw clench as the smell got into her throat. “Oh gross.”

“Toldja”

It was horrible, and she wasn’t walking through it. Gabrielle glanced ahead of them where Aphrodite was wading then back up at Xena who was unconsciously grimacing. Could she help?

Sure she could. “Xe?”

One blue eye opened fully and looked down at her, while the other squinted almost shut from a cloud of mist that nearly made them both retch. “Yes?”

Gabrielle rubbed the side of her neck with her thumb. “Think about that spring by our cabin, Xe. You and me, in there, it’s summertime, and night, and we can smell jasmine.”

Xena’s eyebrows lifted in patent skepticism.

“Can’t you smell it?” Gabrielle smiled at her. “C’mon. An owl’s going to hoot any minute and ruin my mojo.” She said. “Think of it. Remember what it was like that last night we were up there, just when it was starting to turn cold.”

“We were idiots and we both got sick.” Xena reminded her

“Yeah, we did, but it was worth it.” The bard gently stroked her skin. “Remember the frost on that spider web?”

Xena could picture exactly what Gabrielle had suggested, and as she did, the discomfort of the cavern faded, and she could, at the edges of her senses, smell the jasmine. “I do remember that.”

“There’s a million stars, and I can smell the pot of duck stew in the cabin.” Gabrielle continued. “I just hope Dori doesn’t wake up.”

“She’ll ask you for that damn cow story.” Xena finally responded, investing herself fully in the scene, aware her body was continuing to move forward but also aware of a slipping of her senses, a fading out of the cavern and the horror as she savored the image in her mind’s eye.

“Not tonight, I promise.” Gabrielle said, in a fond tone. “See Xe? It doesn’t even smell that bad anymore does it?”

“No.” The warrior admitted. “Remind me to have you do this next time I take a header into the manure pile willya?”

“Anytime.”

“Hey!”

Xena jerked and stopped walking, just before she was about to crash right into Aphrodite who had likewise stopped.

“Good job.” The goddess said, quietly, gesturing behind them.

Xena turned her head, and saw nothing but an empty, dry cave. There was no liquid, no stench, no mist. Just dry air, and a rocky, dirt covered floor. “What the heck?”

Aphrodite came over, as Xena let Gabrielle down and they both looked around them and then back at her. “That’s why I need you.” She said, in utter seriousness. “I can’t do that. None of us can do that. What you told Hades scared the piss out of him, about how you got out of here the last time.”

Xena frowned, but Gabrielle nodded in understanding. “That’s why Hera backed off.”

Aphrodite nodded. “C’mon.” She turned and started down the path. “Let’s get this over with.”

**

It was growing dark by the time they struggled up the last part of the track and found themselves on a flat area covered in snow before a tall, triangular opening in the rock face that was bleak and shadowy inside.

The animals blew out their breaths heavily, streams going up from their heads in a continual fog as they shifted their hooves, moving them off and on the ice covered ground.

Solari and the rest of the Amazons moved through the troops to the opening, Paladia carrying a torch in her hand. She poked it inside the rock face and then edged inside, walking in several steps and then looking around.

Solari came in after her, pushing her hood back as snow dropped off her from all directions. “Huh.” She motioned Bennu inside. “There’s lots of space in here, Benny.”

Artemis entered just behind him, and walked over to where they were. “The true entrance is at the back of the cave here. “She said. “It might be locked.”

“Well.” Bennu let out a whistle. “Might be so, but we’ll get all inside and out of t’weather for they freeze hard. “

The troops started coming inside, bringing light and activity with them, spreading out to plant torches inside the wall and guide in the sorely suffering horses. The wagons came in behind them and in a few minutes the cave was loud and getting cramped.

Argo had been brought in and was with the rest of the spare horses. She edged aside from them, and ambled through the crowd, gently nudging people aside until she was at the far edge of the camp.

She kept walking, and after a minute Solari, Paladia and Artemis followed her, as she snorted a little, then turned down a passage in the back.

“Hey.” Solari broke into a trot. “Argo! Where ya going!”

“What is this animal?” Artemis asked Paladia.

“It’s Xena’s horse.” The Amazon commented briefly. “She’s pretty smart.”

They rounded the corner and found Argo standing in front of a huge, arched ancient looking gate, with thick bars bolted into the rock. She was peering through them, nostrils flaring. As Solari came up next to her, she turned her head and regarded the Amazon through dark, liquid eyes.

“Hey Argo.” Solari peered past the barred door, seeing nothing but darkness beyond it. “Bring that torch up huh?”

“Sure.” Paladia came up next to her and put the torch as close to the gate as she could. The light only showed a long, dark hallway slanting down, into the distance.

Argo snorted.

Artemis examined the door, reaching out with her good hand and touching the lock. As her fingers brushed the cold metal, it glowed briefly. She let her hand fall, and took a step back. “I had not thought to find this locked.”

Paladia looked at her. “Do you mean we just all humped up here for nothing?”

Artemis drew breath to answer, when she paused and turned as Cereberus appeared, ears perked up on all three heads as he approached the gates.

They all drew back except for Argo, and he reached out a paw and curled his claws around the metal, and gave it a tug.

Nothing happened. The three headed dog tugged again, then shoved his weight against the metal. Aside from a faint creak, it remained shut, and Cereberus sat down and regarded it for a moment, then let out a loud incredibly deep bark.

The echoes went on and on, and he barked again, making the women next to him cover their ears and Argo pin hers back.

The hall behind them filled with soldiers and Bennu shoved his way through, fingers plugging his ears. “What the Hades?”

Cereberus turned all three heads around and stared at him, then opened his multiple jaws and emitted a roar that made the walls shake so badly rock started falling down on top of them.

Argo reared up and struck out at him with her front hooves in obvious irritation, snapping at his ears with her teeth, making the three headed dog shy sideways in shock and stop his noisemaking. Argo dropped to all four feet again and snorted, shaking her head.

It was momentarily silent, then Artemis cleared her throat gently. “That is a smart horse.” She acknowledged, gingerly putting the palm of her hand out for Argo to sniff. “To no purpose though. This gate is well and truly locked.”

“Ho boy.” Solari sighed. “Well, at least we can get some rest up here and not get snowed on.” She turned and started exploring the other side of the hallway. “Think there’s a crack in the rock up here we can make a fire in.”

“Aye.” Bennu turned from the gate as well, taking his silver linings where he found them. “Got some firewood in t’wagon. Have the lads bring in some from down the slope.”

“Stupid.” Paladia went over and examined the gate, then she lifted both hands and curled her fingers around the bars. “Should have stayed in the other place.”

Pasi patted her awkwardly on the shoulder. “Let’s go get some wood. Maybe if it’s lighter in here we can see something.”

“Peh.” Paladia gave the bars a shove, prepared to released them and step back when she felt them shift under her touch. “Huh.. hey!”

To everyone's surprise, the gates opened silently at her touch, and swung back to fold against the walls, leaving an opening wide enough for both Argo and Cereberus to walk through together, and after a shocked and almost breathless moment, they did.

"Hey!" Solari blurted. "Hey Argo!"

Cereberus shook himself happily and bounded ahead, outpacing the mare and disappearing quickly into the darkness. Argo slowed to a halt and turned her head back to look at them, just at the edge of the light.

"Guess we're not getting any rest." Solari sighed, as she left the crack in the rock behind and tailed after Paladia who was jogging over to join the mare. "Pasi, go grab our waterskins."

**

"Jessan, I don't quite think I can go any further." Cait sounded apologetic. They were halfway down the path to the plains and the snow was almost up to Cait's chest, and showed no sign of slowing down. "I think I'm freezing."

Jessan had been plowing ahead making a path, but he now stopped, and looked around, turning and clawing his way back up to where Cait was. "Not sure we can just stop here." He said, shielding his face from the blowing snow.

Cait was shivering, and her lips were blue. "You go on then." She said, in a quiet tone. "I'll try to find a spot to shelter."

Jessan grimaced wryly. "You don't actually think I'd do that right? Leave you here?" He asked, plowing his way back over to her and looking around for options.

"Well really does it make sense for both of us to get stuck here?"

"Yes." Jessan responded.

"Really?" Cait smiled a little.

"Would you leave me here?" The forest dweller countered.

The Amazon sighed. "This whole heroic thing is a bit nonsense sometimes." She said. "No of course not." She pulled her cloak closer. "But we really are going to freeze."

"Nah." He looked past her into the thick stand of stark trees that slanted down the slope. "There's a couple of logs there. Let's build a snow fort."

"A what?"

"C'mon." Jessan plowed through the drifts off the path, stamping the snow down as he moved further into the trees. The ground was thick with broken branches, and he carefully climbed over them, until he'd reached the small bowl between two lines of pines he'd spotted.

He turned and reached a hand out to steady Cait as she climbed after him, and then he pulled several of the downed branches out and started stacking them against the top of the tumbled lots. "We put a bunch of these in here, and pack the snow in, we'll do okay."

"Hm." Cait found that as soon as they piled the branches up it cut the wind and that helped. She could barely feel her hands or feet, but she managed to use her gauntlets and yanked the branches up, between them finally clearing a spot of ground and surrounding themselves with a round wall of branches.

"Lets put a roof on." Jessan scooped up claws full of snow and packed it on top of the branches, and Cait knelt and pulled up some smaller branches, tucking them in place as the fort thing formed around her.

It was already a lot warmer. Cait blinked, and felt droplets coming off her eyelashes. She removed the pack from her back and dug out two travel cups, filling them with snow and setting them

down. She turned and saw Jessan bending the last limb into place, leaving an oval shaped opening she could see the snow falling down through.

"There." Jessan squirmed inside and sat down. "See?" Snow fort."

Cait pulled her legs up crossed under her and pulled her pack over, opening it again and sorting through it, removing packs of dried meat and nuts. "I suppose it has to stop at some time." She handed over half of her supply. "I'm just a bit anxious about the whole telling the army thing. Xena might need some help in there."

Jessan chuckled. "She might." He agreed. "But chances are, whatever she's doing in there, she's doing it right so don't worry, Cait. She sent us out of there to keep us out of trouble not to get help for her."

Cait thought about that, as she chewed a piece of dried venison, a little stunned by how quickly she'd gone from being a frozen and miserable person to this relative comfort. It felt strange, almost like she'd woken unexpectedly from a dream.

She had never been as cold as she was on the path. Her cloak had become stiff with frozen snow around her and it had been all she could do to keep moving her boots forward. Just horrible.

"Glad you said to stop." Jessan remarked. "I was getting ice balls between my toes. It's really uncomfortable." He indicated his fur covered feet, which were coated with snow.

Cait looked sideways at him.

"Hey it is. You've got boots on." He smiled his toothy smile at her. "I know it's really kinda crappy here, Cait." He said, in a gentle tone. "But we'll make it. It can't snow forever."

Cait found that her face had unfrozen enough for her to smile back at him, and she did. "It's just been such rot this past while." She explained. "Every time we thought it was getting better, it didn't you know?"

"I know. " Jessan exhaled, looking around at their shelter with a satisfied expression. "But I'm so happy to be out of that place it can't get me down." He ate a nut. "Being in there is like having my head stuffed inside a big poo filled sack."

"What do you mean?" Cait started to break off some of the dead twigs, setting them aside to dry. "Because it was so dark and grotty in there?"

"Um no.. it's.. I have this… " Jessan wiggled his fingertips. "Didn't Gabrielle ever tell you guys about us?"

"Tell us what about you?"

"About our thing."

Cait's eyebrows lifted sharply.

"No, not that thing."

**

At the last, they came to the bottom of a long sloping hall, where the torches had faded out and only a faint golden glow lit the way.

It was very quiet. There was only the sound of the rasp of their boots against the stone and the tick tack of toenails as Ares the wolf kept up with them, panting a little as he stuck close to Xena's heels.

It was breathless, and oppressive, even though the air was reasonable in temperature, and the ground they walked over even and without blockage. There was a sense of being at the center of a profound dark solidness and Xena was sure someone or something was watching them.

Ugh.

The hall stopped, and there was a tall, arched opening at the end of it and Aphrodite walked through it with her head high and without hesitation.

Xena and Gabrielle followed, their heads turning in almost unison as they crossed into the chamber and stopped, looking around them in startlement.

"Wow." Gabrielle said, after a moment.

After the close hallways they'd been traveling through the feeling of vast open space around them was surprising and they slowed to a halt to look around, while the goddess of love walked on oblivious.

The cavern was huge, so big that they could barely see walls around them, the stone glowing with that same golden light but dimmer here, going completely around the cavern showing no breaks, and no exits save the one they'd entered from.

Overhead the ceiling was sparkling with what looked like stars, vivid and bright, twinkling and patterned as the heavens were and Xena thought she could hear the faintest of tinkling noise coming from them.

"Xe." Gabrielle whispered, pointing at the center of the cavern where they saw a stone platform, which Aphrodite had hurried up onto. They could see a body lying on it.

"Yeah."

There was a hush around them, and by common consent they reached out and took each other's hands as they slowly moved to the center of the chamber and the table.

It was Ares, of course, and his body was outlined faintly by the starlight or whatever it was over head.

Xena felt an uneasy ball form in the pit of her stomach. She kept hold of Gabrielle as they mounted the steps up to the top and then they were standing there next to the stone slab table that extended an arm span around the body on top of it.

Ares was laying still, naked, only the faintest motion of his chest indicating any sign of .. Gabrielle stopped the words from sounding in her head, because she wasn't really sure how the words life and death applied to him.

"C"mon, bro!!" Aphrodite was shaking him. "I got your besties here! C"mon!" She looked around at them. "Give me a hand here, girls."

They came up next to her and looked down, the familiar profile a little unfamiliar, flattened in the silver glow without it's customary haughty expression. "What's wrong with him?" Gabrielle asked, after a moment's quiet.

Xena gently moved Aphrodite aside a little and examined the body on the table. Ares flesh seemed cool to her touch, and when she pressed her fingertips against the inside of his wrist she could only feel a faint vibration.

Was that normal? Xena looked at Aphrodite, then she reached out and grasped the goddesses wrist, and put her fingers across the woman's pulse.

"What the.." Aphrodite almost jerked her arm free in reflex. "Hey! He's the one in trouble here!"

Xena released her. "Just wanted to see what kind of pulse you Olympians have." She said. "As in, you have one."

"Have one what?"

"A pulse." Xena touched her fingers to her own wrist. "You can feel your heartbeat." She returned her touch to Ares's arm. "I can't feel his."

Aphrodite went very still, watching her. "What does that mean?"

Xena took a breath. "Not sure if we can do anything for him."

The God of War's face was still, and very pale, the faint light outlining his profile in a bluish alabaster that made Gabrielle think of being halfway up a cliff, in the extreme outpouring of her strength, seeing that profile in much that same stillness over her shoulder.

In pure human reflex, she reached over and took Aphrodite's hand, watching her expression shift as she realized what Xena was saying.

"Oh that's not cool." Aphrodite said faintly. "Xena, you gotta do something."

"Aphrodite… sometimes there's things even Xe can't fix." Gabrielle said in a quiet tone. "Unless… Xe, was it giving back the sword that did it last time? Could you try that again?"

"Sure." Xena walked around the table to the other side, and after a moment, she drew the Sword of War out, and laid it down on Ares's body, settling the hilts right over his chest. "Gladly in fact. " She glanced over at the goddess of love. "Doesn't belong in my hands."

Then she released it, and stepped back.

They all watched in silence, but absolutely nothing happened. Not a single nerve in Ares face twitched, and the faint motion of his chest remained faint.

Xena frowned. "C"mon." She flicked the hilt of the sword with her fingertip. "Go back to where you belong."

Nothing.

"Oh wow." Aphrodite murmured.

"That' will do nothing."

The dark, loud voice echoed from behind them. They all turned to see Hades standing there, in his long robes ,hood up to frame his face. "He gave up his powers willingly. He is mine now."

"Hades, that's not fair." Aphrodite objected. "You know that's against the rules."

Hades smiled unpleasantly. "There are no rules anymore. " He lifted his hands and started to shape two red pulsing balls "I have destroyed war. Now I will destroy love."

"Xe."

"Yeah. Stick with me."

"Like the stripe on a skunk hon. Go."

**

There really wasn't much time for her to decide what to do. Xena took the moments there were, and at the end of them she reached out and grabbed the Sword of War, bolting off the platform and swinging it up to intercept the fireballs Hades pitched hard at Aphrodite.

Behind her she heard Gabrielle tackle the goddess to the ground, and if she looked behind her she knew she'd see her partner yanking her behind the table.

She didn't look, though, because the pain that shunted through her hands as the blade impacted the fireballs took up all her concentration as she landed and braced herself, bringing the blade up and around in time to knock aside another aimed this time at her.

Painful.

He drew out a long bright column of fire and gripped it like a sword, and came at her. "You are just a plaything, Xena. This is beyond you."

Xena braced herself and lifted the sword up over her head to block the flowing fire blade as it smashed against her, sending a wash of brilliance across her skin that smacked against her nerves.

He had intended it to crush her, sure that his older power would break the Sword of War but she drew in a breath and felt the energy flare in the other direction as her joints locked and her grip held against the onslaught.

"Play this." She arched her back and shoved off against the ground, forcing the blade screeching against hers up and away from her. She let the anger build inside her, then she turned and pulled the sword down, ducking as Hades lunged at her and slipping around behind him.

Past him, she could see Gabrielle, crouching on the edge of the platform, a big rock in her hand. As Hades turned and whipped his blazing weapon at her, she heard the soft grunt and as the rock struck the god of the underworld in the head she leaped over his sword and brought her own around in a roundhouse motion, both hands gripped on the hilt.

The blade hit him, just on the side of his neck as he stumbled forward from the unexpected strike on his skull.

A tiny spray went up, as Xena felt the sword recoil back in her hands and she only barely got her balance under control as her body was flung through space towards the back wall.

Tumbling around she got her feet under her and landed on them, straightening back up as she turned to meet his attack.

For a moment, he stared at her.

Then another rock smacked him on the back and he turned around, raising his hand and loosing a fireball at Gabrielle. It spread and enveloped the end of the platform as Xena launched herself towards it, but a golden blast met it, and sent the energy scattering to all sides.

"No." Aphrodite said, putting herself between Gabrielle and her uncle. "No you don't, Hades."

"You dare raise hand to me here, in my house?" Hades raged, turning fully to go after her then lunging forward as an angry Sword of War wielding Xena slammed into him from behind, letting out a roar of rage as she wrapped her arm around him and whacked him in the head with her sword.

"Kill love?" Aphrodite let out a blast of her own, pink and cheerful and devastating as it threw Hades offbalance as he tried to get himself free of Xena's grip. "You have no idea what you just got yourself into."

Xena sheathed the Sword of War and grappled with the god of the underworld, throwing herself to one side and yanking him ot the ground as Aphrodite pounced on him, slamming him with fireballs.

Gabrielle got herself another big rock and rambled sideways, waiting her chance. She could see Xena get Hades into an arm lock, rolling him over to expose him to Aphrodite's ferocious pummeling, all the while growling with anger.

Ares the wolf wisely stayed under the table, crouched on his haunches, his eyes watching the scrum going on below him.

A scent came in on a sudden cold breeze coming from the opening and he turned his head towards it, letting out a growling bark.

The chamber suddenly started to fill with gray clad soldiers, and Gabrielle turned just in time to see them attacking. "Oh, you big coward." She threw the rock in her hands at the first of them and when he dodged and came at her with his spear, she grabbed it and yanked as hard as she could. "Xena! Look out!"

"Gotcha!" Her partner's voice came back, along with a whistle.

The wolf scrambled down from the platform and responded, evading a spear and latching onto one of the gray soldiers legs with his powerful jaws, shaking his head vigorously as he bit down. He released the man then went on to the next, squirming between the soldiers to get to where Xena was fighting.

"She's right." Xena growled into Hades' ear. "You are nothing but a coward. You deserve to fade."

“You dare.” He snarled. “I will see you ripped asunder.” He twisted and tried to grasp her. “Foolish mortal.”

“Not as foolish as you are.” She responded. “Draw me in here? I’ll teach em all how to leave.”

There was a deep, purple flare, and a loud crack, and then she was holding nothing, as Aphrodite thumped to the ground next to her from where she’d been kneeling on Hades chest and sprawled awkwardly across the stone. “Oof!”

“Bastard.” Xena started rolling up onto her feet.

Hades was gone, but the gray army wasn’t and Gabrielle used the spear she’d liberated from the soldier to hold the first of them off until Xena could get up and come to join her. They went shoulder to shoulder as the gray army let out a yell.

Aphrodite also scrambled to her feet and rushed up onto the platform, standing behind the two women and lifting her hands. “What a suck filled day.”

“No kidding.” Gabrielle exhaled. “And I don’t see any end to it.”

Four men rushed them, and Xena drew the Sword of war with no hesitation this time, holding it in front of her and blasting them back. She took a step forward and moved the sword in an arc, sending the ranks tumbling to the ground before she lifted it up and whipped it into a figure eight to repel the incoming hail of arrows.

Aphrodite flung pink balls in response, and Gabrielle stood to one side of Xena, swiping some arrows with her borrowed spear, and watching for someone trying to get behind her.

The room kept filling though, and now they were all the way around the central pedestal, and pressing forward.

Xena got herself on the point of the pedestal and spread her booted legs out, taking a breath and releasing it and preparing herself to repel as many of them as she could.

The soldiers yelled.

Xena yelled back. “I will kill you all!” She felt the rage erupting inside her, a mixture of frustration at the attack, and anger at the cowardice of it. She shifted her grip on the Sword of War and released herself to it’s will, allowing all that passion to fill her as she set herself to defend herself.

Herself, and the love of her life, and the two gods who more than any other defined the two of them.

**

“So we’re just hauling ass down into the underworld.” Pasi commented, as she adjusted the straps on her pack. “At least it’s warmer in here.”

“No kidding.” Solari glanced behind her, where the bulk of the army was steadily marching along, the gates fallen back a long ways by now.

They had left the support people in the cavern, safe and warm with two large fires made. Artemis was walking next to them, her cloak draped over her body protecting her injured hand.

Paladia was on Solari’s left hand side, and Bennu was on the right past Pasi, all of them slowly looking to either side as they walked down the sloping, faintly lit corridor.

It felt creepy, Solari decided. It was too quiet, and the air didn’t smell like anything in particular, and the ground – instead of being raw rock like the walls were – was neatly set and chiseled stones with a repeating pattern carved into them.

Cereberus was long gone. Argo was just ahead of them, ears twitching as the mare walked steadily along, pausing to sniff the air periodically.

“So what is this again?” Solari asked Artemis.

“Persephone’s path.” The goddess answered. “It is how she goes to Hades house, deep underground, when it’s her time to spend here.”

“Isn’t she like a goddess too?” Paladia spoke up.

“Yes.” Artemis nodded. “She is the daughter of Demeter, who is of the elder ones and of Zeus.”

Paladia eyed her. “He gets around.”

The goddess gave her a dour look, but then shrugged. “She is the goddess of the Underworld while she is present here and so this path is a smooth and protected one.” She said. “It will lead to Hades’s great chamber, and surely if you are looking for your friends that’s where they’ll be.”

“Why?” Solari asked.

“Hades would not tolerate mortals in his kingdom.”

Solari looked at her, then turned around and looked at the columns of soldiers behind them. “So we’re gonna piss him off, huh? Cause everyone here is sorta mortal.”

“Yes.” The goddess agreed. “He’s going to be very upset.” She paused, and a faint smile appeared on her face. “I believe I will enjoy that.”

“We probably wont.” Paladia muttered. “Probably everyone’s going to get their ass kicked until we find Xena and Gabrielle, and they’ll end up taking care of the whole thing.”

Artemis looked at her with interest. “And yet, you opened the gates.” She remarked.

“Yeah how’d you do that?” Solari asked.

Paladia gave them all a slit eyed look. “Like I know.” She said. “Maybe I pushed and the rest of you pulled. “

The quiet, empty air coming at them suddenly shifted, and on the wind that gusted up they could smell fire and musk along with the sound of battle. The sound of swords clashing and yells of anger flowed up and got louder by the moment and above that, rising high, a battle yell they all knew.

“That’s Xena.” Solari and Bennu said at the same time.

Bennu let out a whistle and they sped up from a walk to a run, as they let out a yell of their own, hoping it reached her.

**

They’d finished the jerky and nuts, and Cait had managed to make a small fire with the branches she’d collected. They were sitting on a bit of log, and the fire produced enough warmth that she could push back her hood and relax a little.

“So anyway.” Jessan said. “Those two were the first humans any of us had met who kind of had that connection, you know?”

“I see.” Cait tucked her knees up and circled them. “I’ve seen that work. It’s quite .. ah…”

“Creepy.” Jessan smiled, showing his fangs. “Hey, its okay. We think you humans are creepy too.”

“Not creepy exactly.” Cait objected. “It’s just.. it must be awesome, you know? Its like they can talk to each other without speaking.”

“That’s not just the connection. That’s just them living together like they do.” Jessan explained. “Just because you’re a soulbond, you don’t always get that understanding.”

“Really.”

“No, I mean.. it’s sort of like what we have, but not exactly. They’re different.” The forest dweller said. “In some ways. Like the thing with Dori.”

Cait cocked her head. “But I thought Gabrielle said you had something like that too.”

“Legends.” Jessan responded. “But even the legends, about children of the spirit.. the people.. I mean it’s kind of like two people who could actually have a kid.” He blushed a little. “You know?”

“Not really.”

“Our soulbonds go boy girl.” Jessan said in a rush. “Like, I wouldn’t be able to have a spirit child with another guy.”

“Oh.”

“So yeah, they’ve got something like us, but in other things, they’re nothing like us.”

“Hhm.” Cait mused. “I wonder then how they did that?”

Jessan shifted a little, and scooped up another mugful of snow, holding it near the fire to melt. “I think it’s just something Xena wanted to do.” He studied the flames. “She knew Gabrielle wanted it, and she made it happen.”

They both stopped, and paused, hearing a soft crackling near by. In the same motion they stood and drew weapons, Jessan ducking out from under their snow packed branch shelter and lifting his sword up and around into place.

The hooded figure approaching them stopped and went still, as Cait appeared, her own sword out and ready, a dagger in her other hand.

Slowly, the figure raised it’s hand and pushed it’s hood back, straightening up as the snow continued to fall down heavily around them. “Who are you?” It asked, with a deep, raspy voice that somehow did not seem either male or female.

This wasn’t someone she knew. “Well then, who are you?” She countered.

He was of middling height, and he had black hair with faint gray streaks in it, and a thick dark brow over equally dark eyes that held more than a shade of irony. “I am Apollo, son of Zeus.” He said, in a mild tone. “Probably the last being you wanted to see.”

Cait and Jessan exchanged glances. “Actually you’re not the last. “ Cait said. “Would you like to come in out of the snow? We have a.. “ She eyed Jessan.

“Snow fort.” The forest dweller supplied. “We got tired of freezing.”

Apollo smiled. “A better reception than I expected, truly.” He crunched through the snow and joined them as they ducked back inside the shelter, and returned to the fireside. “I will tell you what brings me to Hades’s hillside, then maybe you will be willing to tell me the same.”

“I’m Cait.” She extended a hand to him. “This is Jessan.”

Apollo gave the both graceful nods. “I’m looking for my twin sister, Artemis.”

“Figured that.” Jessan said. “Last time I saw her, she was with Xena’s army, heading back towards the pass out of Thrace.”

He nodded again. “Was it so. She has entered the realms of Hades through Persephone’s Gate, and my father sent me to try and retrieve her. He knows Hades will make her fade, as he already has Ares.”

“I see.” Cait digested that. “Shouldn’t you be all secretive and lordly over us and all that? The rest of you lot are.”

“I should. But to tell the truth, I’m tired and it’s gotten us no where lately.” Apollo rested his elbows on his knees, lacing his fingers together. “So I thought I’d try being nice for a change. Is it working?”

Cait smiled at him. “It is actually.” She said. “But I’m not sure what we could do for you. We’re not really good at the whole underworld thing.”

“What she said.” Jessan chimed in.

Apollo smiled back, seeming a bit bemused. "I was trying to enter through the door at the top of the mountain path. But it seems it's sealed. I cannot." He said. "I will have to go the way Artemis did, but there's a problem."

"You don't know where it is?" Cait said. "Can't much help you there, I'm afraid."

"No I do, I just can't use it." Apollo said. "Unlike my sister, I'm not mortal. They can walk that path or Persephone can. I cannot."

Jessan grimaced. "Not again."

"Listen, you don't have to worry if that's where she went." Cait said, in a serious tone. "Because Xena and Gabrielle are there, and they'll sort it all out."

Apollo looked steadily at her and Cait returned his stare without flinching.

"She's right." Jessan said. "There's nothing either of us could do that would beat what Ares' Chosen and her soulbond can do if they put their mind to it." He added. "Especially since she's got the Sword of War."

Apollo's eyebrows contracted. "What?"

"Ares gave it to her." The forest dweller said. "So you know, maybe it's better if you, and us, just stay out of her way."

"Ares gave the sword to her." The god murmured. "Voluntarily?"

Jessan nodded.

"Then I may be too late." He exhaled, his shoulders slumping. Then he looked over at them. "Will you let me take you to Persephone's Gate anyway? Your friends are there, the ones that didn't go with the soldiers inside."

"Absolutely." Cait said. "Right?" She glanced at Jessan, who nodded after a brief pause. "Maybe we can find a way to help you anyway."

Apollo stood up and rubbed his hands together. "Too late for that. But lets get you back to your companions. It's the least I can do."

They gathered their things and Jessan put the fire out, then they stood quietly as Apollo raised his hands and stepped forward, already looking ahead to rejoining the army, and getting out of the snow.

**

Xena hopped up onto a layer of dead soldiers and repelled the nth attack on her, having worked herself around the side of the platform and she took a breath and exhaled, lifting the sword of war up and into position.

Gabrielle was behind her, guarding her side with the spear she'd stolen gripped tightly in both hands, and Aphrodite was on the top of the platform, shooting pink fireballs and keeping the bulk of the soldiers back.

It was surreal. The gray soldiers were unrelenting, faces blank as stone, set to keep moving forwards towards them regardless of their losses. They did not care. As one fell under Xena's sword, another came in to the entrance in the rear, a neverending supply of fresh fighters.

How long could they keep going? Xena didn't feel tired yet, but she knew Gabrielle was, she could see it in the set of her partner's body.

What was the point of it? Somewhere, Xena was sure Hades was laughing, all his own risk gone as he watched his soldiers attack, attack, attack, with no way out for the three women and one fading god left behind.

Could she carve a path to the entrance? Could they force their way up through this relentlessly mindless army to the path they had been on to the outside world?

“Hey.” Aphrodite spoke up. “Sorry about this, guys. I really am.” She tossed a fireball at the front lines and watched as it blew the bodies advancing back. “I should have let you just keep going out there.”

“That’s okay” Gabrielle took a step back and released one end of the spear, wiping the sweat off her brow. “If there’s one god I’d fight an army for, it’d be you.”

Aphrodite paused and looked at her, hands still raised in the air. “You serious?”

Gabrielle nodded, without turning around. “You’ve shaped my entire life.” She swung the spear again, knocking a soldier back onto his heels. “The only thing that’s ever meant anything to me, you know? It’s love.”

Xena cut off a head, and then took a step forward, as six soldiers launched themselves at her. “Yeah me too.” She whacked at the attackers who swarmed over her and nearly knocked her over, emitting a roar of rage as they hacked at her with war axes and a mace.

Two blows got through her defences and whacked against her leather armor, her cloak having been discarded long ago to give freedom to her arms.

Gabrielle got her spear point past her and the first of the soldiers was gutted with it. He yanked himself back wards and pulled her with them as she couldn’t let go fast enough and the two of the others jumped on her.

A heavy blow impacted her back, and then a second later she heard Xena’s wild yell echo above her and two boots came to bracket her on either side.

She felt a surge of energy, then the weight came off her and she could scramble back, rolling over and getting to her feet on the steps to the platform, catching her breath. “Jerks!”

A soldier broke through and lunged at the tabletop, driving his sword towards Ares body and without thinking Gabrielle got in the way, slamming the spear down to knock the sword aside as Ares the wolf darted between her knees and clamped his jaws over the arm holding it.

A second later, they all heard yelling in the distance, and a horn.

Xena had leaped up onto the top step and turned to put herself between the army and Gabrielle, yanking one of the soldiers back with a grip on his armor and her head lifted as she heard the sounds. “That’s Bennu.”

“It’s the army.” Gabrielle agreed, with a grimace, still trying to get her breath back. “Ow.”

Aphrodite scrambled over and put her hand on each of their shoulders . “Lets get out of here.” She said. “I can get us to Hades throne room. We can go out from there.”

“What about Ares?” Gabrielle asked, since Xena was busy killing soldiers. “We can’t just leave them here. Those guys are going to cut him up.”

Aphrodite looked at her with an oddly grave expression on her face. “We can’t save him, Gabrielle. I’m not going ot let you guys get crunched in here cause of my family crazy.” She drew in a breath. “So let’s go. It’ll be what it is, you know?”

Xena knew she had a few breaths to decide what to do and then, it didn’t even take one breath as she turned and extended her hand back, laying the Sword of War across Ares’s body as Aphrodite’s fingers tightened and she felt the room around her dissolve.

Then they were in the big chamber.

Then chaos happened, as the room erupted in torrents of flame, and creatures were coming at them from all sides.

“Oh. Whoa.” Aphrodite grabbed for them again, but Xena and Gabrielle were already running, heading for the huge, arched entrance out of the chamber. She bolted after them, ducking a blast of fire as a dragon sinuously slithered past and headed after them.

She heard laughter, hard and cruel and then they were out of the chamber and running down the hallway. “This is so not cool!”

Xena was in the lead, and she then pulled up as she came to a crossroads, hearing the sounds of running down the path to her right, and screaming up the path to her left. She turned and headed right, whistling as loudly as she could.

After a moment, she heard a response, and then the sounds got louder and she could hear hoofbeats among the boots.

“Xe! Behind us!”

She heard the roar and felt the heat and as they turned a corner in the hall she had to pull up to avoid crashing into the rear group of her own army who let out a yell of joyous recognition on seeing her.

Her name rang out from a number of throats then and she turned as Gabrielle and Aphrodite came past, to find a beast breathing fire coming right at them.

And behind that, she heard many many feet thumping along the ground.

Gabrielle came up next to her. “Hon.”

“Shoulda stayed in bed.”

“Shoulda.”

**

The army had flattened against the walls to let Bennu and the Amazons bolt through them and they reached Xena just as the beast let out a long breath of fire, deflected at the last moment by Aphrodite’s pink foam.

“You!” Artemis gasped as she reached them.

Aphrodite turned and regarded her. “Chick, please.” She turned back around and started tossing fireballs as the dragon opened it’s jaws and regurgitated flame right back at her.

“Use the sword!” Artemis told Xena.

“Only have my own.” Xena drew it and flexed her hands. “I left his where it belonged.”

Artemis groaned. “You idiot.”

Aphrodite smiled, giving Xena a sidelong glance. “Wrong, you pinheaded bimbo. She did it right.” She pulled up her diaphanous sleeves. “C’mon, kids. Lets go bap this thing.”

Paladia had gotten to what was now the front of the army, with Solari and Pasi behind her. “So where’s the nutcase?” She asked Gabrielle. “You didn’t like leave her someplace didja?”

Aphrodite started walking forward, with the rest of them clustered behind her, being shielded by the pink cloud she threw out ahead of them.

“We did, actually.” Gabrielle got her spear into place. “Xe and I made her and Jess get out while they could.”

“Yeah?” Paladia seemed surprised. “For real?”

“Yeah, she was supposed to find the army and tell them what was going on but like usual with our plans that turned out to be a cock up.” Gabrielle sighed. “So they’re probably out on the mountainside freezing their buns off.”

“Crap.” Paladia exhaled. “I did all this poop for nothing. Figures.”

“Hang in there.” Gabrielle reached back and patted her on the arm. “With any luck we’ll be in the same place soon and we can all freeze together.”

Bennu had gotten up next to Xena’s shoulder, sword out and ready. “Gen’rl.”

Xena turned her head and regarded him. "Glad to see you, Benny. Did we keep everyone together?"

He nodded. "Lost some in a battle, yeah? With some of those lot." He pointed over his shoulder. "Saw the back of 'em and then they went gone."

"When we did." Xena agreed.

"Aye. Musta been." Bennu said. "Then word came up they heard you t'back of us."

"Yeah, we were in a dead end. One of the gods popped us out of it." Xena told him. "Long story."

"They all are at this rate." Gabriele muttered. "Xe, there's more behind that damn thing>"

Xena sighed. "Let's see if we can get past this and get back out." She shaded her eyes and peered through the pink foam, watching the by now very angry and annoyed dragon taking reluctant steps backwards.

Bennu peered at Aphrodite. Then he looked at Xena, with a cautious raised eyebrow.

"Goddess of Love." Xena acknowledged.

"Ah. " The big soldier grunted.

"We're all in with her." Gabrielle smiled briefly. "C'mon Ben. If you had to worship a god, wouldn't it be her?"

Bennu looked at her, then he shifted his eyes to Xena, then he looked back at her, and winked.

The army surged forward and got behind Xena, who had one hand on the shoulder of the goddess of love. They let out a yell and stomped booted feet on the ground,

Boom. Boom. Xena felt herself falling into the rhythm and she stamped her own boots, half turning her head in surprise when she heard the distinctive clank of horseshoes behind her. "What the…"

Argo shoved her way between the soldiers and caught up to her, ears flat back, nostrils flared. Shes shoved her head into Xena's shoulder and snorted, blowing her rider's hair back away from her face.

"Hey girl!" Xena patted her cheek. "Look, Gab! Look who's here!"

"Made us come down here. " Bennu said. "Fought off that big dog thing too."

"What?"

"What?" Gabrielle repeated.

Then a huge, and loud, and ominous bang sounded cutting off all speech as Aphrodite got her hands up and stopped unexpectedly. "Whoa! Look out!"

A chunk of rock fell down almost on Xena's head, and she batted it away only to see more of them coming down. "Oh crap."

"I think we need to just run, Xe." Gabrielle pointed. "Lets go right through that thing."

Xena gripped her sword and started forward. "Run!" She agreed and lifted her voice in a yell. "Run! Everyone get out! Out!"

The army surged forward behind her and she pushed Aphrodite ahead as they came up the hall as the dragon lifted it's head and prepared to blast them. Xena didn't wait for the flame, she sped up and leaped at the creature, angling her blade as the fire started towards her and splitting it to either side.

She hit the ground and leaped again and ducked the flames as she turned and swiveled in mid air with her sword outstretched, closing her eyes as the heat flowed over her and aiming for the dragon's throat.

She felt the blade impact, felt the grinding crunch as the hand hammered steel cut through the creature's hide and turn and twist as she did, hearing the rumbling roar as the cavern roof was collapsing over all of them.

Then her shoulders hit the dragon's chest and she ripped the blade out of it's throat as she continued around and ducked under it's falling head.

She heard Gabrielle's yell of warning and dropped flat, rolling as the creature writhed and smacked the ground, as huge chunks of rock fell all around it. "C'mon!" Xena scrambled to her feet and climbed over the still moving dragon, jumping to the ground on the other side of it and barreling up the hall.

A moment later, Gabrielle was at her side. "The place is collapsing!"

"I know." Xena turned and saw the army flowing over the dying dragon, as the roof crumbled. "Hurry!!!"

Aphrodite ran past it, dragging Artemis along with her.

Xena kept running herself, her sword in one hand and her other around Gabrielle's bicep, ducking her head and shrugging off the shards of rock falling all around them. She could hear rumbling booms from further down and there was a sense of something coming up behind them she didn't really want to see.

The noise was incredible. Xena wished she could cover her ears as they stumbled along with rocks hitting them in the head and shoulders but she kept going, yelling encouragement to everyone that was following her.

She drew in a breath for another yell and was shocked with a taste of air that held cold moisture, not the dry, lifeless dust of the underground. Looking forward, she could see a bend at the top of the passage they were in.

Already half full of rubble. "Move it!" Xena sped up, almost stumbling when she was bumped from behind by Argo. They surged together almost as a huge single animal and went around the bend, seeing the outside world as light and cold past huge, closed iron gates.

"Oh crap." Paladia panted. "Who the damned crap blank head closed those damned things."

They surged against it, pulling at the bars as Aphrodite braced her back to it, blinking with the effort of keeping most of the ceiling up over their heads.

"Won't open?" Paladia yanked herself on them. "Aw crap."

A loud crack sounded over head and Xena moved just in time to get her shoulders under a sliding plate of rock, the muscles in her legs jumping visibly through her leggings as she caught the weight and held it.

Everything came to a halt.

Xena let out a shrill whistle, her eyes closing as she concentrated on not letting the rocks smash her flat.

Argo walked to the gates and snuffled at them, stamping the rock with her front hoof.

Artemis edged around the rocks and went to the gates, putting her free hand on them and pulling. They didn't budge, and she turned and put her back to them, looking back down the hallway. It was full of soldiers, the ceiling over their heads outlined in pink mist, bits of rock and debris falling down among them with the snick of stone on stone.

Then they heard the rattle of boots on stone and Xena's support team came rolling around the corner, led by Jessan, who let out a roar when he spotted them. "Hey!"

"Need to get that space open." Xena shouted back. "Whatever it takes. Get horses and ropes in here." She could feel the weight of the rock against her shoulders bearing down on her, and a moment later Gabrielle was wedged in next to her, boot against boot, hip against hip as she pressed her hands up against the stone.

"You can't open them that way." Artemis told her. "The doors open inward."

“Great, then pass the ropes in here.” Xena said. “Everyone grab on and pull.”

The first rank of the soldiers and the Amazons surged forward, getting to the gates and calling out instructions to the support people on the other side. They were passing ropes through the iron when two figures squirmed through the crowds and came to the gates, grabbing hold of them and peering thorugh.

“Artemis!” The taller male said. “By Olympus I found you.”

“Apollo” Artemis answered, in a quiet voice. “Get these gates open. Let us out.”

He shifted to one side and looked up, putting his hand on the metal surface, as Cait got past him and peeked between the bars. “Pally!”

Paladia darted over. “There you are you damned nutcase.” She sounded profoundly relieved. “I thought you croaked.”

Another loud crack sounded, and a huge rumble started coming towards them. “Oh oh.” Aphrodite grimaced. “That doesn’t sound good.”

The floor started shaking and the pink mist started to shiver and fade, as the floor began to crack and open.

Xena felt it. “Gab.” She turned her head. “Screw the rocks grab onto me.”

For a frozen moment, the bard merely stared at her, then she dropped her hands and turned her body, coming around in front of her partner and putting her arms around her. Xena braced her back and let her own hands drop, the sword falling to the ground as she returned the hug.

It seemed like it was the end, again. Time, again. Gabrielle drew in a breath, then something clicked and she turned her head towards the gates. “Cait!!!!”

The young Amazon had been feeding in ropes that were ultimately going to be useless. “Gabrielle” She dropped the rope and stared through the bars.

“Push the gates!” The bard yelled. “Want to come in here!”

With a puzzled expression, Cait did, to no effect .”I tried that!” She yelled as the floor started to split open, cries going out as men and women slipped through it.

“HARDER.” The bard said, in a fierce tone. “You have to really want it, Cait!”

“ Yeah, c’mon nutcase!” Paladia caught on and grabbed the bars from her side. “You’re an idiot aren’t you? Wanna die with us? C’mon!”

Cait’s eyes met hers. Then with a slight gasp of understanding she lunged against the bars and shoved with all her strength.

**

The bars swung inward so quickly Cait swung with them, loosing her balance as they hit Paladia and shoved her backwards, as the ground between them split open. “Oh!” Cait scrabbled for a handhold and caught the bottom of the gate as her feet dropped into nothingness.

The bars were slippery with moisture from the storm outside and she lost her grip on one hand, then her eyes widened as she dangled in mid air.

“Aw, crap!” Paladia bounced off the wall and without further thought dove out over the gap and grabbed hold of the gate with one gloved hand and Cait’s wrist with her other just as Cait lost her grip on the metal. “Grab my fricken belt!”

Cait did, then they both yelled in alarm as the entire hallway rumbled into motion and soldiers started falling into the opening floor with yells of despair.

Xena moved. She grabbed Gabrielle and bodily threw her through the gateway, and gave Argo a stinging smack on the hindquarters sending the mare lunging forward, the ground crumbling and opening under her hooves as she made a startled, desperate leap through the portal

Xena saw her safe, then she leaped over the opening and grabbed the gate as she went, trying to swing Cait and Paladia back to the edge of the path with her momentum. "Hang on!"

"Ooof!" Paladia kicked out with her legs to try and get up on the rock ledge, but it shattered as she hit it and fell down into the gap, which was starting to emit a hot moist steam. "Oh crap!"

Xena tried to use her weight to get them closer, but as she did Apollo bolted past the portal and crashed into her, sending her back out over the gap as the gate swung the other way. "Hey!".

"Xena!" Gabrielle had landed, rolled and gotten back to her feet, bolting back towards her partner. "Hang on, I'll get you!" She reached out as the warrior threw herself at the wall, grabbing hold and yanking her to thump against the wall. "Ugh."

Some of the soldiers were skirting the wall on the other side, squeezing past the iron bars as support people from their army were grabbing them and pulling them over.

Xena was shoving soldiers towards the edge of the gate, along the tiny bit of floor left to them on her side. "Get back!" She yelled at Gabrielle. "C'mon people! Move!"

"Hey!"

Xena turned back and saw Paladia loosing her grip. "Damn it!!" She dove back at the gate grabbing it at the bottom near the two of them and hooking her hand around Paladia's belt. "Climb up!"

Paladia got one hand on the crossbar and hauled upward, but then the floor suddenly started to close, slamming against the three of them and sending the two Amazons tumbling into the gap as it clamped around Xena's legs and pulled her down as well.

In a moment Gabrielle was on the ground inside the gates, letting out an inarticulate yell as she lunged onto her belly, grabbing at her soulmate. "Xena!!!!"

Apollo had reached his sister, and picked her up, moving quickly past the drama in the center of the floor heading back out into the outer world.

"Thanks for nothing, pinhead!" Aphrodite yelled at his back, then released her pink hold on the ceiling and as it started falling on top of everyone she went to the gap instead, grabbing hold of both sides of it and applying her magic there, face tense with effort. "SO NOT COOL!"

The army rushed to the side of the gap and flung themselves onto the ground, trying to pry the rock trapping their leader and swallowing the two Amazons. Solari was first among them, shoving her bow in the gap and yelling in panic. "Hey! Hey!!!"

"You should get out!" Apollo yelled back. "Aphrodite! C'mon!" He gestured at her. "We're all that's left! C'mon! We have to go home!"

"You stupid idiot!" The Goddess of Love screamed back at him. "Don't you get it? Don't you even for one stupid second get it??? Help us! Help me help them!!!"

"Them?" Apollo shook his head. "No." He had Artemis in his arms and he ran down the corridor dodging the support people and army soldiers running back to help.

Rock was tumbling around them and one of them slammed Aprhodite on the back of the head and she tumbled forward, scrabbling to keep her hold on the rock as it tried to surge closed.

Xena saw stars. She clamped her jaw shut and looked down past her knees, where she could see Cait and Paladia smashed together, their faces crumpled in pain.

The pressure intensified, and Xena felt Gabrielle's hands wrap around her just as a hugely loud rumble caused rocks to rain down on top of them. "Get out!" Xena yelled at the soldiers banging at the rock around her.

“Never.” Bennu yelled back at her. “By the gods, Xena, we’ll all go w’ya.”

Pasi and Jax crouched over Aphrodite, protecting her from the rocks that were now falling like rain. “We got your back.” The Amazon told her. “Just do your stuff.”

“Baby cakes, I’m trying.” Aphrodite growled. “Stupid family! “

The gap surged and one side of the hallway ceiling collapsed, burying a host of soldiers as Jessan furiously grabbed a bit of the iron, now torn loose from the wall and shoved it in the gap, leaning all his strength against it.

“Would you all get the Hades out of here!” Xena bellowed in frustration. “Is there sense in all of us dying?”

“Yes.” Jessan was near her head and bellowing back. “There is sense in dying to make my life mean I would never leave a friend in danger.” He shoved against the steel, his clawed feet scrabbling against the stone. “That my soul is bared for yours.”

“Ah Jessan.” Xena closed her eyes in pain.

“It’s all I have to give. All I am.” He panted. “What other offering do any of us have? So no, Xena I won’t turn my back and walk away from you here.” He hauled with all his strength, his hands locked around the metal bar.

“S’true, Xena.” Bennu was now hip deep in the cleft on her other side. “Grab on my foot there, Cait!”

“Can’t.. quite move.” Cait coughed. “Oh gosh.”

“Hang in there Cait.” Two of the soldiers squirmed down towards the two trapped Amazons, whacking at the stone with axes. “We’ll get ye all out!”

Gabrielle slipped her body into the gap, grabbing hold of Xena’s waist as she felt the stone close around her as well. “You hang in there too.”

Xena looked at her in silence, then she drew breath to speak, pausing when the bard lifted a hand and covered her lips.

“Shut up.” Gabrielle said, just loud enough for her to hear. “This is my place. I earned it.”

Xena rested her head against Gabrielle’s. “Body, heart and soul. He’s right. It’s all any of ever have to give.”

There was crack overhead, and then the rocks came down over them. Xena threw her arms around Gabrielle and took the brunt of them, reeling on the edge of unconsciousness when the light around them shifted and changed, blue meeting pink is shift of startling suddenness.

A loud, male brass bellow rung out and then a tall, bare body was kneeling between Aphrodite and Xena, shoving a blue tinged sword in the gap and flaring a cloud of it over their heads, sending the falling rocks out and back.

“Ares!” Gabrielle gasped.

“Later, blondie.” Ares got his feet braced on one side of the gap and gripped his sword, hauling back and closing his eyes in concentration. “Busy now.”

The ground writhed around her. Xena took a deep breath and braced herself, putting her hands on the edge of the rock, feeling a shiver as they passed through the godsfire as she pushed outward.

Rocks cascaded down from the ceiling but stopped just above them as Ares let out another bellow of rage, tensing his body as the blue fire expanded out from him, the sword growing suddenly much brighter between his hands.

There was a sound of the earth splitting.

Xena felt the grip relax and she hauled Gabrielle up and out of the gap. Then she reached down and grabbed Paladia’s cloak, wrapping it around her and and bracing herself to start pulling when a

dozen hands grabbed her and hauled her out of the opening and she tightened her grip on the cloak before it was ripped out of her hands. “Hang on!”

“Move it!” Ares grunted. “Can’t hold this!” His body was curved like a bow, muscles standing out under his skin in the blue light, veins visibly crossing them. “Go! Go!”

Jessan and a half dozen soldiers hauled Paladia up, her arms clamped so tightly around Cait the tendons were standing out like cords on her arms and they just cleared the gap as it crackled and thumped, and Ares yanked his sword clear as it closed.

“Move!” Bennu shoved Xena and Gabrielle towards the gate and grabbed soldiers and dragged them with him as everyone who’d survived and wasn’t buried in underworld rock scrambled to follow them as fast as they could.

Pasi and Jax gently lifted Aphrodite to her feet and they bolted through the gates with her suspended between them past Ares, who had paused at the entry and waved them through. “Get moving morts!”

He stood guard until the last of the remaining army ran through under the blue half circle protecting them, stumbling and exhausted, some of them injured, some of them dead.

The ground had swallowed a portion of them.

Those remaining got around the corner of the passage and then it was quiet. Ares stood there, his hands lit in blue godslight, his will holding back the destruction aching to happen, feeling the weight of the entire mountainside leaning against him.

He leaned back, extending his free hand palm out in a rejecting motion. Then he turned as Aphrodite came up next to him, extending her own hand out and mingling her godslight with his. “Yo.”

“Yo.” Aphrodite responded. “Fade to all of them, Ares.”

“You finally got it, huh?” Her brother shifted his grip in the sword, daring the mountain to try him.

“Yeah.” The Goddess of Love exhaled. “Finally. “

“It’s the morts.” Ares answered. “Always was.”

“It’s the morts.” The Goddess of Love nodded “Always was.” She looked into the darkness. “And now they’re ours.”

Ares nodded. “Let’s go”

He backed out the portal and let his sword drop as she let her hands fall, and in an instant the tunnel imploded, sending a cloud of razor sharp shards blasting over them as the rock collapsed into nothing.

Ares turned at the last moment and spread his arms to protect his sister from the volley of rock as a crowd of bodies came flying back around the corner, weapons raised, ready to help. “STOP!” The God of War barked.

They stopped.

Ares let his arms drop, and gave himself a shake, then brushed the shards off his chest with a look of profound disgust. “You suck!” He turned and addressed the now sealed tunnel. “You couldn’t have beaten my mothers butt pillow.”

Then he turned back and regarded the silently watching crowd. “What are you all looking at?”

Xena lowered her sword to rest on her shoulder and gave him a brief smile . “Someone get him a cloak.” She said. “And all of us a hot cup of tea.”

**

They had made the cavern into a reasonable camp, and now, with snow still falling outside and it full night there wasn’t much to do but make the best of it.

Whatever it was, at the moment.

Xena was seated on a box, her head resting against a second. Gabrielle was laying across a third crate, her head resting on her partner's leg.

Cait and Paladia were sitting on a wagon across from them, silent wrapped in sleeping fur, and Jessan along with Bennu and Solari were sharing a folded hide tarp on the floor, sitting knee to knee in somber silence.

Everyone was in bit of shock. No one really knew what to say.

Gabrielle finally exhaled, resting her forearm over her eyes. "Let's go home, Xe."

One blue eye opened and regarded her warily. "Right now?"

"If I could walk right now I'd say yes. " The bard said. "But no. As soon as we can."

"Agreed." Xena rested her hand on her partner's stomach. "Big mistake, coming here." She admitted. "We should have stayed home and minded our own business."

"Except we never would have."

Solari shifted. "Can't wait to see our place." She admitted. "Night in my bunk would feel great. "

"Yeah." Pasi said. "But hey, we made it, right?"

Xena chuckled wryly. "We did." She admitted. Then she straightened up, and gently moved Gabrielle aside. "Need to go get something to eat." She got to her feet and stretched, then shook herself and walked through the lines of wagons, Ares the wolf at her heels.

To one side, they'd roped off an area and the horses were there, being fed dried grasses and some grain. The support teams had built up a fire, warm and crackling and tucked inside it's heat were a half dozen pots all steaming.

So normal. On the far side of the cavern the healers had set up roughly made pallets and on them were the soldiers injured in the fighting. Xena detoured over to them, bypassing the cookfires.

The healers saw her coming and stood to greet her, wiping off hands full of ointments and cleansers most of which had come from her own hands. "Xena."

She joined them, and they drew over one side and lowered their voices. "Whats the count?"

"Got a dozen just breaks and cuts." The most senior of them answered. "Another dozen got crushed in the tunnel there, bad hurt. " He said. "Got six probably not going to make it."

"We left a score in the valley back there, getting up to this place." One of the others said "Didn't have time to give em a pyre, and no wood for it any case."

Xena exhaled, and shook her head. "For nothing." She murmured. "Damn I wish they'd just kept going."

"Wouldn't have." The elder healer said, with a faint, gentle smile. "Wouldn't leave you behind, Xena. You know better. These soldiers all knew the risk. "

Xena remained still for a time, only her eyes moving as she regarded them. "I wish I'd know the risk." She said, bluntly. " I should have known better. " She clapped the elder of them on the shoulder. "Do what you can to make them ready to travel. Sooner we head for home, the better."

The man nodded in agreement. "Will do, Xena." He paused. "Get yourself some rest. You had a harder row to hoe than the rest of us did."

Xena nodded, then headed back towards the cookfire, slowing again when she saw Aphrodite approaching her, a rough brown cloak over her shoulders and a serious expression on her face that looked very out of place to the warrior's eyes.

"Xena." The goddess said. "Can we talk?"

Xena glanced past her, to the little curve in the rock where the Olympians had taken up shelter in solitude. "Now?"

"Now."

"Sure." Xena gestured towards the cave, and followed Aphrodite towards it.

**

Gabrielle pushed herself up to a seated position, then swung her legs over the edge of the box and dangled them there, regarding the cavern's other occupants soberly. "Are you guys okay?" She asked Cait.

"Not really so much." Cait answered. "Feels like I fell down a mountain."

"You did." Paladia was leaning against a piece of the rock wall, her eyes firmly shut.

"What a crazy day." Jessan looked across at Gabrielle. "So glad it's over. I feel like I could sleep for a week now." He paused and thought. "You know though, I didn't think Apollo was going to turn out such a stinker."

"No." Cait said. "Me either." She wrapped her arms around her knees. "Did you know him, Gabrielle?"

"Didn't even realize who it was until Artemis yelled." Her queen admitted. "Aphrodite was really something though, huh?" She got to her feet and cautiously stretched her body out, easing the fabric of her cloak over the scrapes and bruises from the cleft. "And I was never so glad to see Ares in my life."

"True that." Paladia still had her eyes closed. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

Gabrielle walked over to her. "Sure. No guarantee I have an answer though. My brain is toast."

Paladia opened one eye and looked at her. "You told the wingnut to push the gates. Why?"

Gabrielle took a seat on the rock ledge next to where they were seated. "Why did I know she could open them you mean?"

"Yeah."

Cait half turned and looked up at Gabrielle. "I wondered that myself."

Their queen regarded them with wry fondness. "Silly kids." She mock sighed. "It's Persephone's gate. Or it was. It's the boundary between the earth and the underworld, and she went through it to join her one true love."

They both grimaced. "Oh" Cait's nose wrinkled. "Well gosh."

Jessan chuckled softly, and patted Gabrielle's leg. "Glad you were there to know that, little sister. Would have been a much longer day if you weren't."

"Not so much. I'd have been on the other side of that gate getting through it we both know that." Gabrielle rested her hand on his shoulder. "Let me go see what Xe's gotten into. I'm hoping she's just ticked off at the weather."

She stood up and walked off, leaving the cavern and heading the same direction her partner had, moving quickly out of sight.

Cait scratched her nose and gave her head a little shake. Paladia settled her elbows on her knees, lacing her fingers together and muffling a faint smile.

Jessan leaned back against the rock again, closing his eyes.

**

Xena perched on a haybale and extended her legs, crossing them at the ankles. The small space contained the four Olympians, Apollo and Artemis seated across from Ares, who was joined by Aphrodite as the goddess entered behind her.

"Why did you bring her here?" Apollo asked, looking cross. "Aphrodite, we've got enough problems without dragging random mortals into our business."

"You really are an idiot." Aphrodite said, as she sat down next to Ares. "So, Xena, let's catch you up."

"Do you have to?" Xena said, in a mournful tone. "I'm about out of party tricks or give a damn right now." She let her hands rest on her thighs. "We're done with this. Soon as it gets light, we're heading back to Amphipolis."

"Were it that easy." Artemis said. "You assume there will be light, or that the home you left still remains." She held up a hand as Xena stiffened and then stood up. "I mean you no ill will, Xena. We just know the fate of the overworld depends on Persephone, and she will never come back out that path to the world."

Xena studied her, flexing her hands. "That tunnel's not reopening." She clarified.

"No, uncle was seriously pissed off." Aphrodite said "Especially since we got out of there." She looked to the side at her brother. "Tell Xena what happened in the chamber."

Ares was dressed in a set of spare leather and armor, a thick cloak draped over his shoulders. He had the sword of War loosely gripped between his hands, it's point resting on the floor. "One minute I was sitting on a cloud." He said. "Next minute, I was in that damn chamber, hearing screams all over the place and ducking bolts."

"I left the sword with you when we ran." Xena told him, calmly. "Since we couldn't take you with us."

"You're kinda dipshit." Ares told her. "Woulda made it a lot easier for you if you'd kept it."

"Didn't want it."

Ares rolled his eyes.

"I didn't. It hurt like crazy to use it." Xena told him. "It's not mine. Not my gig. Not something I ever did want, Ares."

The god of war sighed. "I know." He said, in a somber voice. "But you were the only one I could give it to that I knew would have the guts to use it."

Apollo leaned forward. "You gave it to her?" He asked, in a shocked voice. "Ares!"

"Don't Ares me." The God of War glowered at him. "Who was down in the underworld trying to goose our rep while you were somewhere drinking nectar? You come down here at the last minute and act like a big deal? Kiss my ass."

"Yeah, don't diss him." Aphrodite chimed in. "He's right. We got no help from you at all." She pointed one pink fingernailed finger at him. "Mr Oh I'm holding down the fort here! You jerk."

"Aphrodite…"

Xena went over to the bale and sat back down, exhaling and letting her hands fall on her knees. "Did you want to tell me something?" She asked pointedly. "I've got a route to plot and an army to take care of."

"Ah doesn't matter." Apollo said, with a sigh. "We failed. Hades won."

"How do you figure that?" Xena asked him. "We beat his army." She made a vague gesture behind her. "Inside the underworld, outside the underworld.. one of my scouts sent his son back to him. I ditched his henchmen. How'd he win?"

Gabrielle chose that moment to enter, coming over to sit next to her partner. "Hey."

"He had a bet with Zeus." Apollo stated.

“Oh for crying out loud. Not again.” Gabrielle stood back up and tugged on Xena’s sleeve. “C’mon, Xe. I’ve got a nice big bowl of soup and hammock waiting for us.”

Xena got up to join her. “I don’t even want to hear it.” She agreed. “He’s a coward. Wouldn’t even stand up to us himself. “

“Yeah!” Aphrodite said, brightening. “Shoulda seen it.” She nudged Ares in the shoulder. “Xena had him down on the ground in a headlock and I was whacking him with zingers. “

Both of Ares eyebrows lifted. “Yeah?”

“Totally true.” Gabrielle agreed. “I was throwing rocks. I think Xe even clipped him with your sword.” She indicated the Sword of War, then glanced up at them as complete silence fell among the Olympians.

Ares took a careful breath. “Didja?” He asked Xena, after a long pause.

Xena studied them, noting the sudden change of expression even on Aphrodite’s face. “I did.” She confirmed quietly. “Cut him in the neck. I saw the blood fly.”

Artemis put her hand up over her mouth in reaction, her other hand going out blindly to find Apollos.

Xena sat back own and patted the bale next to her. “I think you just changed the picture, hon.

Gabrielle sighed and resumed her seat. “Didn’t mean to.” She acknowledged. “I just remembered that and I wondered, you know? About the blood and all that stuff. Because he ran from you and Aphrodite.” She paused, thoughtfully. “You fought with him, Xe, then Aphrodite was beating up on him and then he disappeared, after his gray army came in.”

Apollo slowly got up, releasing his twin sister’s hand and walked over to crouch next to Gabrielle. “You saw this all?” He asked. “Could you tell us everything you did see? It could be very important.”

Gabrielle exchanged looks with her partner. Xena shrugged a little, lifting her hands and putting them back down. “I can.” She said. “But you know what? I’m not going to.” She stood up. “I’m done with you all.” She turned and left the niche they were all in, leaving utter silence behind her.

Apollo looked up at Xena. “Can you m… persuade her to tell us?”

“Why should I?” She answered. “Why should she want to? Shes probably remembering you telling Aphrodite to abandon us in that crevice. Screw you.”

“I could kill you.” He answered, conversationally. “I am, still, a son of Zeus.”

Xena shook her head. “No you couldn’t.” She said, just as conversationally. “G’wan. Try it.”

He stared at her. She stared back at him. Behind him, in her peripheral vision she could see Ares and Aphrodite just watching, with somewhat neutral expressions.

What would happen? What would he do? What would she do? Xena was relatively sure of only one thing, that very soon she’d get up and leave the cavern, and taste Gabrielle’s bowl of soup and they would lay down together in a hammock and savor their love.

She really didn’t care what Apollo was going to do, and so, when he abruptly stood and thrust his hands at her, and red fireballs appeared to shoot right at her face, she did nothing to stop them and they exploded against her skin without any impact.

Felt like soap bubbles. She almost even convinced herself that she could smell the faint, spicy residue of her mother’s hand made soap in them. It made her think of home, and their cabin, and bathtime with Dori.

Apollo stepped back in shock and stared at her.

Xena shrugged and stood up, dusting herself off. “C’mon out to the cookfire if you’re hungry.” She said, simply, before she turned and followed Gabrielle’s steps outside.

**

Apollo stepped back and sat down, looking stunned. After a moment he looked over at Ares, who had extended his legs and crossed them at the ankles. “Now I know how our father felt.” He said. “Things just stop working.”

“Freaky, huh?” Ares said. “I told you not to screw around with her.”

“Yeah, and like, you think that’s a way to get help?” Aphrodite added.

Apollo ignored the tone. “She drew his blood.” He said. “She was the rightful holder, stupid as that was of you,a nd she drew his blood, Ares.”

“Uh huh. S’what I was hoping she’d do. Actually, I was hoping she’d put the damn thing right thorugh his loins.” Ares said. “So he didn’t win.”

Apollo stared off into the distance, then looked at Aphrodite. “He struck at her? And failed? You’re sure?”

Aphrodite nodded. “But it wasn’t a biggie. He was already crapping his toga.” She said. “She told him she’d tell all his groobly ghouls how to get out of Hades, and dude, she knows.” The Goddess of Love folded her hands. “She’s the key. She always was, he always knew it.” She nudged Ares with her elbow. “So now she won daddy’s bet again, and we’re still screwed.”

“How?” Artemis spoke up at last, sitting in her corner, cradling her arm, pale as a ghost. “She’s just a bastard mortal.” She shifted a sideways glace at Ares. “Unless you’re going to fess up finally.”

Ares shook his head. “None of mine.” He said, in a sad tone. “None of mine, mores the pity.” He stood up, lifting the sword up and letting it rest on his shoulder. “I finally saw it, when we were fighting our way out here. Army from the port city, coming at her and she lifted up that sword and charged them and by the name of Zeus.” He spread his free hand out. “By the name of Zeus, I, I the God of War, wanted to follow her.”

The other three remained quiet, watching him.

“She is the elemental of what I am, what they worshipped me for.” Ares said, tipping his head back and regarding the cavern ceiling. “Of course I gave her this.” He lifted the Sword and let it fall. “Idiot.” He now straightened and looked at Apollo. “I couldn’t have fought him. Neither could you. He’s family.”

Apollo tilted his head in acknowledgement.

“But Xena could.”

“Xena did.” Aphrodite confirmed. “But, so now what? Daddy won his bet. Why are we still here? Why is she still mortal?” She indicated Artemis. “Persphone’s gate is destroyed. Now what?”

“Now what.” Apollo repeated glumly. “That’s a good question.”

“Maybe something happened and there really is no more home.” Aphrodite said, after a long moment of silence. “Maybe this is all there is left.”

There was a sound of footsteps, and they looked up, to see two of the Amazons entering with a tray. “Hello.” The shorter of the two said. “We thought you’d like some soup and bread. It’s all we have, but it’s quite nice.”

“And a couple apples.” The taller of the two added, putting a small bowl down. “And this.” She added a wineskin, then half turned to address Ares. “And thanks for saving our butts.”

Ares hesitated, then he moved closer to them. “You got the gate open.” He said, pointing at Cait with his sword. “Good job.”

Cait folded her hands. “Wasn’t anything really.” She responded politely. “Gabrielle figured it all out.”

Ares nodded. Then he casually lifted his sword up and touched the top of Paladia's head with it, then Cait's, watching both of them carefully to see that faint catch in breathing. Then he winked at them, and picked up the wineskin.

They both smiled, and backed out, disappearing into the faint haze from the main part of the cavern.

"Is this the time to be collecting accolytes?" Apollo remarked, wearily.

Ares let the sword rest on his shoulder again. "When if not now?" He retreated to the rock ledge and sat down, uncapping the wineskin and taking a sip from it. "If not them, then who?"

"You doing poetry now, bro?" Aphrodite was smiling knowingly, accepting the skin when he passed it to her.

"Hey you were shooting fireballs." Ares picked up a bit of his cloak and wiped the sword down, inspecting it's surface before he finally reseated it into it's sheath.

Artemis got up and went to the tray, retrieving some bread and a bowl awkwardly with one hand. She retreated to her corner and set her burden down, with a tiny shake of her head, then looked up, about to speak when the entryway filled again with Xena's tall form.

The warrior crossed the chamber and took a seat next to her, unrolling a leather sack. "Let me see your hand." She said, briefly. "Never got set, did it?" She indicated her cloth over leather clad knee. "Put it there. I'll do what I can for it."

Artemis looked up into those clear, pale eyes. "After everything, why would you?"

"Because I can." Xena said, candidly. "And you did us all a favor leading the army up here. Would have never gotten here in time otherwise, and they drew Hades' troops off."

The mortal goddess digested this, then nodded and eased her hand over, uncovering it from the cloak fold it had been under and carefully positioning it palm up on Xena's knee. "But you would do this even so."

"Yes." Xena examined the hand, grimacing a little. She touched Artemis's wrist with her fingers, then pressed against nerves there.

Artemis gasped, and jerked.

"No pain?" Xena guessed. "Don't' get used to it. I can't do that for long." She went to work on the swollen, grossly disfigured appendage, feeling through the disfigured flesh for bones and moving them carefully into place.

Apollo edged over to watch. "You know this art." He commented, after a moment. "I am it's patron."

Xena had, actually, forgotten that. She spared him a glance, and merely grunted in assent, using her task to defer further talk. It was a bad fracture, and she gave Artemis a healthy bucket of guts points for enduring it without complaint.

"She's good at it." Ares looked up from his bowl of soup. "She got one of Hade's arrows out of me before it could send me to Tartarus."

Xena focused past them, as she concentrated on the work under her fingers. She half closed her eyes and as she worked the broken bones into place, imagining in her head the structure beneath the flesh she couldn't actually see.

Some of the bones had started to fuse, and she grimaced a little as she shifted them, working in silence until she finally had them sorted. Then she took some lengths of wood from the kit and measured them, breaking them in sections with casual expertise.

She removed some lambs wool from the kit and gently wrapped the hand with it, then laid the supports in place before wrapping it all in place. "Okay, hang on. It's going to hurt again." She told Artemis.

The goddess nodded, and drew in a breath as the nerve blocks were removed, holding it briefly, and then letting it back out. “Not as much.” She stated “Will this mend?”

“It will.” Xena said, as she put her gear away. “We mortals are built to mend. Helps when you’re getting beat up all the time.” She gently set the hand on it’s owner’s lap, then got up and took one of the cups that Cait had brought.

She filled it with wine, then mixed the contents of a packet into it. “If you drink this, it’ll make the pain less.” She handed the cup to Artemis. “But wrapping it like that keeps all the parts still. That will help more until it heals.”

She glanced at Ares, who met her gaze with a faint, wry smile. “We’re moving out in the morning.” She said, then headed for the opening, tucking her kit along her side as she left them.

Apollo thoughtfully reached over and touched the bandage, then turned his head to regard the soup. “If not them, who?” He repeated Ares words in an undertone. “Who indeed?”

**

Xena put her kit away in her saddlebags and paused, looking around the cavern. She spotted Gabrielle in a moment, the bard seated near the firepit with a bowl in her hands. After only a brief second she looked up, and their eyes met.

Xena put the saddlebag down and walked over, taking a seat next to her partner inside a small group of soldiers and Amazons.

“Xena?” One of the soldiers came over, offering her a bowl. “Good to get warmed up inside.”

Xena accepted it, cupping her hands around the worn wooden surface, feeling the scrapes and nubbles against her skin. “Thanks.” She took a sip from the edge of the bowl. “I think I also owe you all a thanks for coming in after us. Took a lot of guts.”

The soldiers straightened up a little in reflex. “Wasn’t going to let you sit in there, Xena.” Bennu spoke up. He was seated on the ground with his long legs splayed out over the stone. “Started chopping through the rock for that lady told us about this place.”

Cait came over and settled down next to him. She was a little pale, and her eyes had dark smudges under them, but then so did most of the rest of them. “That other fellow found Jessan and I.” She volunteered. “He brought us here, and we were quite glad about that. Saved us a hike.”

“Apollo?” Gabrielle asked, in a quiet voice.

“Yes.” Cait nodded, then cleared her throat. “So, what actually happens now?” She asked, looking over at Xena. “I mean, we started off wanting to help some people, and we ended up… um… “

“Halfway buried in Hades’ realm.” Gabrielle finished.

“Well, yes.”

“Was there a point to this?” Solari spoke up, after an awkward silence. “Really?”

Gabrielle turned and looked at Xena. “Was there?”

Xena drank her soup for a few minutes in silence, while the rest of the group around her waited. What, really, could she say? Had there been a point? Had she lost scores of her militia for some actual reason or just in service to her bad judgement?

Was it bad? Could she run along the timeline to before they’d left Amphipolis, and go back to a moment before she’d decided she was going to take her army out and say, yes, that was a good choice?

She stared into the fire, through the flames, watching the motion of them, trying to step outside herself for a moment and just look.

Just look at what they'd been through. "I think we had to do this." She finally said, sounding surprised to hear the words. "There was a crossroad and we had to move through it."

"Get past Olympus?" Gabrielle asked, quietly.

'Get Olympus past itself." Her partner replied. "I think we did something. We played a part in all that. I just don't know if there was any reason to it."

Everyone around her was nodding in agreement.

"I just don't know." Xena sighed. "So we should get some rest, and then tomorrow head home."

"Boy that sounds good to me." Gabrielle rested her head against Xena's shoulder. 'But for the record? If I had it to do over again, we would have stayed home. I think this whole thing was a setup."

Xena regarded her thoughtfully.

"I mean it. They gamed us, Xe." The bard said. "Those guys? Those visitors to Amphipolis? They pitched us right where they knew we'd bite. Some big jerk messing with a little town?" She snorted softly. "Sucked us right in."

"Who did?" Cait asked.

"Olympus." Gabrielle replied. "Smells like them. They had some game going, some bet on, some something and they thought, hey let's drag Xena into it. She's always fun to watch."

Xena shook her head. "People died for that." She said. "We lost good people in this game of theirs." She rested her elbows on her knees and somberly regarded the fire. "I'm tired of suffering for them. Even Ares coming in and pulling us out – we wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for him."

Gabrielle looked at her. "Hey." She lowered her voice. "What is it we owe her for?"

Her partner smiled briefly. "She's the one who got you out of the lava pit." She responded quietly. "She saved you, and Dori." She paused, hearing Gabrielle's faint, indrawn gasp. "Gave me my life back."

Oh. Gabrielle felt a prickling on her skin, remembering that horrible, soul wrenching moment, feeling the pain of it all over again. "Saved me from myself." She acknowledged. "Oh Xe."

"Yeah."

The bard reached over and squeezed her hand, then she got up and circled the fire, touching Jess on the shoulder as she moved past, going over to the entrance to the cavern and looking out.

It was cold here, the snow had stopped for the moment but the air was crisp and sharp in her lungs, making her eyeballs sting as she stood quietly, watching her breath rise from her partially open mouth.

The forest was dark, leading down the ridge. The sky overhead was inky black, stars etched sharply against the sky with no moon visible, and aside from the faint sound of the dead tree branches rustling against each other, it was quiet.

Looking out over the valley, from Persephone's gate she could see the snow covered opening between the trees that was the path downward, and as far as her eyes could see there was nothing but ice and snow and cold.

They Olympians were convinced it would stay like this. Xena had been places, though, where winter just didn't exist. In fact the pretty silver horse Iolaus had came from a place just like that. A place of neverending sun, and sand and heat.

What was the value of belief?

She heard footsteps behind her and she turned, to find Aphrodite there. "Hey."

“Hey.” The Goddess of Love returned the greeting. “Kinda sucky day, huh?” She had her cloak wrapped around her, her curly blond hair ruffling slightly in the breeze.

Gabrielle extended her hands and took hold of Aphrodite’s. “Xe told me why we owe you one.” She said. “So with all my heart, Aphrodite. Thank you.”

The goddess looked a bit embarrassed, and she scrunched her face up in reaction. “I got in so much trouble for that.” She admitted. “But I was super glad I did it. That was really gutsy of you.”

Gabrielle half shook her head. “Yeah that was hard.” She said, softly. “Hard, because I knew I was carrying Dori. Hard because I was leaving Xe behind.”

“Yeah.”

‘But it was my thing to do.” The bard concluded. “And you got me out of it”

“I did.” Aphrodite nodded. “Gabrielle, you did the right thing.” She said, in a somber tone. “It would have ended up seriously not cool for you if you hadn’t done it, but it wasn’t fair to make you pay out like that, you know? That whole thing with Dahok – that was our gig, not yours.”

“Huh.”

“So I didn’t care if I got in trouble.” Aphrodite stepped forward and gave her a gentle hug. “I’m glad it worked out, you know?”

They had walked a little bit outside, under the canopy of stars. “I am too.” Gabrielle smiled, after a pause. “I’m glad I got to meet my kid. Did you know Xe got her a pony on our last crazy trip?”

“A pony?” Aphrodite cocked her head to one side. “Awww, that’s cute. I have to go see the little snookums.” She glanced out over the icy scene. “I think we’re going to hike with you guys. No other place for us to go I guess.”

“You can’t just go back to Olympus?”

The goddess shook her head. “Apollo tried. Thought maybe he could go ask the rents what the deal was, but no go. We’re kinda stuck here.” She made a face. “But hey, maybe we can figure it all out on the hike back to your place.”

Gabrielle sighed, straightening a little as she sensed Xena coming up behind her. She felt the gentle pressure as Xena put her hands on her shoulders, and acknowledged a sense of impatience now that whatever it was was over and they needed to start back home.

It was cold and she was tired, and more than anything on earth she wanted to be home, the journey behind her, back again with her daughter and her Amazon family. For one of the first times in a while, she had no desire at all to be out having an adventure.

“Wish we were home, Xe.”

“Me too.” Xena let her chin rest against Gabrielle’s head. “This is all just crap.”

“Yeah.” Aphrodite agreed. “Sorry we can’t just poof everyone there.” She patted Gabrielle’s arm, and stepped past them to re-enter the cavern, leaving the two of them standing there in chilly embrace.

“I wish they could too. We’re going to freeze our buns off going home.” Gabrielle groused. “It’s too damn cold, hon.”

“Mm.” Xena grunted thoughtfully. “Maybe we can do something about that. “ She said. “C”mon.” She steered Gabrielle inside the cave, nudging her towards the fire. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Oh boy.”

**

They wandered back into the center of the cavern, where the army was starting to settle down to get some rest. Though their own gear was stashed back in a corner with some privacy, Xena found a crate next to the fire and sat down on it.

She drew attention. The soldiers who were folding up cloaks to make pillows half turned to keep her in view, and the Amazons came wandering over as Gabrielle dragged over a camp stool and sat down next to her.

"Up for telling a story?" Xena asked, softly.

"Oh Xe, no." The bard sighed. "I'm tired. My throat hurts. I think I'm getting a cold."

Xena kicked her heels against the crate a bit, as the circle of watchers continued to grow. "Maybe just a short one?"

Both of Gabrielle's eyebrows lifted, and she glanced over to study Xena's profile. Normally, a demurral would have been taken seriously, and a claim of any illness would have brought out her soulmate's kit of herbs in a heartbeat.

For Xena to ask twice for a story? "What's up?" She asked conversationally.

Xena cleared her throat. "I just thought everyone might like to hear a story." She said noting the quickly pricked ears of those closest to her. "Maybe one of the older legends."

Mmhm. "Maybe one about the gods?" Gabrielle guessed. "Is that what you're hinting at? You want me to buff up their image for these guys? Really, Xe?"

Xena looked at the fire thoughtfully. "You told me, once." She said. "That I do things because I believe I can."

The bard sighed, easily seeing where this was going. "Xena, that's you."

'That's me. But I remember what it felt like to hear you tell other people a story about me that made me look like something other than a grumpy jackass."

"Mmph."

"Give them that gift, hon." Xena uttered under her breath. "For me? Please?" She leaned against Gabrielle. "I'll mix up some tea for your cold."

And that, of course was that. Gabrielle didn't think for one minute a story would make a difference to them. They were too ancient, too jaded. They'd seen too much, experienced too much. They weren't Xena.

She felt the warmth where Xena's body was pressing against her, and she met those eyes, where the soul shining from them owned her fully.

She leaned over and kissed the warrior on the lips. "Only for you, my love." She whispered, before she straightened up and got off the camp stool, strolling over near the fire and shrugging off her cloak.

"May I, Gabrielle?" Jessan held a paw out to her. "Hold your cloak?"

"Sure." She draped the garment over his arm and rubbed her hands together, sorting through the stories she had readily available, trying to think of a story that would gild the Olympians without being too obvious about it.

Behind her, she sensed Xena settling down on her crate, a glance over her shoulder showed the warm smile on her partner's face and she smiled back, before she turned back around to face the fire, and the audience just past it.

"You all up to hear a story?" She asked, as some of the scouts scrambled up onto the wagons to get a better view. "Kind of end the night out before we get some sleep?"

Everyone clapped and whistled, and Gabrielle didn't deny the warmth that caused as her ego responded to it. "Okay. So, since we've gotten to spend some time with the sons and daughters of Zeus this little while I thought I'd tell you an old story I used to hear around the campfire when I was a little kid."

She turned abruptly and pointed at Xena. “Don’t say it.”

Xena grinned at her. “I wasn’t.”

“You were thinking it.” The bard shook a finger at her, before she turned back around. “That sound okay? I don’t think I’ve told this one before.”

She made eye contact and swiveled, seeing the interest and feeling the prickle of excitement she’d lately realized would sometimes greet her new efforts.

“Have I heard this one?” Xena called over, softly.

“Not from me.” Gabrielle flexed her hands. “So here we go.” She let her voice lift a little, taking on tone and timber to echo a bit off the stone walls, sure to lift and spread into the alcove where the Olympians were resting.

So.

“So what is humanity, save a reflection of that which they worship?” Gabrielle drew in a breath and released it, abandoning herself to her imagination as she raised her hands and invited the listeners in with her. “Listen now to a tale of what it means to be mortal, and to be immortal, and to what ties the two together.”

**

“What are they doing?” Apollo was standing near the entrance to their seclusion.

Aphrodite came over and peered past him. “Oh.” She nodded knowledgably. “Storytime.” She said. “Gabrielle’s gonna entertain them I guess.”

Apollo frowned, then turned and looked at her. “As in the hall at home? After dinner?”

“Something like that.” The Goddess of Love agreed. “Gabrielle’s pretty rad at that. She usually yaps around about Xena, you know? That was part of the gig before they were going to try and goose our reps but it didn’t work out.”

Apollo studied the group outside, as Gabrielle shed her cloak and stepped closer to the fire. “Why?” He asked. “Mortals are gullible for tales.”

“I think they ended up killing too many people to tell stories.” Artemis had joined them. “Is what I heard once they found us.”

“Mortals believe whatever they’re told.” Apollo commented. “Was that not how we controlled them? Our oracles spoke our words to them, and they obeyed. Look at the Spartans.” He turned and regarded Ares, who was still sprawled out on the rocks, lazily watching them. “A word to them to find a woman to lead them was all that took.”

“Yes, and look where that ended us up.” His twin sister said, acidly. “Athena is violated, and probably perished by now, and likely I will soon be the same.”

Apollo looked abashed. “I didn’t mean to bring that up.” He admitted. “Sorry.”

Artemis sighed. “No, don’t be.” She stared past him at the group of mortals settling themselves to be engaged by the story that Gabrielle was starting. “All the blaming elsewhere has gotten us where we are, Apollo. We shouldn’t have let ourselves be drawn into father’s entertainment.”

“Shoulda left my damn war alone!” Ares commented loudly.

Artemis looked over her shoulder at him. “Yes.” She said, in a quiet tone. “We should have, Ares. We had no cause to try and usurp your place. We mistook father’s anger at that for encouragement. “ She shook her head a little. “Hercules was right.”

“And you guys zapped him.” Aphrodite said “We heard.” She indicate herself and Ares. “So uncool.”

“Shh.” Apollo suddenly said, holding a hand up. “Listen.” He took a step forward, tilting his head. “She speaks of us.”

“I can just imagine.” Ares sighed, putting his head back down on the rock behind him. “No telling what story’s gonna come out of that mouth.”

“But this is new.” Apollo said. “I have not heard this one.” He started forward, aiming for a crook in the rock half hidden from the fire. “How can there be a tale of us we do not know?”

Artemis followed him, brushing past Aphrodite, who turned and lifted both hands as she faced Ares. “Bro?”

Ares rolled his eyes.

“I’m like, sure you’re gonna be in this thing.”

With a long suffering sigh, Ares got to his feet and trudged over, bumping into Aphrodite and nudging them both forward. “Bet you are too.”

**

Xena found herself ignoring the hardness of the rocks she was leaning against, completely absorbed in the story Gabrielle was telling. It was one that she hadn’t, in fact heard before, a tale about the beginnings of the Olympians that went through the different facets of humanity they had come to champion.

It had humor, and heart and as Gabrielle skillfully painted the story for all of them she could feel that sense of slight dislocation as she let her surroundings fade out, and enjoyed the images the bard put into her minds eye.

“And so they became our teachers.” Gabrielle was saying. “We were like children, who only knew home, and the campfire, and sticks to dig with and they decided to teach us how to build great things, and grow great things, and how to pass that knowledge down to our own children.”

Heads in the audience ringing her nodded.

Xena spotted in her peripheral vision the shadowy forms of the Olympians, taking seats on a stack of blankets out of view of the army, and of Gabrielle. They were listening with various degrees of intentness from Apollo the greatest amount to Ares the least.

Apollo was, Xena remembered now, the patron god of the arts. Of painters and stonecrafters, and singers and bards, whose statue in fact stood outside the academy of bards in Athens.

She could see the interest in their expressions though, interest and a touch of wonder, a quirked eyebrow even from Ares who after a moment stood up and came over to join her, plopping down next to her on the crate in full view of the army.

Her patron. Xena left her arm draped where it was and thought about that. As a teenager she’d been his acolyte. She’d laid offerings on his temple altars, including the hearts of some of her early conquests.

He’d liked that. Shown himself to her. Praised her budding mastery of the sword.

Had he really taught her anything though? She watched the fire outline Gabrielle’s body as she remembered her partner slowly, almost agonizingly gaining the skills she was now displaying, this effortless storytelling.

Like her now effortless ability to use weapons, gained with the same long years of practice.

Gabrielle had seen the motion and she briefly paused and glanced behind her. “And of course, they taught us, taught us mortals who knew about death, and pain and dying already, about war. “

Ares lifted a hand and waved it, then let it drop. Then he leaned over. “Where is she getting all this stuff from?” He whispered into Xena’s ear.

Xena eyed him. “You tell me?”

Ares made a face at her and shrugged his shoulders. “Not my gig.”

“Not mine either.”

Gabrielle’s voice took on a bit more volume, and they both fell silent to listen, the story rolling over them now as it told of a horrible danger to the mortal world, and humanity in peril, and how the Olympians had descended from their mountain to battle on their behalf.

“The spirits of darkness were terrible.” Gabrielle said. “They swept down upon us and killed life where they found it – they withered the grass, and stilled the newborn and when the mortal world stood on the edge, they came.”

Xena looked at Ares, his eyes focused on Gabrielle, expression intent.

“They came when the night was darkest.” The bard’s voice softened. “When we had nothing to offer them. No sacrifice to make save the dedication of our souls.”

There was an eerie silence after she finished speaking. Even the fire seemed to calm, no longer sending sparks up or emitting crackles as wood was consumed.

“Why would they do that?” Gabrielle asked, into all that silence. “Why bother with us, our short lived selves, and stand between us and another one such as them?”

“Cause you were our patch.” Ares spoke up, from behind her, his deep voice echoing off the rocks.

All eyes shifted from the bard to the tall, dark haired being behind her. Ares had his long legs sprawled out, and his hands folded together over his belt. “We made ya interesting. A little.”

Xena nudged him with an elbow. “Be nice.”

Gabrielle grinned briefly, then she swiveled around to continue, drawing a breath that she then just held when a deep, bright flash lit the cavern, blinding all of them. She threw up her arm over her eyes and felt a deep, buzzing tickle cover her skin and hold her still.

She couldn’t even yell. She couldn’t hear, or hardly breathe, though she became aware of a powerful force coming up next to her and softly, almost in an echo, a loud and angry voice.

Probably was Xena. She forced her hand to move, the one not covering her eyes, and reached out to feel arms around her.

More voices. Cries of pain.

Then the tingle faded and the light wasn’t nearly as bright against her eyelids and she squeezed them open, as a loud rumble of thunder shuddered the air. “Ow!”

“Hang on.” Xena was right there at her side. “Damn it! Cut that out!”

“Silence!” A deep voice answered.

“I SAID CUT THAT OUT!” Xena bellowed back. “I don’t give a damn who you are!”

Silence.

Then the horrible grip relaxed, and she was free.

Gabrielle blinked the tears out of her eyes and looked around, unsurprised to see Zeus, and Hera, and several others on a ledge over their heads. “Jerk.” She exhaled in disgust. “Don’t even know why I tried that for them, Xe.”

Xena patted her side. “Easy.”

“Arrogant old ass.” Her partner grumbled.

“Silence.” Zeus repeated. “You have all violated a sacred space and destroyed that which belonged to Hades.”

Xena walked to the edge of the fire, looking across it, past the still and frozen figures of her army, and friends. “On your behalf.”

“And you, who took what wasn’t yours, spilled our blood.”

Ares appeared, nudging Xena aside a little and coming to stand between them and Zeus. “Not really the way it was, pops.” He said. “My sword. I gave it to her.”

Zeus stared at him.

“I gave it to her, after old Uncle spilled MY blood.” The God of War said, pointing at his own chest. “And she won your bet for you. So don’t be so ungrateful, huh?”

Apollo walked over and joined them, looking first at Gabrielle, then up at his parents. “You wrong these mortals, father.” He said. “This one was just telling a marvelous story about us. One I didn’t know.”

Aphrodite had by now come over and joined them on the other side of Ares, her hand coming to rest on Gabrielle’s shoulder. “Hey, we did what you told us to do!” She said. “What’s the scam?”

Zeus studied all of them. “Fools.”

“No they’re right.” Artemis joined them. “These mortals have taught me much, both good and bad. They didn’t violate Persephone’s Gate. I led them to it.”

“Did you.” Zeus said, in a dry, cold voice.

“I did. What choice did I have? It was your caprice that put me here, that broke me. That got my sister ravished. For what?” Artemis said. “For what? For your amusement, father? What this mortal said on Mount Olympus was the truth.” She pointed at Gabrielle. “Now I know well what it feels like to be a plaything.”

A blast of white light and she collapsed on the ground, senseless.

“Father!” Apollo knelt next to her. “For speaking the truth?”

“What is truth?” Zeus asked, drily. ‘Truth says you were sent here to command the mortals, and ended up in their charity. You shame me.”

Ares half turned. “Get out of here.” He said, in a deadly serious tone. “I’ll cover for you.”

Xena glanced around at the cavern. “Can’t’” She said. “Not without the rest of em.”

“Don’t be an idiot.” The God of War whispered. “They’re already dead.”

Xena went still. “What?”

“They’re dead.” Ares repeated. “That blast daddy did? They’re toast. They’re basically statues. Dead. Mort. Gone.” He said. “So g’wan. Get your asses out of here. Last chance. Say I owed you one.”

Gabrielle inhaled in horror, her eyes going to the frozen, still figures of Cait, and Solari, and Jessan, caught in mid motion. “Oh, Xe.” She whispered. “Oh no.”

Xena walked a few steps forward, easing past Ares and facing Zeus. “Did you?” She asked, in a loud voice. “Did you just kill all these people?”

Zeus looked at her. “What is it to you?” He asked. “They offended my senses. Yes. I sent them to purgatory.”

Gabrielle saw it coming. She saw Xena’s body stiffen, and her hands close and she took a deep breath as her partner went into motion.

She took a step back and reached behind Ares shoulder, grabbing hold of the Sword of War and drawing it before she barreled forward and leaped for the ledge the king of the gods was on, before he could move or Hera either.

Before Gabrielle could react, though she bolted after her.

“You bastard!” Xena let out a bellow as she reached the ledge and came at him, seeing his eyes go wide as he realized what was going on.

“Xena!” Ares let out a yell of his own and leaped forward, belatedly.

Xena slammed Hera aside and backhanded Zeus before he could raise his hands to repel her. She was aiming a slash at his chest when Ares got to her and grabbed at her arm but she ripped out of his grasp and went for Zeus, growling with rage.

She went eye to eye with him for an instant, and saw, deep inside that gaze a red reflection that was suddenly, shockingly familiar in a very bad way. She got the Sword back around and swung for him in earnest, driven now by that innate sense of rightness that overshadowed the anger. “You!”

“Xena!” Ares was grabbing for her again. “No!”

Gabrielle was right behind Ares, and she got in his way as he lunged for her partner, grabbing his belt and yanking him sideways as hard as she could, sensing that overwhelming understanding from her partner without really knowing what it meant.

Just that Xena suddenly knew something that was dire, and urgent and she was acting on it.

Zeus crashed to the ground with all three of them on top of him, one hand slashing at Xena in a blaze of white light, that somehow hit the Sword and in a scream of releasing energy reflected back on Zeus as Hera cast her own bolts into the mix.

Gabrielle felt a soul rending pain contort her body as her hands reached out desperately and caught Xena’s arm and she heard a raw scream she thought maybe was her own.

Maybe it was Xena.

Maybe it was Zeus.

Then, abruptly, it was dark. Gabrielle felt a complete dislocation of time and space, and then she was laying horizontally, and it was a soft surface, and there was a loud, yet soundless crack.

Then it was quiet.

Really quiet.

She drew a breath and heard Xena do the same and they both sat up and looked around. “Wh.” Gabrielle started to say, as she caught sight of a mostly guttered candle, and the red embers of a fire. “Where are we? What happened?”

The sudden sense of overwhelming familiarity was disorienting in the extreme. She’d gone from the strangeness of the cavern and the cold and the utter danger to this contained peace and silence and normality.

Xena blinked. “We’re back.” She said, after a moment of silence. “We’re in our cabin.” She clarified. “At home.” She got up and looked around, as though expecting some of the insanity to have followed them.

Gabrielle got up and walked a few steps, then looked around, as Xena went over and freshened the candle. They were, in fact, inside their cabin high on the mountainside above Amphipolis. After a brief, frozen moment she went to the doorway that led into Dori’s room and looked inside.

Curled up in her bed, their daughter was sound asleep, a scruffy mostly grown wolfdog sprawled asleep next to her. Her eyes drifted across the room and found a new addition, a second little bed in the other corner holding a small, curly headed occupant also sound asleep.

So.

She withdrew without a sound and turned around, to find Xena looking back at her, hands resting on hips, the question so evident in her body posture it almost made Gabrielle smile. “So.” She uttered softly, coming back over to her partner and folding her arms.

They were both in shifts. Both as though they'd gone to bed on a normal night as though nothing at all had happened. A quick look showed her carrybag in it's usual place, and a bowl with winter fruits sitting on the table she knew damn well she hadn't left there.

What the sheeps?

She turned around, seeing Xena's armor hanging in it's place, her sword sheathed on it's hooks. Her own staff resting in the corner, a fresh sheet of parchment laying on her writing desk all ready for her morning bout of writing.

Her diary resting next to it.

Outside the window, she could see snow softly falling. "Cari's in the room with Dori." Gabrielle said. "What the heck, Xe?"

"What the heck. Gabrielle. " Her partner agreed. "I have no idea what the heck, but I'm going to go down to town just to make sure this is not some scam." She went over to the clothing press and started to exchange her shift for warm clothing.

They both paused as they heard footsteps crunching through the snow outside, and Gabrielle went and retrieved her staff as a knock came at the door. "Knew this wasn't going to be that easy."

"Ungh" Xena abandoned the wardrobe and pulled her sword from it's sheath on the way over, yanking the door open as she kept the weapon ready, to find a figure wrapped in a cloak standing on the porch, carrying a lightly crackling torch.

"Hot damn." Solari's voice broke the silence. "You're here too!"

**

They met on the level area on the path that split downward for the town and sideways to the Amazon village. Solari, Cait and Paladia, Xena and Gabrielle, and Bennu, who'd just climbed up from the barracks which was in total confusion and befuddlement.

"Like, what the actual Hades is going on here?" Paladia asked. "Those people in there remember us doing stuff we didn't do like march back in here yesterday."

"Aye." Bennu agreed. "T'town says we came back in just after dark. All of us crossing the bridge, going to barracks." He lifted his hands. "Genr'l, we didn't do none of that."

"Yes. Eponin told me she and Ephiny greeted us when we arrived and we had dinner with them in their quarters – but we didn't do that." Cait shook her head. "I know we didn't. Goodness, Xena! Last night I was stuck in a crack getting squished to death!"

"Right." Solari agreed. "I'm glad as nuts we're here, don't get me wrong." She said. "Save that long ass walk, you know?"

"We know." Gabrielle said. "We're as confused as you are. Trust me." She scrubbed her face with one hand. "I should go talk to Eph."

Xena now in her leathers and thick leggings, put her hands on her hips. "What's the last thing you do remember doing?" She asked Solari.

"We were listening to Gabrielle tell that story." Solari said, promptly. "I remember thinking about going to get a cup of cider, then all of a sudden there was a big bang."

"Big bang." Cait nodded. "Yes. I remember that too. Then I was in my hammock here. Very, very odd."

"But we were gone a moon." Solari added. "Eph said, she was surprised we were back so soon. Wanted to know how we did."

Xena turned to Gabrielle. "What was the last thing you remember?"

Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest and thought. "I remember seeing Ares come over and sit down next to you, and starting to tell that part of the story." She said, watching the rest of them nod. "Then I remember…" She paused "A big bang. You?"

They all looked at Xena in question. "Yeah, same for me." She answered after a pause. "Just a loud cracking sound, then it got dark, then we were here."

"Then we were here." Gabrielle repeated softly. "Wonder what the story is behind that?"

**

Xena was sitting on the edge of their bed with her elbows resting on her knees, nursing a wooden cup of tea clasped lightly between her hands. She was once again dressed in a shift, though this one was blue, and newly bought at the fair before they'd left.

A quick run to town and barracks had left her puzzled but happy. The army had settled back into their barracks, very glad to be home, though their losses were intact and the healer's longhouse was busy with injuries and some frostbite.

Wagons had been put up, horses and oxen were in their barns, and her mother had taken the time to assure her they'd come marching in last night triumphant, or didn't she believe her?

Triumphant. Well. Xena shook her head a little. They had defeated pretty much everything they'd encountered so yes, she supposed they were triumphant in that regard but the thought of the men lost, the pain suffered ate at her.

However. With a sigh, she reconciled herself to paying out the troops in the morning, and moving on with their lives.

Faint crunching caught her attention and she turned her head as the door opened and Gabrielle came inside. She hung her cloak up and stripped off her gauntlets, dropping them onto one of the low tables before walking over to the fire and warming her hands over it.

Xena got up and crossed the floor over to her, silently unbuckling the belt holding her thick overtunic closed and removing it.

She could see the reflection from the fire outlining Gabrielle's face, and the pensive expression on it, and she untied the front lacing, edging a little around to the side as she parted the fabric, her fingertips brushing the skin underneath.

Gabrielle's expression shifted a little, and she lifted her eyes to Xena's as her clothing was gently removed, a faint smile appearing as her partner stepped around behind her and kissed the back of her neck.

No words needed, really.

Xena folded the tunic up and put it on their garment press, coming back over with a finely woven woolen shift she replaced it with. She gave Gabrielle a tiny nibble on her ear, then she retreated back to the bed, resuming her seat on it, crooking a finger at her partner in silent appeal.

Gabrielle came over and sat down next to her partner and they quietly regarded each other for a few minutes in silence. "Something really weird happened to us." Gabrielle finally said. "I mean, weirder than usual."

Given the scope and breadth of what they'd been through together that was indeed a statement, and Xena gave it due regard. "Well." She cleared her throat a little. "We all remember pretty much the same thing. Us and the army." She said. "And we sent a messenger up to the valley to make sure Jess got back all right."

"Mm."

"And the town remembers pretty much the same thing." Xena continued. "It's just that what they remember and what we remember for the last day is completely different. We know we didn't march in here last night. We didn't march anywhere last night."

“Mm.” Gabrielle grunted agreement. Then she hiked one knee up and rested her elbow on it.
“Hey Xe?”

“Mm?”

“Let’s just go to bed. We’ll talk about it in the morning.” She stifled a yawn. “Nothing we can do about it right now anyway.”

They got under the covers and let out twin sighs. Gabrielle felt the warmth from the fire, and from the covers soaking through her. She reached out and felt for Xena’s hand, curling her fingers around it and feeling the tension returned.

She felt very unsettled. “It was the gods, right?”

“Thought we were waiting for tomorrow?”

Gabrielle sighed. “It keeps going around and around in my head.”

“Had to be.” Xena replied, after a brief pause. “Something happened, and they put us all back for some reason.” She wriggled a little into the soft down cover of the bed, glad to allow her body to relax, glad of the warmth, and the comfort of their home. “Not gonna argue.”

“No.”

“We must of done something right.” Xena said. “They could have left us all there. Just popped out and we’d be in that cave, freezing our butts off.”

Gabrielle considered that. “That’s a point.” She replied. “Not only did they put us back, they put us back where we belonged, assuming Jess is, and we were in our bed, with our kid here with us.”

“True.”

“So why do I feel so weird?”

Xena chuckled softly. “We’re so used to them screwing us over.” She said. “It’s always us on the wrong side of things, suffering, getting our ass kicked, you name it. Whether we do things right or not.”

“Mm.”

‘So what did we do this time that was so right that we got this favor?” Xena shrugged a little. “Maybe your story did it. I liked it.” She paused. “Hey, I just remembered – Ares was asking me where you heard that story.”

“I didn’t hear it anywhere.” Gabrielle rolled onto her side, and tucked herself into her accustomed spot on Xena’s shoulder. “I made it all up.”

Xena’s eyes opened up wide and she regarded the neatly timbered roof of their cabin. “Uh.. what?”

“I made it up.” Gabrielle yawned and closed her eyes. “I thought about how the gods might have ended up being a part of our world and went with it..”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Was that it? Xena rested her chin against her partner’s head, already feeling the relaxing of Gabrielle’s body against her as the bard dismissed the thought and let sleep claim her.

Huh.

Xena admitted privately to herself how shook up she felt, so visibly to her affected by the gods machinations that had brought her, and her army so far without really understanding what had gone on.

She felt like she was missing something, but searching her memory over and over, she could only recall that moment of dislocation, herself seated next to Ares, seeing Gabrielle look over her shoulder at them, seeing that brief, wry grin.

Then the bang.

Then nothing. Nothing but the echoes of that sound shaking her awake, here in Amphipolis, here in their home, all the struggle, and battle and trouble behind her.

What had happened to the gods? Had they helped? Was Artemis back in Olympus, and what had happened to Athena or Hercules?

Did it matter really if she just let it go, and joined Gabrielle in sleep? Xena mentally shrugged and let her eyes close, letting the silence of their cabin settle around her.

Outside, the wind was rattling the branches, and there were soft pops and crackles from the fireplace where a neatly laid fire would keep them until dawn.

Then maybe they could gather down at Cyrene's inn and compare notes, see if there was anything else that they'd remembered. Or forgotten.

Or maybe they'd just have breakfast, and resume their lives. Dori would ride her pony. They'd take Cari back to the Amazon village. A hunting party would go out.

Life would go on.

**

By the morning the snow had stopped, and the sun was out and bathing their cabin as it rose through the thick stand of trees around it.

Xena stepped onto the porch and went to the edge of it, letting her hand rest on one of the supports as she watched a squirrel race across the open space before the cabin, dashing up a tree and pausing to look back at her.

Gabrielle was down in the village already and she pondered whether she should join her or go down to the town. After a moment she pushed off the porch support and went down the steps, her boots crunching softly in the snow as she headed for the path.

At the landing in front of the Amazon village she turned in, exchanging a wave with the Amazon guard there as she entered the central square. Just as before they'd left, women were crossing the big open space dressed in thick furs and leathers, and the laughter of children sounded just off to the left.

Normal. Like nothing had happened. Xena could hear Gabrielle's voice in the dining hall as she neared it, and she angled that way, pushing open the sturdy door and entering the busy with breakfast space.

Had she been teaching metal working just a moon ago here? Xena quickly spotted Gabrielle over at the head table and went to join her, stepping up onto raised platform and taking the hand the queen reached out to her.

"Xe, listen to this." Gabrielle said, as she sat down.

"Sure." Xena rested her elbows on the table. "What's up, Aalene?"

"I was just telling Gabrielle." Aalene responded promptly. "That right after you left, the plains queen? The one who got beaten up? She disappeared from the back of the inn. Cyrene came up here and asked if she'd come up by us, but no. She just vanished."

"Huh. Forgot all about her." Xena admitted. "Maybe she just got tired of the company?"

"With those injuries? Just walk out? " Aalene said. "Cyrene said she sent one of the kitchen gals to bring her some dinner the night after you all went off and there was no sign of her."

Gabrielle frowned. “No one saw her leave?”

“No, that was the weird thing, and why Cyrene came up here to ask us – it’s not like you can just walk out of Amphipolis without someone noticing, the guards, or whatever.” Aalene said. “Not that we weren’t glad to have her gone. She was creepy.”

She had been. “Hmph.” Gabrielle grunted. “Wonder if she wasn’t just part of this whole scheme.” She murmured. “I was kinda hoping we’d get a chance to tell her she hadn’t been abandoned by her sisters.”

“Maybe she knew that.” Xena spoke up. “Maybe she was the one who sold those guys out, then she got beaten when she wanted to get paid.”

“Oh, no. Xena she wouldn’t.” Gabrielle protested. “Those were her… “ She paused, seeing the wry look on her partner’s face. “Xe, c’mon. They came here to try and get money out of us fo.. “ She paused again. “Oh sheeps.”

“That ranks.” Aalene made a face, looking up as Eponin came over and took a seat next to them, as two of the youngers delivered a platter to the table. “Hey Pony.”

“Hey.” Pony returned the greeting. “You hear about whatserface taking off?”

“Aalene was just telling us.” Gabrielle said, then she glanced to one side as she caught sight of Cait entering the dining hall. “Excuse me a minute.” She got up and moved around the table, signaling her chief guard to hold up.

Cait did, pushing back the hood on her cloak to expose her pale head. “I’m glad you’re here.” She told the queen when Gabrielle reached her. “I’ve got to ask you – whatever are we supposed to say to people when they asked us what went on the past moon?”

Gabrielle sighed. “Yeah, Pasi just asked me that too.” She edged to the side with Cait, clearing the passage up to the breakfast pot. “I have that same problem sometimes. There are just things I don’t say because people think I’m nuts.”

“Exactly.”

The bard nibbled on the edge of her thumbnail. “Tell you what, I’ll tell everyone the whole story tonight, after dinner.”

Cait’s pale brows lifted.

“So tell everyone to wait for that.” Gabrielle put her hand on Cait’s shoulder. “But what I really wanted to tell you is just, thank you.” She said. “Thank you, and Paladia, for standing by us, and risking a lot of yourselves in that little adventure.”

Cait studied her soberly. “It was difficult.” She admitted. “I was terribly scared a lot, and I’m not used to that.” She said. “It made me feel awful.”

“It does.” Gabrielle replied. “I felt overwhelmed myself. There was just so much out of our control you know?”

Cait nodded. “How does Xena feel about it?” She asked, after a pause. “She got to use that great sword, and all that.”

Gabrielle turned her head to regard her partner, who was sprawled half over the table, hand propping her head up. “Xe’s funny that way. She doesn’t really stress over things like that. It’s in the past, for her.”

“Really?”

“Really. I mean, here we are going through all that, and the sea creature, and being in Hades, and all that stuff – and we wake up in bed last night and Xe’s all like - how convenient!” Gabrielle laughed faintly. “She just moves on.”

Cait thought about that for a minute, then she smiled. “Clever of her, really.”

Gabrielle also smiled. “It is, because she knows she can’t change what happened. I finally learned that myself, because I used to go over and over and over things in my head, and worry. Xe doesn’t worry. Xe just lives.”

Cait visibly relaxed. “I think that’s a good idea. After all, we really can’t go back and change it can we? And we’re here, at home, with a lovely breakfast to look forward to.” She indicated the cookpot. “Would you like some?”

Steaming hot porridge. Gabrielle hated it. “Absolutely.” She put her hand on Cait’s back and guided her towards the front of the hall. “Is Paladiasleeping in?”

“Gosh no.” Cait now sounded more herself. “She’s sketching like mad. Says she wants to make her pictures of it before she forgets all of the things that happened. Especially that whole crack bit.”

“That’s great. She can help me tell the story tonight then.”

“I’m sure she’d like that a lot.”

“I’m sure she’d rather chew nails, but I bet you can get her to do it.” Gabrielle was slowly feeling the world settling back into it’s proper place around her. She no longer felt strange and out of sorts.

“Mama!” Dori came pattering in, her body covered in what appeared to be flour. “I made the buppit change color! Come see!”

“Yep.” Gabrielle exhaled wryly. “It’s good to be home.”

**

Xena found herself a little later down in the stable in back of her mother’s inn, brushing Argo’s mane and tail out and examining her favorite horse for any ill effects from the travel.

Argo seemed none the worse for wear, chewing a bit of hay from the haynet in her stall, and she bumped her rider casually as she shifted a bit in the straw.

All her tack was in it’s place, as though Xena had put her in her stall herself, and the rest of the horses, Shadow and Iolaus, and Rusty the pony were contentedly chewing, or in Rusty’s case, lying down casually, glad to be snug and warm inside rather than out in the chill air.

She’d left her sword up at the cabin and was dressed in plain working clothes, and she finished up her brushing, walking past Argo and giving her a kiss on the head. “Glad to be home, girl?”

Argo eyed her tolerantly, lifting her nose up and puffing warm exhales gently into Xena’s face.

“They told me you led the way into Hades to go looking for us. That true?” Xena put the brush down and put her arm over her horse’s neck. “You and that crazy Cereberus.”

Argo snorted, and shook her head, and Iolaus put his head over the wall of her stall to see what was going on. Xena gave him a scrub on the forehead with her knuckles, then she moved out of the stall and went to make sure all their kit had ended up back where it belonged.

She lifted the cover up of the cabinet and reached inside, then paused, and gently shifted aside the bag Gabrielle typically carried her things in.

Underneath it, she found a splint, and she picked it up, turning it over as she recognized it as the one she’d assembled around Artemis’s hand. It had been carefully unwrapped, and neatly folded, put carefully away as though to wait for another time.

Xena put it in her belt pouch and then she sorted through the rest of the gear, but there was nothing else out of the ordinary to be found in it, just well used tools and equipment, cleaned and ready for their next adventure.

She covered the supply box and looked around thoughtfully, tipping her head back out of long habit and finding the faint, fading letters carved into the spars that held the thatch roof up and stopped, her breath catching. “What th…”

After a frozen moment she leaped up and pulled herself up into the loft, getting closer to the spars and peering at the new, perfectly shaped carving in them.

Then she let herself go flat on her back. “Gabrielle’s gonna freak.”

She lay there for a minute, then she rolled over and rolled right off the loft edge, dropping to the ground and making Rusty snort in surprise. “Sorry little guy.” She headed for the door and went through it, into the bright, cold light.

It was busy, in the crossroads by the inn. Her army was putting supplies away, and as she went down to the barracks she saw several soldiers in the three cornered building that held the smith forge and that made her remember again what she’d been doing before the whole thing came up.

It felt like that was years ago, her being up in the Amazon village, teaching them to work metal. Things had been going along well, she reflected and then.

And then. Xena paused and regarded the sturdy barracks, busy with soldiers going about the business of being soldiers.

And then.

She rested her hands on the top rail of the fencing that edged the slope the barracks were on, noting that her presence was noted. She lifted a hand and waved, and Bennu left behind the saddle he’d been carrying and came over to meet her.

“Mornin, Xena.” Bennu perched on the railing. “Army’s finally settling. Still trying to figure out what the Hades went on.”

Xena sat down next to him. “If I had to guess, I’d say we managed to achieve whatever it was we were drawn out of here to do.” She let her hands rest on her thigh. “Because I think we were.”

“Aye.” Bennu nodded. “Was thinking that, after that caltrop.”

“Caltrop?”

“One was found in the stable. That dead un, paid to put there. Was meant to hurt you, Xena. Only your beasts in there, belongs to your family.”

“Guy was found dead.”

“Aye. He was. Was thinking he was done off with to keep him from talkin.”

Xena considered that in silence for a long moment. “So we couldn’t tell who was behind it.”

“Aye.” Bennu scratched his nose. “Every time we thought we had things taped, it wasn’t. Like them folks from that city, what come to get us. Was dead wrong in that place, Xena. Them was wrong headed.”

Xena folded her arms.

“Anyhow.” The soldier cleared his throat. “One thing some of the men were asking, like, is if it was okay for us to put up a little shrine to the God o war. That okay with you?”

“We used to have one.” Xena indicated the space behind the stables. “It got destroyed in one of the raider attacks.”

“Your mother said.” He nodded. “Men figured us being a army and all that wouldn’t do no harm.”

Would it? Xena thought about it. “I think it’s fine.” She said, slowly. “I was saying to Gabrielle when we were marching that worship of the gods..the falling off of that started with us, not with them.” She remarked. “In my early career as an ass kicker I used to burn an offering to him before any of my big fights.”

Bennu smiled. “Don’t much need to do that now.”

“No.” Xena returned the smile. “I’m not sure I needed to do it then. But it felt right, you know? Just a little routine, like sharpening my sword, or taking a bath.”

“A cleaning, yah.” He chuckled. “Boy do I remember that.”

“Anyway, sure. Pick a spot and have at it.” Xena got up off the railing. “Let me know when its’ ready and I’ll christen it with you.”

Bennu looked pleased. “Will do, Xena.”

They both looked up as they heard familiar pony hoofbeats, and saw Dori come galloping around the bend of the path on Rusty’s back. “You’re right.” Xena hopped off the railing and went to intercept her daughter. “About that caltrop. Hey! Hey Dori! Hold up!”

Bennu watched her slow the pony down and grab his bridle. “Aye.” He said, somewhat under his breath. “Wanted you, it did. Whatever it was. But when it gotcha, it was sorry.”

Xena walked the pony back up the path. “Where’s your friend, Dor?”

“In da stables, Boo.” Dori told her. “I was gonna go get some cookies. We were making fun.”

Obligingly, Xena changed her path, crossing over and guiding child and pony up to the side entrance of the inn. “Okay, let’s go see grandma.” She lifted Dori up off Rusty’s back and set her on the ground, then looped the pony’s reins over an iron spike in the inn’s walls.

“Bring him too, Boo.” Dori protested. “It’s cold outside!’

“He’s got a nice, thick coat.” Xena herded her through the side door. “We’ll bring him a treat.” She followed Dori into the kitchen and found her mother and two of the cooks inside. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Cyrene was perched on one of the benches either side of the table. “Figured out what’s going on yet?”

“No.” Xena picked up one of the utility baskets. “Got any cookies? Dori’s playing house in the barn.” She watched her daughter patter around the room. “Which now has some carved initials from Olympus in it.”

Cyrene had started to stand up, and now she paused in midmotion. “What?”

“Yeah.” Xena was rummaging in the cupboard. “Up in the loft.” She found a small loaf of nutbread and stuck it into the basket. “I know you think we’re crazy, but maybe that’ll change your mind.”

Cyrene snorted.

“Boo, look!” Dori came over, holding her hand up. “An happle. Can I give it to Rusty?”

“Sure.” Xena ruffled her hair. “”Gwan.”

“Xena, it’s not that we think you’re crazy.” Her mother came over, holding the door open as Dori squiggled through it. “I just remember, clear as day, clear as I see you standing here, you, and that whole army coming around the bend and off the road. I can hear the sound of the lot of you on the bridge if I close my eyes.”

“I know.” Xena added some pears and apples to her basket. “But I just as clearly remember being in a cave, listening to Gabrielle telling a story about the beginnings of the gods last night.” She regarded her mother. “We figure something happened, and we did something right for a change, and as a reward we got put back here without having to march.”

“Eh. Not that it much matters.”

“True.”

A distant whistle caught Xena’s ear, and she ducked outside the kitchen door, almost bumping into Rusty as she moved past him and into the road to look towards the sound. The guard stationed down

across the river was loping across the bridge, and as she watched he spotted her and headed immediately in her direction.

Bennu had heard the sound too, and was moving her way, with a half dozen other of her army.

"What's goin on Boo?" Dori had wandered into the path behind her, tugging Rusty along. "Bad mens?"

"No, just one of our friends." Xena lifted her up onto Rusty's back. "Just hang on there, shortie."

The guard arrived and so did Bennu and his mates. "Xena, got a relay from the pass."

"West?"

"Yes." The man nodded. "Trading convoy coming through. A dozen wagons, and Ref said they told him they were looking for a spot to winter."

"From?"

He shook his head. "Didn't say. Therma way maybe, some said they knew you."

Broad range of possibilities. "Okay, when they get here let them settle in across the river. They can shelter in the playhouse." Xena shifted her basket and took hold of Rusty's reins again. "Market's always good news." She started leading the pony back to the stable.

"Less they'e got caltrops." Bennu reminded her.

Xena looked over her shoulder and gave him a wry look. Then she continued on. "Lets get you back to your friends in the barn, Dor. I've got to go find your mama."

"Go mama." Dori answered contentedly. "Boo, can Cari stay with us?"

Xena walked along in silence for a moment. "You want that, little one?" She asked, as they neared the barn. "Did you have fun in the valley with her?"

"Yes. Good friend." Dori supplied, earnestly. "She wasn't scared even when we flyed home, Boo."

Xena stopped at the door and looked at her. "Fly home?"

Dori nodded. "Fun." She assured her parent.

The warrior pulled the barn door open, and stepped back to let Rusty walk past her.
Inside, Cari and Toris' twin boys were in the hay bin, giggling as they appeared.

"Aww!" Little Solon yodeled. "You brought back auntie Xe!" He jumped out of the haybin and ran over to her. "Auntie Xe! Auntie Xe! Come see what we found!"

"Hang on." Xena walked Rusty back to his stall, as Dori scrambled off his back. Since her child hadn't bothered to add any tack to the pony's halter, she merely pulled down an armful of hay for him in an automatic gesture, and put up the rope at the front. "Okay you bandits. What's up?"

She went over to the hay crib, drawn by Dori's squeals of delight and looked down to see motion at the bottom. "What do we have here?"

"Buppits!" Dori danced around in a circle. "Oh Boo!"

Xena perched on the edge of the crib and reached down, picking up one of the puppies and cradling it in both hands. It was a mottled brown color, and had a round head and tiny ears, but there was a faint familiarity about it that made her pause.

It opened it's eyes and blinked at her, showing pale, golden orbs and she let out a breath. "Look at this, Dor. " She glanced down. "There are four of them. How do you like that?"

"Buppits!" Dori hauled herself into the bin and sorted the straw, exposing another of the pups and gently picking it up. "Look!" She brought it closer to Cari. "Look, Ca!!"

"So cute!" Cari answered softly, reaching out to touch the tiny animal with her fingertips.

Dori looked around. “Boo, where dere mama?” The child of two of them immediately recognized the lack. “You scare her out?” She asked Solon, who solemnly shook his head.

“No, we found them.” His brother added. “Just like this, Auntie Xe.”

These were not Ares by blows. Xena handed off the pup she was holding to Cari, watching the child carefully cradle it. Each of the puppies, on their small shoulders had light tan, round spots and a ring of the same color around their necks.

“C’n I have one Auntie Xe?” Solon asked, wistfully.

“Sure.” Xena lifted the third of the four out and handed it to him. “Hold him gently, okay?” She watched him cradle the puppy, a grin forming on his face. Lyceus came over to claim the last one, and they all sat for a moment, four children with four puppies, and their silent watcher.

They were more than newborns. Xena figured they were six or seven weeks old, and she thought she understood the silent message they brought with them. Whether they were Cereberus’ get, or his son’s it was a more than obvious offering.

So.

The door opened and Gabrielle entered, pausing to regard the small group. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Xena extended her hand. “C’mon over and meet the new family members. Olympus left us a present.”

“Ah.” Her partner joined her. “They’re adorable.” She gently touched the shoulder spot on one Lyceus was holding. “Really glad they just have these. A lot easier to explain to the neighbors.”

Xena chuckled.

“Buppits.” Dori was seated cross legged in the straw, with her new friend in her lap. “Boo said we could keep them mama!”

“Of course Boo did.” Gabrielle issued a wry, indulgent grin. “Are you going to name this one, Dor? Not just call him Buppit?”

Dori studied her new friend. “C”n I call him Boo?”

“Please no.” Xena sighed.

“Now honey, you can’t call him Boo.” Gabrielle said. “If you start calling out Boo, how will he know if you mean him, or Xena?”

“Call’m friend.” Cari suggested softly. “I can have this one?” She asked Xena. “A friend is good to have.”

“A friend is the best thing to have.” Gabrielle answered. “So I think these little friends were left here for you kids, and you should feel really good about that.” She regarded the small animals, all of which were watching her from identical, golden eyes. “Love them.”

Dori hugged her puppy, understanding that word at least. “Call him Buppit.” She decided, making both her parents laugh. “He can be friends withRusty too!”

“Will you tell daddy we can keep them, Auntie Xe? He’ll do what you say.” Solon asked earnestly. “He don’t like aminals.”

“I”ll tell him.” Xena reassured him. “These are special animals. He’ll get it.”

“Will he?” Gabrielle muttered.

Xena’s lips twitched. “Look over the loft.” She muttered back. “Think they wanted to make sure we got the message.”

Gabrielle got up and went to the ladder, climbing up into the loft and then turning and dropping onto her back, wriggling through the straw and looking up at the spars that held up the thatch of the

roof. After a moment, she folded her hands over her stomach. “I don’t know how I feel about that, Xe.”

“Eh.”

“How do you feel about the Amazons asking me to build a temple up there.”

“Uh oh.”

“Not for who you think.” The bard reached up one hand and traced one of the new, perfect carvings. “Aphrodite.”

“Eh???”

“Cait explained it to me. They figured out that I’m the happiest person they know, and Ares didn’t make me that way.” Gabrielle informed her. “Had no idea really what to say about that. I was about to ask if they wanted to make a temple to her or one to you.”

Xena started laughing.

“I mean, c’mon.”

Xena got up and went to the loft, laying her hands on the wood of the floor of it. “Army wants a temple for Ares.” She said.

“Could have asked them the same thing.” Gabrielle eyed her with faint amusement, watching her partner roll her eyes. “But you know, I’m okay with both of those shrines. Maybe we can re-ignite those traditions a little.”

“Do we want to?”

Gabrielle exhaled. “We need something to look up to Xe. We know them. Maybe the alternative is far, far worse. You know? Then worshipping love and war.”

Xena looked behind her at the children playing with their new friends, surrounding them with a giggling circle as they tumbled in the straw. “Maybe.” She admitted. “At least we do know them.”

“Mm.”

Xena leaned her head against the wood. “Just please don’t let them name any of those puppies Xena.” She whispered. “Or Boo. Please?”

Gabrielle rolled over and reached out, cupping her head with one hand and leaning over to kiss it affectionately.

**

The snow had stopped, and it was dark, a crystalline darkness with a crisp half moon risen over the horizon, lighting the valley and river below the ridge Xena was standing on.

It was a distance from their cabin, around the side of the mountain from where it stood and down slope from her old tree haunt, a wide plat of ground that allowed no access upward towards their home for normal folk, and access from below only by a rugged, tough path.

Hard place to get to, but it had an isolation and an overlook that bespoke a dignified grandeur.

“Going to be a pain in the behind to build it here.” Jessan came over to her and stood beside her looking out over the snow covered ground. “But it feels right.”

“It does.” Xena kicked a bit of rock with her boot and watched it sail out over the edge of the ridge. “I didn’t want to put shrines in town.”

“Or the village.”

“Or the village. This gives anyone wanting to make an offering work for it.” Xena turned and regarded the ground. “Even us.”

The forest dweller turned into the breeze, his nostrils flaring as the wind brushed back the thick russet hair around his head. “We won out there, Chosen.” He said. “I can feel it. We all did. Elani told me even when we were in Hades, and I couldn’t sense her, she could sense me. She knew we were all right.”

“Huh”

He spread out his arms, and breathed in the cold air. “I told them about Ares. They want this too.”

“Shrines.” Xena sighed.

Jessan walked over to her. “They want something to believe in.” He stood toe to toe with her, their eyes meeting in the moonlight. “When I told them that you were thinking of doing this … I could see the burn in their eyes, Chosen.”

Xena sighed again.

“I want this.” Jessan said, gently. “I saw him. I fought next to him.”

“You carried his sword.”

“And you wielded it.” Jessan remained silent for a moment. “What did that feel like?” He asked. “Did it hurt?”

“Yeah.” Xena flexed her hands, turning them upmost and studying their unmarked surface. “It hurt. It was hard. Felt like my whole body was on fire. I was glad to give it back.”

“Truly, Xena?” He asked gently. “For that moment, you owned that thing.”

“Did I?” Xena shook her head after a moment. “No.” She spread her arms out and let the moonlight bathe them. “Not in the way I own my own. Or the way I own this body.” She closed her eyes and thought about the difference, the sense that the sword was guiding her, to it’s own purpose. “We were pawns in a play, Jess.”

“Gabrielle said that.” He answered with a faint smile, showing the tips of his fangs. “And if anyone would know, it’d be her. But was this the end of the play?” He indicated the ground. “Us doing this?”

“Maybe. But I’m all right with it.” Xena tugged her gauntlets on a bit more snugly. “We’ll start dropping logs down that cliff tomorrow.”

**

Gabrielle sat at her desk, head propped up on one fist as she wrote on a thick parchment. The sound of the quill point scraping on the surface was loud in the room, the shutters over the windows tightly fastened to block out the cold.

She paused and put the quill down for a moment, picking up a cup of tea and taking a sip of the lightly steaming beverage, leaning back in her chair for a few minutes break.

Her quarters had been expanded a little. They’d built on a new room, to give Dori and Cari space for their rapidly multiplying toys so that it was more or less the same size as their cabin up the ridge.

Both she and Xena had thought through keeping Cari with them for quite a while, but the very obvious joy Dori displayed with having a constant playmate had eventually won them over.

Easier, Xena had eventually said than having them try to have a second. Wasn’t it?

Well. Gabrielle took another sip of her tea, savoring the new, spicy taste of the herbs that had come with the merchant wagons.

She heard bootsteps approaching and smiled as the door pushed inward and Xena entered, closing it behind her. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Xena undid her cloak and hung it on the doorside hook, then came over and settled on the stool next to her partners desk. “Temples will be ready tomorrow.”

“Uh huh. So what’s the consensus, we open the doors in the morning or at night?” The bard asked. “That whole moonlight thing is cool hon, but it’s freezing out there.”

Xena grinned briefly in agreement. “Dawn.” She said. “Weather should be good for it. Freeze might even break.” She let her hands rest on her knees. “Long ass winter.”

Gabrielle nodded. “You thinking about what it’s going to be like if they were right and it’s not going to end?” She asked seriously. “Not sure if we can exist just with hunting.”

It was cold, and had been cold since their return. Not just the normal cold they’d become used to, but a frozen, lifeless cold that had them chopping holes in the spring just to get water, and gained them several scores of miserable wanderers, survivors of ghost towns who didn’t have the supplies to keep them fed.

“We can move.” Xena remarked. “Plenty of places its warmer. You’ve been to some.” She added. “But no, I don’t think they were right. I’ve seen winters bad as this here.”

“True. But I don’t want to move so I’ll gladly agree with you.” The bard offered her the cup. “What did you say this spice was, Xe? Its nice. I like it.”

Xena tasted it, then handed the cup back. “That’s ginseng. And I don’t really want to move either. We’ll just have to see what happens.” She glanced at the parchment. “That the proclamation?”

Gabrielle nodded, and pulled the parchment over, it’s rich, creamy white texture at odds with the rest of the scraps all over her desk. “You like?”

“I like that your handwriting ‘s getting better.” Xena leaned forward to read, as they both heard a veritable stampede of tiny boots and paws heading their way. “Uh oh.”

“Gee thanks, madam who writes like ink spattered squirrel feet. Read fast. I’d better get that put up before it’s covered in gunk”

The door opened, and Dori came running in, with Cari after her, and two growing puppies. “Boo! Mama! Guess what we sawed!”

Could almost be anything. “C’mere and tell mama.” Gabrielle edged her seat out from behind her desk and held her hands out. “Boo’s reading something for me.”

The two puppies came over and under Gabrielle’s desk, immediately taking a seat one each on Xena’s boots and looking up at her expectantly.

Gabrielle snickered unkindly. “Animal magnetism. Never fails her.”

Xena glanced at her, then at the puppies, then back at the parchment. “Ah, for the days when I was a bloodthirsty warlord.” She sighed in mock regret.

“Honey, way back then you’d still have been feeding those puppies under the table so don’t even.” Gabrielle put Dori on her lap, while Cari came over and peeked over the top of her desk. “Now, what did you see, Doriana?”

“Mama I sawed a big white owl and Cari sawed a white deers!”

Gabrielle tilted her head and exchanged brief glances with her now serious faced partner. “Really Dor? Where’d you kids see those animals?”

“Up up.” Dori informed her. “Buppit wanted to go go, but we came here.” She kicked her booted feet out in random rhythm. “Mama you got cookies? We’re hungry.”

Xena got up and gently de puppied her boots, putting the parchment up on a shelf behind the desk. “Be right back.” She said, briefly, detouring over to the wall to don the over the shoulder belt that held her sword in it’s sheath.

Easier to fit over the lined and thick hide tunics and leggings she was forced to wear in the cold, less apt to get tangled if the hooks for the sword were sewn directly into the hide covering her

back. Xena worked the clever and intricate clasp at her waist that twisted together and started for the door.

“Want company?” Gabrielle had gotten her boots under her to stand up.

“Probably nothing. I’ll call ya.” Xena evaded the puppies underfoot and went to the door, getting through it before anyone could follow her. She loped quickly across the Amazon village and emerged onto the path, turning right and starting up the slope towards their cabin.

The frost on the ground crunched under her lined boots, and she could feel a little of the cold penetrating the sleeves of the shirt she was wearing under her tunic, cut to allow her free motion if needed.

As she reached the top of the path and emerged through the dead branches into the clearing that held their home, she paused and went still.

Unlike in the warmer season, when the always windswept glade would be full of leaf sounds and branches rubbing, and the warbling of the spring now there was a breathless, frozen silence.

The cabin was draped in snow, across the thatch roof and on the edges of the railing that bordered the porch. Behind it she could see the depression that was the frozen over spring and the faint hump that was the piping that would, in warmer times, bring water into the cabin.

Slowly she turned around and extended her senses, her eyes spotting the footprints in the snow that marked Dori’s wandering. She searched the branches on the edge of the open space intently, moving from tree to tree in search of the huddled form of the owl.

The wind lifted her hair and brushed against her face and she inhaled it as her ears cocked, listening.

Then the silence was broken, and she jerked, then relaxed as she recognized the black form emerging from the trees, licking it’s chops. “ Hey Ares.”

The wolf came over to her and sat down, his tail wagging a little in the snow. There were snowflakes resting on his fur and he twitched one ear, shedding some of them. “Groof.”

“C’mon” Xena walked past the cabin and entered the woods beyond it, her boots making deep impressions into the snow as she climbed up the sloping ground and made her way between the trees as they altered from bare branched to the thickly needled evergreens.

That brought a rich, pungent smell to banish the chill nothing, and she breathed it in with pleasure as the needled branches brushed against her, shedding some snow and their distinctive oil with it. She continued on, ducking under some lower limbs and watching carefully for any moving creature.

Ares trotted at her heels, sniffing the ground. Then he suddenly came past her, diving through the snow and leaping up onto a boulder that stood at the edge of the treeline.

Xena eased up next to him and put her hand on his back, feeling the fur lifting under her touch and she looked across the slope where he was staring, but found nothing there. With a sidelong glance she walked past and felt the wind pick up as she climbed up the ridge to where her old apple tree stood.

It’s branches were bare, and snow was piled up at the bottom of the trunk, a large blob near the top identifying where the little tree house was that she’d once played in, once gazed out over the valley in and on one magical night, slept with Gabrielle in.

It had been a very clear night, she remembered, and tonight would be clear as well, only much colder. She put her hand on the trunk of the tree and patted it in deep affection, looking carefully but seeing nothing stirring anywhere around.

This much closer to the temples she could hear the faint sounds of construction going on, the last touches being put on the two shrines for the morning and after a moment she continued on along the ridge to where the sturdy poles of two big ladders could be seen.

Xena looked down at the lower plateau, seeing a half dozen workers around the new construction, two roughly square buildings made of stone cut from the mountain and wood from the winter bared slope above.

Her body stiffened suddenly as she sensed something behind her, and she turned and stepped back from the edge, one hand going up to grasp her sword hilt.

But the slope was empty, save for Ares who was seated nearby, tongue lolling out.

And yet, she could still feel something there. Her skin prickled and she felt a tension around her shoulders, muscles readying to fight.

But the clearing stayed empty, Ares stayed seated, looking around and watching her with a somewhat puzzled expression.

Xena exhaled silently, her breath streaming visibly from her lips. She put her hands on her hips and waited a few minutes, her nape hairs prickling, but to no avail. "Damn it." She walked back to the tree and gave it another pat, shaking her head.

Taking a step past it, she sensed an attack and she turned, lifting her arm to protect her head as she felt something moving towards it. It bounced off her forearm and dropped to the ground, disappearing into the snow. "What the heck?"

She stuck her hand in the hole it left and felt a round surface under her fingers, which, when pulled up for her inspection turned out to be an apple.

Xena looked up, at the completely barren tree branches. "Thanks." She put the apple into her belt pouch and started back towards the cabin, the tingling on her skin fading as she walked. "Gonna be one of those days, isn't it."

**

"Cari, c'mere." Gabrielle leaned her elbows on her knees.

The curly haired child looked up, then she got to her feet and came over, not without a touch of apprehension.

An old feeling that Gabrielle understood, at a very gut level. She held her hands out. "I want to ask you something."

Dori looked up from her rocks, watching her mother alertly. After a moment she got up and joined them, standing at the edge of the desk. "Mama, what you do?"

Gabrielle looked directly at her. "I want to talk to Cari, honey. Go play with your rocks for a minute." She waited for Dori to consider the request,then reluctantly retreat to the bearskin in the corner. "Thank you."

Cari took her hands uncertainly. "I do something bad?"

Gabrielle smiled at her. "Not at all, Cari. I just want to ask you something, that's all." She watched the child relax. "So, are you having fun being here with Dori and us?"

Cari nodded confidently.

"Do you miss all the kids in the big house?" The bard asked. "Being with all the other girls?"

Cari considered this a little longer. But not much. "No." She answered, softly. "Don't like them."

Gabrielle's eyebrows lifted. "You don't like the other girls?"

The little girl shook her head. "Means." She added. "Them means to me, until Dodo comes." She looked behind her where Dori was seated cross legged, merely listening. "Good friend."

Why? Gabrielle sighed internally. Why would they pick on little Cari, who was shy and harmed nothing?

What was it about the Amazons that made them be so competitive? To have that constant drive to fight to the top of the ladder and reject almost instinctively the gentle and quiet among them? Even as children. "I'm glad Dori's been a good friend for you." She said, after a moment.

"Gots to go back?" Cari asked, forlornly.

"No." Gabrielle said. "I was going to ask you if you wanted to stay with us all the time, Cari. We want you to be part of our family."

"Stay here?" Cari almost gasped.

"Yes." Gabrielle watched Cari's eyes open in wide hope and she pulled her into a hug, remembering a moment in her own life when acceptance had meant everything.

In the worst of times.

In the best of times.

She felt Cari jerk, and she loosened her hold so she could look at the child. "Is that okay?" She asked, smiling as she saw the delight her eyes. "You want to be part of this crazy family, Cari?"

"Yes." Cari smiled back in obvious relief. "I can be crazy too?"

Gabrielle let out a chuckle. "Sure, why not?" She ruffled Cari's curly hair. "I think I have to work on getting more of you kids adopted out to the tribe. You all need attention."

Dori clapped, over in her corner. It attracted the attention of the two puppies who came over to her and started licking her face, making her giggle. She got up and came over again. "Mama done?" She inquired. "No more yak yak. "

"Precocious child." The bard regarded her offspring indulgently. "You're such a brat, Dori. Just like your other mother."

Cari turned to Dori. "Sokay if I call her mama?"

Dori's dark brows contracted as she tilted her head. "What else you gonna call mama?" She asked in some bewilderment, looking up at Gabrielle. "Mama is mama."

"Sure." Gabrielle agreed. "And its okay if you call Xena Boo if you want to. She doesn't mind."

Cari's eyes widened in alarm. "Yes?"

Gabrielle's mental wagon went briefly off the trail. "Sure. Don't be afraid of Xena. You aren't, are you?"

Cari's lower lip poked out a little. "Big." She said, after a moment. "The others are scared."

Ah. Gabrielle's expression sobered. "Okay I see." She said. "Cari, you never have to be afraid of Xena. Only bad people have to be afraid of her, you know? Because she protects the people she loves and she doesn't want them to get hurt, ever."

Cari's face brightened. "Like Dodo."

Gabrielle looked over at her daughter, with a faint, wry smile. "Yes. Dori's very much like Xena. And she's going to be just as big as Xena when she grows up so get used to that." And as she said the words, she knew in her guts they were true, and that Dori's future would never be in a peaceful farm or busy shop. "Right Dor?"

"Yes!" Dori patted the desk. "We go play now?" She determinedly changed the subject. "Go see if Cat's got fishes." She grabbed Cari and started for the door. "Go go go."

It opened as they reached it, and Xena stepped to one side to let them out. "Careful kiddos. Steps are slippery."

"Dank you Boo!" Dori called over her shoulder as she jumped off the little porch, evading the whole step issue altogether, as the puppies scrambled after them.

Xena watched them go, then stepped inside the queen's quarters and let the door close behind her. She and Gabrielle regarded each other in silence for a bit, then she removed the apple from her pouch and went over to set it down on the desk, taking the chair across from the bard and dropping into it.

"Do I want to know where that came from?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena grunted, and propped her head up on one fist, her elbow on the chair's arm.

"That's what I thought."

**

They decided to sleep in the cabin that night, and Gabrielle was sprawled on the low slung leather couch in front of their fire, doing nothing more than enjoying the fire and it's shadowy dance on the ceiling.

Dori and Cari were down with the rest of the kids in the village, at a group sleepover where the minders would watch them while the tribe and the town, and their parents launched the new temples.

Xena was over in the corner where she had her little work bench set up, polishing her armor, an oil lamp hanging over her head spilling light all over her.

"Want another baked apple, Xe?"

"Sure." The warrior stifled a yawn. "Almost done here."

Gabrielle pushed herself to her feet and went over to the fireplace, picking up one of the wooden platters sitting on the table and bringing it with her. She removed the top of the cast iron pot hanging over the fire, digging the third of four apples out and scooping some honey and cinnamon to drizzle over it.

One of Xena's favorite treats, in this case made from the last apple harvest from town and set to bake before their dinner, to provide a sweet at the end of it. She brought it over to her partner and set it down on the workbench. "They worth all that polishing? You're probably going to be covered in dew before we get down there."

Xena chuckled. "I haven't had this stuff on since we got back. Needed some work."

Gabrielle sat down on the stool next to her. "Do we know how to get a temple started, Xe? Or are you just going to go down there, push the gates open and tell them all to get on with it?"

Xena sniffed reflectively. "Good question. I thought putting the word out would bring up some of their accolytes… maybe an oracle but I guess not. We'll figure it out." She finished the last piece of armor and set it aside.

"They'll show up eventually. Probably waiting for better weather." Gabrielle watched her pick up the dish and dig into the apple. "Maybe that's where the term fair weather worshippers comes from?"

Xena chuckled silently as she chewed.

"I think I'll recite a poem for Aphrodite's." Gabrielle said. "I have a new one I wrote, and I think it's okay for that."

"Sounds good."

Gabrielle reached over and stole a bit of the apple with her fingers. "And I'm looking forward to the festival. Glad we're having it across the river, and all those merchants are around. It'll be fun."

"It'll be fun." Xena agreed. "Army finished putting up all those tents." She licked the spoon she was eating the apple with and then put the dish down. "They're happy, town's happy, tribe's happy, army's happy, mark the date on your diary cause that ain't happening again soon."

“Heheh.” Gabrielle took the dish from her and put it on the washrack, then she came back over and offered both hands, curling her fingers inward invitingly. “C’mon.”

Xena got up and evaded her grip, closing her arms around her instead and lifting her up in a ferocious hug. “Thanks.” She bumped her over to the bed and then turned, dousing the lamp beside it. That left only the fire in the fireplace burning, shedding a faint golden red light on the inside of the cabin.

She tumbled into the soft, feather topped bed alongside Gabrielle, inhaling the clean linen smell and settling her head down on one of the pillows as the quilted blanket was brought up over her. It was cool and then warm, and then Gabrielle was draping her arm over her and curling up against her side.

They both exhaled about the same time and then laughed. “So.” Gabrielle snuggled up to her. “You think we can keep this festival going allsevenday until your birthday?”

“Can’t we let the festival be enough birthday?” Xena asked.

“No.”

“Gabrielle, c’mon.”

“Honey we love celebrating your birthday.” Her partner protested. “It’s solstice. You get presents, we get presents – c’mon yourself!”

“Mmph.”

“I’m trying to figure out what we’re going to give Dori that’s going to beat that damn pony.” Gabrielle mock sighed. “I mean really. Could you maybe build her a slide?”

“A slide???”

“And we should give Cari something nice. How about some clothes? She liked those boots your mom gave her.” Gabrielle gently drew patterns over her partner’s stomach, under the light fabric of her shift. “It’ll be fun.”

“What do you want for Solstice, by the way?”

“Me?”

“No, I’m talking to some other woman in bed with me.” Xena reached over and tweaked her nose. “Aside from nutbread and socks.”

Gabrielle smiled. “I want all my family to be happy.” She responded. “Not a damn other thing.”

**

Xena got to the bottom of the ladder and landed on plateau, which was already full of people. There were forest dwellers and Amazons, merchants and townsfolk, most of whom had climbed up the newly staked out path from the valley below.

It was pre-dawn and dark. But she could smell food and green things and spices, offerings to the gods that had been laboriously brought up with those who had made the climb up to help inaugurate the two new temples.

It was clear and the wind had died down, and as Xena sidled her way through the crowd she drew in a breath that didn’t sting the inside of her nose for the first time in a while.

“Xe.”

Gabrielle’s voice penetrated the murmuring and she angled her steps towards the temple to Aphrodite where here soulmate was standing with a group of Amazons.

“They did a nice job.” The bard indicated the temple. “Look.”

There were oil lamps inside, warming the interior with a rich, golden bright light along all three of the open walls and at the apex of the roofline.

The third side was left open and it had been decorated with evergreen boughs, with pinecones and nuts tucked into them along with tiny wooden birds and flowers. Xena ducked her head to enter and felt warmer immediately

Inside the altar was stone, chiseled with care by the town stonemason and the center of the altar was a deep pool of fragrant oil, with floating wicks inside it.

"It's really nice." Solari said. "We had some dried flowers and Renas made these." She indicated a half dozen wreathes that decorated the front of the altar. "Better in the spring when we've got some fresh ones."

It was nice, and Xena ran her hand over the carved surface with a grunt of approval. Above the altar was a neatly painted image of Aphrodite herself, the colors rich and vibrant, the Goddess draped in pristine white and girded with gold, holding a golden cup and half smiling at the viewers.

The image itself was realistic and precise, one of Paladia's nicest portraits. "Wow." Xena said, half turning to look for Cait. "That's nice."

Cait smiled. "It is, isn't it? Just finished up on those last night." She said. "Wait until you see the other one."

Thus invited, Xena emerged from one temple and moved over to the other one, which, like it's neighbor, was three sided. Cait strolled diffidently at her heels, the young Amazon's rank tokens being gently moved by the slight breeze.

Three sided. Xena paused and regarded the second structure.

That was, really, the only similarity. The opening of Ares temple was lined with iron and steel, artfully curled and intertwined in black and silver and the decorations here instead of birds and flowers were weapons.

Knives and miniature maces, and spear points pointed out in all directions making entry require some caution if you were, as Xena was, more than usually tall. She went inside and felt the difference, this space lit with red oil lamps shedding light the color of blood and the altar black obsidian.

Made Xena's skin prickle, a little in a not entirely unpleasant way.

The floor was lined with gray and black slate and as Cait had promised, above the altar was a blackwood framed painting of Ares seated on a throne like chair in a casual attitude, leaning back, his sword resting across his knees with the hilt clasped lightly in one hand.

His eyes picked up hints of blue color, and were looking right out at the viewer, the likeness impressive and almost uncanny. "Wow." Xenarepeated, unable to repress a smile.

"It's quite good, isn't it?" Cait had her hands clasped behind her back.

'That's him." Xena agreed. "Nice job. Where is Paladia?" She looked around.

Cait rolled her eyes. "Won't come up here. Didn't want to have everyone tell her how lovely these nice pictures were."

Xena chuckled. "Well. That's sort of how I feel about singing." She admitted. "Which I'm gonna do today, so go get her and drag her up here if you have to."

"Right." Cait turned and trotted out, visibly pleased.

**

The sky was lightening, the crowd had gathered.

Xena stood on a flat, high rock halfway between the two temples, as everyone gathered in front of them, the chatter falling off as eyes turned to her with an almost giddy expectation.

She sensed motion behind her, and she turned her head to see tall, furred bodies moving forward from the cliff edge behind the temples, knowing that Jessan had led his people up through the path past her home.

Allowed, through the gates of Amphipolis, and past the guarded entrance to the Amazons, across the clearing that was theirs, and past the tree.

They gathered to one side of the crowd, tall and quiet, and making Xena inhale in surprise as she recognized Lestan's face among them. His eyes twinkled at the expression on her face, and he lifted his one remaining hand up in greeting.

She lifted her own in return, in a hunter's signal that made his smile all the wider.

Gabrielle moved through the crowd, staff in hand, and stepped up onto the rock to join her. Her carrybag was across her shoulder, her scrolls inside it, but the long knife visible at her waist and the staff paid tribute to her now realized dual nature.

"Ready?" Xena asked her.

"As I ever will be." Gabrielle replied wryly. "You?"

Xena cleared her throat and faced the crowd. "People!" She called out briefly. "Let's do this thing."

A wordless shout responded. Xena shifted a little and looked at her partner, who had drawn a scroll from her bag and unrolled it, then paused and looked back. "Oh crap Xe. It's too dark to read it."

Xena stifled a laugh and held up a hand, then she started to get off the rock, stopping when, from nowhere, a small golden orb appeared at the bard's left shoulder, hovering close to the parchment and spreading light over it.

Now there was complete silence, as Xena edged back into position and waited. All eyes were on that orb, save Gabrielle's. The bard glanced at the orb briefly, then dropped her gaze to the parchment. "Thank you."

Xena folded her hands in front of her and just smiled.

"Welcome." The bard's voice sounded, echoing a little over the ridge. "We gather here together this morning to consecrate these two temples, these new places built by our hands to provide us a place to offer our prayers and acknowledge our debts to the two forces that have shaped our lives like none other."

She looked behind her at the temples. "Love and war." Her eyes went to Xena's profile. "Passion and battle have come to define the black and white of us as people, giving us something to aspire to and give our lives for." She looked out over the audience. "We would be the lesser without them."

Gabrielle paused and waited, and a moment later the silence was broken and then filled with Xena's singing voice, rising up on a note so clear andperfect it brought tears to her eyes.

The words were simple, as simple as their origins were and they resonated through this crowd of equally simple folk who expected no more of life than friends and a good mug of ale at the end of a day of hard work.

They sounded of roots and warm sun, of sheep and riding through croplands. Of bending plows into swords, and the pain of a good death. Of giving blood and sweat, and life and passion in the cause of a short life in the mortal world.

Bring the light, Xena sang, as the first rose of dawn lit her face. Bring the darkness, we are children of both.

The last note echoed and faded. Then they stepped down off the rock and moved first to Aphrodite's temple, entering it together and regarding the altar. Xena dug in her belt pouch and removed a roundish object, placing it squarely on the center of the rock.

The apple gathered in the light and shone gently there, and they stepped back.
"C"mon people." Xena broke the spell of silence outside. "Offer whatya got."

They moved to one side of the temple, as people started to move inside, each carrying some object, some small gift for the goddesses new shrine, looking up at the portrait as they approached.

Xena laid her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders and she put her arm around Xena's waist as they watched their friends and family go by, the altar quickly becoming decorated with everything ranging from tiny cakes to colorful stones from the Amazon's valley.

Coins. Soft blankets. Feathers. Carved boxes. Cyrene and Johan added a small pot. Jessan and Elaini put down a basket of herbs and winked at them as they passed outside. Cait added a piece of jewelry, a silver heart, her other hand firmly wrapped in Paladia's cloak, pulling her along.

The former renegade glowered at the altar, her partner, and then gave Xena and Gabrielle a long suffering look as she was yanked past them.

Gabrielle stepped forward and blocked them, then she extended her hand to Paladia, baring her forearm as she offered a clasp, her eyes twinkling gently.

Paladia's eyes narrowed, then she made a face and bared her own arm, grabbing the bard's inner arm up near her elbow while Cait watched with a pleased but puzzled expression.

"Glad I met you." Paladia said, briefly.

"Likewise." Gabrielle responded, releasing her and returning to Xena's side, as they moved on.

By the time it was done, the sun was rising and it bathed them as they went out and crossed the open space between the two temples, and the crowd followed them, clustering around the front of the other temple with an air of expectation.

Xena entered, removing her cloak and facing the altar in her armor and weapons. She briefly glanced at the picture over the altar before she turned and faced the watchers. "There can be only one offering here."

Gabrielle stood at the other side of the altar, her hands wrapped around her staff as she watched Xena, watched the crowd outside, and felt the dark energy flow over all of them as surely as water would have.

Xena removed her dagger from it's sheath and without pausing sliced open the palm of her other hand, waiting a brief moment for the blood to start welling before she held her hand up and spread her fingers, displaying it to the crowd.

Silence. Shivers. A prickling of the soul.

Xena turned and put her hand on the altar, invisibly staining it's black surface with her blood as the sun tipped over the ridge and came in slantwise through the bodies waiting outside and speckling her with light.

She held it there for a moment, then she moved away and stood to one side. Before anyone could move outside though, Gabrielle leaned her staff against the wall and walked forward, quietly removing the long knife she was bearing and cutting a deep cut in her own hand.

She studied it briefly, then she put her hand down on the spot Xena had, mixing their blood together. Without looking at the gathered crowd, she turned and went back to her partner's side and held her hand up, waiting as Xena lifted her own and they clasped.

Appropriate, that their first new scars be matching ones.

The crowd surged forward then, men and women, silent and intent, baring hands and forearms and in Bennu's case, foreheads as they added their blood to the altar and the copper scent of it grew to fill the shrine.

Solari had been the first Amazon to reach the altar, and as she moved away she paused before them, and reached out to put her cut hand over their clasped ones, leaving a stain of her own blood on them before she left.

Gabrielle very gently cleared her throat, but the word silently spread and soon their hands were covered outside with crimson drying to rusty brown.

It was what it was.

**

The celebrants moved down to the festival grounds across the river, and the area was packed with stands and wagons, the hide tents, brought out by the army, protecting everyone from the cold air.

Music reverberated, and on the stage at the far end of the festival area a group of players were gathering, making ready to put on a show.

There were tables spread out and on the far side of the square was a cookpit, staffed by Cyrene's kitchen help who were busy putting out platters of meats and tubers, while several casks of winter ale had been rolled down and set up near by.

Business was booming. There was a giddiness present you could hear in the laughter and the shouts of encouragement as nearby a group of people played darts and others fought in a friendly arm wrestle.

Xena was sprawled in a fur lined chair, a mug of ale gripped in one hand while the other, bandaged, rested on her knee. She was glad the day was nearing it's end, the rich golden light of sunset visible outside the tent edge, a the flaps rustling in a cold breeze coming down from the mountain.

There was the sense of an ending, at least for now, a contentment that would enjoy the peace of the moment, and the coming solstice glad of what they had, and what they had given.

Everyone counted it a success. Even Xena had been surprised with the number of people, town, village and visitors who had come up to her and said how happy they were with the new shrines.

Some, because they had missed the worship of the gods. Some, because they felt that any protection was a good thing. Some, who had gone with her to war, because they had come to a personal knowledge of the gods unexpectedly.

Some, because they saw the commercial possibilities in making Amphipolis a pilgrimage. Xena's lips twisted into a wry smile. Athens andAmphipolis were not all that different in that regard.

The biggest new thing was tiny replicas of the new shrines, built by enterprising hucksters who had been up to them and brought down dead branches and with that, and string and imagination had cooked up little mock ups for sale.

Couldn't make enough of them. Already, some of the merchants were making plans to carry some back towards Therma and once there, she knew word would carry to Athens. And then?

And then. Whatever then turned out to be, it would. Xena wriggled into a more comfortable position, drawing up one knee and resting it on the arm of her chair, idly watching the troops in half armor – her armor – enjoy themselves.

Cait came over to her and sat down on a stool. "My goodness."

Xena shifted her attention to her friend. "What's up?" She regarded the young Amazon's face, which had gained a new maturity over the past weeks.

"If Pally does all the sketches she's being asked, she'll be doing nothing else for seasons." Cait indicated the crowd around her partner. "The dinars they're offering!"

"She's got a real talent." Xena said. "She can always say no."

"Too right." Cait said, to both statements. "One of that lot said she should go to Athens."

Xena snorted.

“Yes, that’s what I said.” Cait produced a wry grin. “But Xena, what really is all this? What does it mean?” She asked. “I thought you weren’t much for the gods.”

“Maybe I was wrong.” Xena replied, thoughtfully. “Maybe we do need them. “

“Maybe they need us more like it.” Cait grinned. “Don’t you think?”

Xena sighed, then paused as Gabrielle emerged from the crowd and headed in her direction, their eyes meeting as the bard evaded servers and hucksters and family. She could read amusement, bemusement and resignation in the bard’s body language. “Hey.”

Gabrielle perched on the sturdy wooden arm of the chair and leaned her elbow on Xena’s shoulder. “Hey.” She returned the greeting, giving Cait a brief smile. “What a circus.”

Xena offered her the mug.

“Gabrielle, I heard you were going to tell that story again, the one from the cave.” Cait spoke up. “Is that true?”

“True.” The bard handed back the mug after taking a swallow. “This seems like the right place for it. Everyone’s still jazzed from the consecration this morning.” She leaned over and gently blew in Xena’s ear. “This is going to end up going in all sorts of crazy and maybe bad directions.” She whispered after that.

“I know.” Xena extended her long legs and crossed them at the ankles. “But maybe if we’ve got these here to protect the area, we won’t have to.”

“Hm.”

“Hm.”

**

The sunset painted the ridge from the opposite direction than the morning, sending slices of deep gold across the cold ground and into the shrines, gilding a tall, leather clad form sitting on the rock Xena had sung from.

His legs were played out, and he was leaning back on his hands, regarding the valley with a thoughtful yet benign expression.

“Oh, Ares. They did a good job!” Aphrodite came out of her shrine and joined him. “It ain’t marble and gold, but its nice.”

Ares tipped back his head. “Yeah.” He agreed. “Not bad.” He got up and turned around, going into his shrine and regarding the altar with it’s deep crimson stain. “Lot of good jazz in here.”

Aphrodite inched in, not without a grimace. “Oh, ugh.”

Ares chuckled, then sobered. He walked over to the altar and put his hands on it, then nodded and took a half step back, drawing his sword out. “They did more than they knew.”

“You gonna tell them?”

“No.” Ares sighted down the blade, then lifted it up, letting it touch his forehead for a long moment, eyes closed. “I accept.” He uttered softly, as he ran his free hand along the blade. “And return.”

He lifted his hand off the blade and turned it palm down most, dripping red in the gold light before he put it firmly down on the altar, adding his blood to the rest.

Aphrodite shivered.

The altar crackled, shivering itself and then lighting from within with a deep faint reflection that extended to include Ares, gilding him, and his sword in it for a long, breathless moment.

Then he lifted his hand and the glow around him faded as he re sheathed his sword, turning to regard Aphrodite. Behind him, the altar retained it'sdeep fire and the oil lamps flickered now with an internal depth.

He winked at her. "Wanna join us?"

"Ares, I can't." Aphrodite made a face, hugging herself with both arms. "Gross."

"Gabrielle did." He needled her.

"Part of her belongs to you." Aphrodite responded. "Just like part of Xena now belongs to me."

"Yeah, yeah." Ares sheathed the Sword of War. "C'mon. You got better snacks in yours."

With a relieved smile, Aphrodite led the way over to her shrine and they walked inside. "Soo much nicer in here."

Ares rolled his eyes.

Aphrodite handed him one of the little cakes from Cyrene's kitchen. "It's nice." She looked around her space. "Look." She lifted up one of the spun wool shawls in creamy white. "Soft."

Ares dusted his fingers off. "Nice." He agreed, then reached over and lifted the apple off the center of the stone. "Ready to accept your new pad?" He inspected the apple. "Nice they figured this out."

Aphrodite moved over to where he was standing and leaned against the altar. "You should tell Xena the score." She said seriously. "She kindadeserves to know, you know?"

"She doesn't remember."

"She might." Aphrodite took the apple from him and took a bite of it. "She already knows it was some kinda scam of ours."

Ares sighed. "She might." He admitted. "I'll think about it."

"It was a pretty sweet scam." Aphrodite offered him the apple, holding it out for him to take a bite of it "You got a lot of eternity points for it."

Ares chewed and winked at her.

The goddess of love put the bitten apple down on the altar, and then laid one hand on it gently, bringing a sprinkle of sparkling light to it. "I accept." She then reached over and hooked a finger into Ares leather vest and pulled him closer.

Hastily, he swallowed, then inclined his head and they kissed.

"And return." Aphrodite murmured, taking a breath and pressing closer to him. "Big time."

**

The festival finally ended in the small hours of the morning and that late hour found Xena and Gabrielle making their way up the slope together, leaving a happy shambles behind them.

They climbed steadily upward, breath fogging, in companionable silence until they reached the fork and paused. "Chances are." Gabrielle said, clearing her throat. "There's hot water already on inside there."

"Tea sounds good." Xena agreed, as she steered her steps towards the Amazon village. "Your throat must be killing you."

"Ugh."

"Good story, though."

They passed the guardhouse, the Amazon guards coming out to salute them respectfully, then ducking back inside the warmth.

They continued on, up the slope to the central plateau the village was built on, seeing candles flickering inside led glassed windows in both small huts and the larger dorms, and lamps lit in the dining hall and outside the gathering hall.

They could hear voices, even at the late hour, and Xena's sensitive ears for once heard no bitterness in them, and easy happiness in the laughter. "I think we even pacified the rest of the elders." She commented. "Whoda thunk it?"

"Yeah. They even accepted that we did one for Ares and not Artemis." The bard mused. "Not after they heard all that back chat from everything."

"Mmph."

"Someone's got the fire on." Gabrielle commented as they walked up the path to the queen's quarters. "Thought I heard a whistle go up ahead of us."

The fireplace was lit, and candles were glowing on mantel and tables when they entered, and they heard the soft rattle of the water pot already set over the fire. "Nice." Xena unlatched her cloak and hung it up, reaching her hand out to take Gabrielle's.

It felt good to have warmth around her, and she felt her body relaxing as she removed her armor, setting it on top of the clothing press against the wall. She paused in that to adjust the bandage on her hand, re-wrapping it a little.

Then she turned her head and looked sideways at Gabrielle, who was standing near the fire watching her.

Gabrielle came over and put her arms around her, closing her eyes and exhaling in contentment. "Don't want tea after all. Just want you."

Aw. Xena found herself agreeing. "Always." She wrapped her arms around Gabrielle in return, and they stood there for a moment, rocking gently back and forth.

They kissed each other, as they undressed, trading furs and leathers for bare skin and finding their way from the fireplace to the bed, getting under the blankets and settling against each other. "You think they liked the new temples, Xe?"

Xena shrugged, sliding one hand behind Gabrielle's head and gently cradling it. "Why shouldn't they?" She kissed the side of her neck, working her way upward.

"It's not like in Athens." Gabrielle said. "I went to one of the temples there. All ivory and gold and all that."

Xena traced a line down the side of her partner's face. "We're not Athens."

"True." Gabrielle conceded, easing closer and resting her hand on Xena's side. "We're us." She laid a line of kisses down her partner's breastbone.

"Then lets just be us." Xena enjoyed the building passion. "Maybe now they'll leave us alone."

Gabrielle paused in her attentions and shifted, going nose to nose with her partner. "When pigs fly, Xena."

Xena blinked. "If I shoot a flying pig out of the air, willya cook it?" She tickled Gabrielle's navel, and they both started laughing. "C'mon." Xenapulled her back down. "Before the sun comes up and life goes on."

**

The End.