

~ Chakram ~

by Aurelia

General Disclaimer: Xena, Gabrielle and all other relevant "Xena: Warrior Princess" characters are the property of MCA Universal and Renaissance Pictures, and their writers. All rights are reserved to the legal owners, and no infringement is intended. All other characters are my own doing.

Specific Disclaimers:

VIOLENCE WARNING/DISCLAIMER:

A general violence warning, after all we are talking about Xena. There are a couple of scenes towards the end of this tale that may be distressing, so please be warned.

SEX WARNING/DISCLAIMER:

This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. Sexual content is mainly PG-13 but not overtly graphic.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This is an alternate timeline story, changing direction from "Destiny". The Warrior Princess and the Destroyer of Nations did not exist. Nor did Lao Ma, Borias or Hercules take part in moulding this particular Xena. This is the second story in this series, the first being "[Gladiator](#)". While this is a stand-alone story, you may want to read the first one to come up to speed with some details in this tale.

Some liberties have been taken with the Chakram of Darkness, so please read this story in the spirit that it was written.

THANKS:

I would like to give a BIG thank you to my Beta reader, Babel, and her ever-vigilant computer. She has put a lot of work in on this story to make sure it comes up to scratch. Thanks sweetie.

FEEDBACK: Any positive feedback is appreciated at aurelia_fan@yahoo.com.au

© July 2005

Chapter 1

'Mama! Look at that!' Xena couldn't help but smile at her daughter's intense curiosity. She was pleased at how easily the child had come to accept her in such a short time, especially with the

dropping of the more formal 'mother'. Marina was proving to be even more of a joy in her life that she had been in the scattered visits over the last nine years.

"Look at what, sweetie?" A small laugh bubbled up in Xena as Marina looked up at her, her small features breaking into a full-fledged grin and her eyes glowing with love for her mother. Unexpectedly, she threw her little arms around Xena, nearly causing the woman to lose her footing. "Woow! Hang on there. We'll fall over." Not that she would have minded. Xena returned the exuberant hug with one of her own.

"I love you, mama."

Oh damn, that is sooo cute. "And I love you Marina. What brought that on?"

"I don't know. Just wanted to say it."

"Well, you can say it anytime you want, sweetheart. Now, what was I supposed to look at?"

Marina grabbed her hand and led her to the railing, pointing to the water below. "What are those fishies doing?"

Xena glanced over the rail to spot a small pod of dolphins racing in front of the ship. "Well, my little busybody, those fishies are playing with the ship. They're racing to see who will come first."

"But why are the fishies jumping out of the water?"

"Those fishies are called dolphins Marina."

"Dol - fin." Marina tried the word on her tongue slowly.

"Why are the dol - fins jumping out of the water, mama?"

Xena would never tire hearing her daughter call her mama. Her mothering instincts were now fully engaged and she turned to mush every time she looked at the miniature version of herself.

"Well, do you see the little holes on the top of their heads?" She could see the child looking intently at the water.

"Yes! Yes I can see it, mama! Do you see it?" She had to laugh at the girl's enthusiasm. Was she ever that young? Xena thought back to when she was a child and realized she must have driven her own mother crazy with question after question.

"Well that little hole is what the dolphins breathe through. They may be a fish but they breathe air like we do." How long did it take her to reach that conclusion? Hours and hours of studying them. What a joke of the gods this was - make a fish that had to breathe air to live.

"So they jump up to get a breath of air before diving back into the water."

"Can I go play with the dol - fins, mama?"

"Do you know how to swim Marina?"

"Swim? Can I swim?"

"Can you do this?" Xena made a swimming motion and could see that her daughter had no idea what she was talking about. "Never mind. When we get home, I'll teach you to swim. Swimming is a way people can get around in the water. See how the dolphins move in the water?" The child looked back down into the water again watching the dolphins move along side the boat. She looked back up, her azure eyes shining with wonder. "Swimming can move you forward in the water, just like the dolphins."

"Oh!" Marina seemed satisfied for the moment and was content to watch the dolphins swim around, resting quietly in the safe haven of Xena's arms.

* * * * *

Marina had finally grown tired and was having a nap. Xena stood at the bow of the ship, enjoying the feel of sea spray on her face. The ship slowly rolled under her feet and the sun blazed down on her mostly bare shoulders. It had been way too long and she so missed the joyous feeling of sailing.

They had been making good time and were now within distant sight of Greece. She was pleased that Marina had taken to the sea like she was born to it. It was another thing that they shared in common. Gabrielle, however, was struggling.

Xena glanced over to see poor Gabrielle in the same spot she had been on and off since they had left port at Ostia, hanging over the rail and heaving up her guts. *Poor girl.* Blue eyes softened. Some people just never got their sea legs. *Not much longer, little one.*

A pale face tinged with green moved from its position over the railing and faced her. *She looks so miserable.* Xena offered a smile in sympathy and winced as the face disappeared over the rail again.

She had gotten a chance to look at the captain's maps and by her reckoning there was another day or so before they would reach port. Not soon enough, looking at poor Gabrielle.

This journey had been wonderful and Xena revelled in her own new-found freedom and the freedom of sailing on the high seas once again. She had enjoyed the time she had to spend with both her daughter and her lover. It was something new and exciting to her - to be able to have the time to discover all the facets of her budding relationship with both of them.

Despite Gabrielle's occasional bouts of seasickness, they spent many hours together, talking, making plans and playing the odd silly game of star gazing. Both, however, were feeling the strain of abstinence. Neither wanted to shock the child and be forced to explain, but having tasted what the other had to offer made the task even harder.

The boat was quiet and she turned from her introspection to see the men watching her. Sometimes it was a curse to look the way she did. Even the conspicuous sword on her back did nothing to discourage the lustful looks she got. *Men...* But then again she couldn't talk - that was the same look she had when looking at Gabrielle, so...

But some of those looks had Xena worried, especially when they were directed at her partner. She kept herself close by when Gabrielle was on deck, not liking the sub-vocal comments from a couple of the sailors. She was thankful for her excellent hearing, otherwise there could have been trouble.

She glanced over to the far horizon and noted that dark clouds were beginning to close in. Just what her lover needed, rough seas, and it looked like the storm would strike before they reached land.

Leaving Gabrielle to her misery for a while, Xena went below decks and collected their belongings together, making a backpack of sorts if she needed to grab them quickly.

She went back on deck and the dark clouds had gathered more quickly than she had anticipated. "Gabrielle?" A sweat-slicked face met her gaze. "C'mon, we need to get below deck."

Gabrielle looked around and saw the reason for Xena's concern. Huge, rolling dark masses of cloud moved quickly in their direction, lightning streaking across the sky in spectacular fashion. Her eyes widened in fright. A pair of large hands rested on her shoulders and she looked up into blue eyes cooling in the darkening sky.

"Storm, ho!" There was a bustling on deck as the crew prepared for a wet night.

"Everything will be alright. C'mon, let's go."

In their cabin Marina had awoken, a little frightened at the rolling of the ship. "It's alright sweetheart. Just a small storm. I'll be right here with you." Xena tried to sound as confident as she could under the circumstances as she gave her daughter a tight hug in comfort.

Over the next candlemark, the storm gathered strength, the rolling became a definite sway, swinging lanterns in all directions. Seawater began washing in the portholes, making walking slippery, and objects were flying in all directions. Things were getting dangerous.

Finding her backpack and making it secure around her, Xena gathered up her family and moved them towards the deck. She didn't want them caught inside if the ship went down.

She stuck her head outside and found the crew were fighting a losing battle, barely able to keep

their footing. Lashing rain was making visibility nearly impossible. The ship was being tossed around like a toy in a bathtub. They could have been blown off course by leagues and no one would ever know.

She heard the cry, "Rocks ahead!"

She grabbed Gabrielle, trying to muster as much confidence and calm as she could. "Wait here with Marina. Should the ship start to sink, make your way to the top. Don't get caught below decks. Understand?" Gabrielle gave her a nervous nod. Xena hesitated for a moment and decided that if something happened she would regret not doing it, so... "I love you sweetheart." Xena brought Gabrielle into her for a quick kiss.

She looked down to see Marina watching them, a puzzled look on her young features. *Hmmm, when we get out of this, I think a talk is in order.* Here was another problem that was going to have to wait in line until they were safely on land.

Xena squatted down on her haunches, bringing the girl to eye to eye with her. "Honey, will you please do what Gabrielle tells you? For me? I will explain everything later." She pulled her daughter into a hug, her body warming the young child's chilled skin.

"Wait here," she cried and dashed out into the howling storm. The deck swayed from side to side, battered by huge waves trying to wash everything overboard. She battled her way to the wheel and grabbed it with two strong hands off the first mate struggling to keep control. She was steering blind and only hoped she was not getting them into more trouble. Pulling the wheel with all her strength to the right she felt the ship start to turn. Precious seconds went by as she held her breath for the collision, and the high-pitched squealing put her teeth on edge as the hull scraped over the sharp outcrop of rock.

They were not out of trouble yet. The heavy sheets of rain still made it impossible to see where they were going. She tied off the wheel and ran down to help the crew with the billowing canvas that was thrashing out of control. The sails were beyond repair, the shredded material flapping uselessly in the howling wind.

Along with the rest of the crew, Xena began grabbing handfuls of canvas, pulling it off the mast. Water ran in small rivulets down her face and into her eyes, blinding her. Continuing her task by feel only, she pulled the heavy material until there was no more. She brushed her fingers across her eyes, trying to get some of her eyesight back, but with the wind, the rain and the crashing of waves, it was impossible. Her senses were useless in this storm. The howling of the wind, the cries of the sailors washed overboard and the creaking wood made them dull and dampened.

She was taken completely by surprise by the whooshing sound and a yell, "Watch out!" just before everything went black.

* * * * *

Xena tested her surroundings with her other senses before opening her eyes. She could feel sand under her exposed skin, water lapping around her and the sun gently beating down on her back. She slowly opened her eyes, immediately regretting the action.

"Ow!" She couldn't stop the exclamation from leaving her lips as her head throbbed in time to her own heartbeat. She slowly tested each of her limbs and found everything intact except for the massive headache.

Her eyeball slowly swivelled and focused on the scene before her. Scattered up the beach were broken planks of wood, some of which she recognised had come from their ship. Shipwrecked! This was a sailor's worst nightmare.

Slowly, she pulled herself to her feet. A hand went to the back of her head and found a lump there. *What happened?* The last thing she could remember was somebody yelling, "Watch out!" She must have been hit in the head with the boom. *That thing is hard!*

Xena looked up and down the beach, scattered with debris. Looking out to the reef, she saw the remains of the ship, gutted and left to die on the rocks. Marina! Gabrielle! In a panic, she ran up and down the beach looking for them. *Oh Gods, where are they?* She could feel herself starting to unravel at the thought of losing them.

Some of the crew had washed up on shore, nearly all dead by drowning but she had found one or two that had been skewered by a piece of wood from the ship. The reality of it all crashed down on her unexpectedly and tears came unbidden to her eyes. Her attention turned to the shipwreck out on the reef.

She was stripping off her armour and leathers before she had given it another thought. She had to know once and for all. Stowing the backpack and her clothes safely in the underbrush away from the beach, and placing a marker so she could find it again, she ran down the beach, stretching her long legs as she lengthened her stride and arced cleanly into the surf. Dressed only in a thin cotton shift and carrying a knife, she swam strongly through the breaking waves out towards the wreck.

The water was cool and clean and teeming with marine life. Trying to keep her fear at bay, her mind logically gathered in all the threads that would aid her in her survival - food, water, fire, shelter - but she couldn't help adding her family to that list. That last point was what would make her survival bearable.

The enclosed cove seemed to be predator-free. There was plenty of fish for food and it looked like dangerous sea creatures were not able to get past the reef. That would mean these waters were relatively safe for swimming. *Good to know.*

She reached the wreck in no time at all and scrambled to get a hold to haul herself on board, the constantly breaking waves making standing on the tilted deck difficult. She quickly scanned the surface and saw a couple of dead bodies caught on broken wood, not yet claimed by the sea.

Gingerly, she made her way to the stairs to go below deck. Supplies were scattered everywhere, some spoiled by seawater but others looked salvageable. But that was not her immediate objective. Frantically she searched around, terror tearing through her like a knife. If they weren't on board, then the chances of her finding them alive were not good.

She was just about to give up looking when a glimpse of blonde hair tucked away under the bunk in their cabin caught her eye. *Nooooo!* Her mind screamed out in pain.

"Gabrielle?" There was no answer. *Oh Gods, answer me!*

She tried again. "Gabrielle?" She crossed the distance in a matter of seconds. Grabbing around under the bed she found an arm and gently pulled. Gabrielle's body came out, her arms safely wrapped around Marina in protection.

She laid them out and quickly checked for life. Pulses were thready and breathing shallow but they were alive. Bowing her head, Xena quietly sent up a prayer of thanks to the heavens.

Time slipped by as Xena silently guarded her precious cargo. Marina lay in her lap while a strong arm gathered in Gabrielle to her side. Relief washed over her and swept her away, her battered emotions finally giving away to the events of the last day, while the two people she most loved in the world lay blissfully unaware of her emotional crisis.

The real world barged in on Gabrielle's grey world with a bang. Everything ached, from her hair to her feet. Scratchy eyes refused to open. Through a haze, a gentle pressure on her arm caught her attention. She tried to speak but it was too hard, and only a small rush of air escaped her lips.

"Gabrielle?"

That low voice she had recently come to crave beckoned to her and she could do little else but reply. "Yeah?" She didn't even recognize her own voice, which sounded dry and broken.

"Oh Gods!" Gabrielle could hear the raw emotion in that voice and struggled to pull up her hand to cup the tear-streaked face watching her. "Are you alright?"

Xena couldn't help but laugh. How ironic a statement that was! "Am I alright? Gabrielle, are **you** alright?"

"Ask me next week." Gabrielle so wanted to go back to sleep, to leave the world's problems behind for a little while longer.

Xena, watched as the bloodshot green eyes closed and she drifted off into peaceful slumber. *One down...* She turned her attention to the child lying in the cradle of her legs. This was the first unguarded look she had of the person who was of her flesh and blood.

She could see a lot of herself in the child, besides the obvious features of midnight black hair and

the electric blue eyes behind the closed eyes. She had the same high-planed cheekbones and aquiline nose. Marina was a bit of a late bloomer, unlike Xena who had been all long legs and arms even at Marina's age, but she suspected that the child would soon have a growth spurt and put some length into her limbs.

She's finally mine! Xena had a hard time accepting that Marina was finally staying with her. All the child's life had been small snippets of a life with a mother whom she saw episodically at the whim of a cruel and arrogant father.

Her eyebrows drew together in concern. While her daughter was a bright and exuberant child, she wondered about her child-like demeanour. Marina certainly did not have the maturity of a nine year-old and her writing skills were only starting to bloom, but she knew the child was very bright, picking up her new language with amazing speed.

She suspected that the adults who looked after her closeted her away from the outside world for many of her informative years, only allowing her out perhaps when her inquisitive nature became too much. Well, she was going to change all that when they got home.

Finally, she spared a thought for the unselfish act of a woman who had given her life to help her. To help them. Emotion tore through her at the memory of a woman who had become, for a short while, her mother. *I won't forget you mother...*

Assuring herself that both of them were out of immediate danger, she turned her intellect to getting them to dry land. As much as she would like to stay here until they were ready to travel, high tide would force them out of this haven soon. She knew Marina didn't know how to swim and she wasn't sure about Gabrielle either.

While they rested, she began looking around for something to get them to shore with. Working quickly, she found a piece of broken decking, flat enough to take both of them. She wedged a plank of wood into the break and began using her weight and strength to tear the splintered wood away. Pleased with her work, she put the raft to one side.

Checking on her patients and seeing that they were still asleep, Xena quickly gathered as much as she could. Wet blankets were filled with anything that was salvageable. Flasks of water, wine and oil, sealed barrels, clothes, weapons, maps, lanterns, flints, anything that could be at all useful, whether she thought she needed them or not, was collected. She would sort it all out later on dry land

High tide would be approaching overnight and could very well lift the wreck off the reef and take it out to sea. This may be her only chance and she was going to take as much as she could carry in the one trip. Once on dry land, she would not be leaving her family alone until they were back on their feet.

She lashed Gabrielle and Marina down to stop them sliding off the raft. Her collected bootie was secured in a torn sail wrapped around a frame and she set off, swimming along side the raft,

steering it through the reef towards the beach. It was very slow going and extremely hard work, especially with the drag of the canvas raft floating behind, but she eventually got back to land without incident.

Exhaustion was eating at her flagging reserves as she struggled to carry everything up the beach to safety. She had a little fresh water and unspoiled food salvaged from the ship before collapsing into a dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

Chapter 2

Xena slowly came back to her senses a long time later. A small hand was patting her cheek and a tiny voice was calling to her. "Mama! Mama! Wake up, mama! Gab ... Gab ... Gab ... lilelle says I gotta ask you if I can play. Please mama, wake up! I wanna go play!" Blue eyes slowly opened to find a young face inches from her own. Smacking her dry lips, Xena nodded her head slowly and the child ran off in search of adventure.

"Don't go too far!" Xena tried yelling but it came out no more than a harsh croak.

"I won't!" The child's voice carried back to her on the warm breeze.

What time is it? She looked up at the sun to find it nearly at its zenith. *Great Mother Hera!* A good eighteen candlemarks had passed. She knew she had been tired yesterday, but she had never slept that long in her life.

"Well, hello there." Gabrielle's voice was a welcome balm to her tired and aching body. "I think I should be thanking you for saving our lives." Xena's gaze softened as she looked on her heart's desire.

"No need to thank me, Gabrielle. It was only self-preservation on my part."

Xena could see the quizzical look on her partner's face. "If I hadn't rescued you then my life would not have been worth living."

Who knew Xena was such a romantic? Gabrielle reached out her hand and brushed away her lover's errant dark locks.

"So what have you two been up to while I had a nice sleep?" They both knew she was changing the subject and decided it was probably for the best at the moment.

"Well, your daughter has been itching to go and play. I kept her busy as long as I could. As you can see, we've found some dry wood for a fire at least. I was waiting for you to tell me what to do next." Gabrielle looked over to her partner and as Xena contemplated the question, a slow, sexy smile crossed her lips.

"What I'd like to do next involves a bed, but that would need some explaining, and I'm not quite up to that yet. I'm sorry it's been so hard for you Gabrielle, but with Marina around it's been a bit awkward." She saw the look of sympathy in those pale green eyes. "I'll talk to her in the next day or so since it looks like we'll be here for a while at least. I'm not going that long without touching you!" She added a waggle of her well-defined eyebrows to illustrate her point.

Gabrielle let out a laugh at Xena's antics. *Things may not be so bad after all.* She moved her body into a seated position, preparing herself for whatever Xena was about to tell her. "So, what is our situation here?"

Xena thought for a moment. "Well, stating the obvious, we're shipwrecked."

Gabrielle gave her a look of astonishment. "No!" She pursed her lips before continuing. "Even I figured that out!"

Xena chuckled and looked out to the reef. The ship had broken in two but the two halves still seemed intact. "First impression is that we've been blown off course to an island that I didn't know existed."

Gabrielle's gaze dropped to the ground, then lifted to where Marina was playing. "So, it's hopeless then."

"Not hopeless, no. I don't have all the facts yet. I managed to salvage some of the goods off the ship yesterday when I found you. I'll swim out again this afternoon if you two are alright to manage by yourselves for a while. I want to get as much off the ship before the sea takes her."

Gabrielle nodded in agreement. Time was of the essence.

"Can you stay with Marina while I scavenge? I don't want her wandering off."

"Not a problem."

A large hand moved over to grab her much smaller one. Gabrielle looked up into vibrant blue eyes that shimmered in the noonday sun. "Don't worry, we'll be fine. I'll get a shelter up when I get back and there are plenty of fish out in the water. We won't starve."

"What can we do while you're out at the ship?" Her partner seemed to be bearing the brunt of the workload and she wanted to contribute her share.

"Well, a little more firewood would help if you can find it. Some branches or fronds that we could use for covering our shelter would be good too. And keep an eye out for any type of fruit or tubers that we could eat."

Gabrielle made a mental checklist, ensuring that the jobs would keep her little helper close at hand and busy.

"Ummm, Gabrielle?"

She's asking. That can't be good... "Yeah?"

"Can you cook?"

"Er, yeah. A little. Why?"

"That's good, because I can't."

Well, here's my contribution to this little adventure. "You may change your mind though. I haven't had a lot of practice lately."

"Honey, as long as it isn't incinerated, I'm there."

"In that case, while you're out there, see if you can find a pot or two to cook in."

"I'll try. In the meantime, how about I see if I can catch a fish or two for lunch?"

"Sounds good. Can you help me with the fire before you go?"

* * * * *

Marina watched her mother with her new friend, Gablilelle. She turned her young mind to the problem, trying to figure out what was going on. She absently patted the wet sand into a pile, adding more and more until it was up to her chest. *They had kissed. What did that mean?* It wasn't like when she and mama kissed. She compared it to all the events of her life, trying to find that elusive jigsaw puzzle piece that would make the picture whole.

The two adults sat together, heads bowed in quiet conversation. Her mama reached for Gablilelle's hand and kissed it. She knew that mama really liked her but how much? She had a faint memory of seeing a young couple back in Rome who acted this way. What was it her teacher had said? They were in love. She didn't fully understand what that meant, but they acted like how other mamas and papas acted towards each other. She studied the two women closely, noting their nearness to each other and the easy conversation between them.

Do they love each other like other mamas and papas? They seemed happier together than the mama and papa she had when she was growing up, who acted as strangers both to her and to each other. She knew they didn't want her but they had to look after her. The only thing that had made it worthwhile was the time she had with her real mother - those little spots of sunshine in an otherwise drab life. So, could she accept these two women in front of her as her new parents? *I think so.*

Her mind put the piece into the puzzle and to her it was complete. She would consider Gablilelle as part of her family. As to what that entailed she had no idea yet but now that her mind had

given it a name, she was content with the way things were for the moment.

* * * * *

"Now you two behave while I'm gone." Xena couldn't help but smile at her small family. Despite their dire situation, she was very happy to have the chance to spend time with them without the intrusion of civilization. "Here, take this." Xena handed over a dagger to Gabrielle. She could read the question on her face before Gabrielle even asked it. "Just in case." Her eyes flickered down to Marina. "You could use it to cut down fruit and dig up anything worthwhile."

"C'mon Gab .. Gab .. li . lelle." A small hand grasped her own and tried to drag her away.

Gabrielle lowered herself down onto one knee. She could see the child was having trouble getting her mouth around the Greek name, having only spoken Latin all her life. "Marina, come here. How about you call me Gabby?" She looked up to the benevolent eyes of her partner. "Only you though. I know your mama can say my name." *Please, oh please keep saying my name.*

"Gabrieeellleeee". That low alto voice pierced through her to her core, setting off a wave of tremors through her body. She looked up to piercing blue eyes that shone with mischief. *And you know it too, you wench.*

One final glance and a 'be careful' look and Xena sprinted off down the sand to the water. She grabbed the two rafts and began her half-league swim out to the reef. Gabrielle grabbed the child's hand and they disappeared into the brush in search of firewood and food.

"So, honey, you gonna help me with some chores? Your mama is relying on us to help her. You think we can do that?"

The young face nodded enthusiastically. "Look, there's some wood over there Gabby!" The child practically dragged her to the spot, Gabrielle having to lift her feet quickly on a couple of occasions to avoid tripping. *She is so much like her mother.*

She had a momentary pang of her own. *What would it be like to have life growing inside me? To have the child grow up to look like me?* Her thoughts stopped when she thought of her current situation. If she stayed with Xena, and she knew that was pretty certain to happen, then the odds of her ever having a child were poor. She would only want to have Xena's child but the impossibility of that left her with only one other choice. If she really wanted one she thought Xena wouldn't object, but would she end up killing anyone who came near her? She put herself in Xena's position and hoped she could be magnanimous enough to let it happen. *Who am I kidding? I'd kill them all.*

She put the thought away for another day and helped Marina, who was struggling with a tree branch that was nearly as big as she was. They began dragging dead wood towards the beach.

* * * * *

The waterline in the wreck was now up to her knees and she was wading through rooms that, up till yesterday, had been mostly dry. As requested, she found the galley and managed to find a pot or two, a skillet and some utensils. She carefully searched the stores for any food that could be salvaged. Sealed pots were carefully checked and some valuable herbs and spices were a pleasant discovery. She found a couple of canvas sacks and began filling them with small items that had been missed on her first search yesterday.

A couple of short swords had been found tucked away in the Captain's cabin and she took them. Since the rescue yesterday, the safety of the three of them weighed heavily on her mind. While her own fighting skills were more than adequate to protect them from danger, she knew logically that she couldn't protect them twenty-four candlemarks a day. That would mean that Gabrielle was going to have to learn to defend herself.

She looked down at the sword in her hand. Could she ask Gabrielle to kill someone? Despite her life, she knew Gabrielle was still an innocent inside. So what could she teach her? She had an answer, but would Gabrielle agree to it?

Xena searched both halves of the wreck for another couple of candlemarks, pain-stakingly going through each cupboard and box for anything they could use. She had managed to fill up the two rafts again, and felt that they could be quite comfortable with what she had found.

In one last final sweep of the entire ship, she found a piece of parchment that had fallen to the floor and ended up under the Captain's bunk. She tucked it away in the canvas bag for later perusal.

Standing on the broken deck in the afternoon sun, Xena closed her eyes and let the warm breeze flow over her damp skin. She could almost feel the floor beneath her sway. It was a feeling she had never gotten tired of. Her eyes turned towards the beach and saw two small figures moving around. Scanning up and down the beach, she thought she saw movement up the far end. Had someone survived? That was possible.

Tomorrow she was going to have to go looking for other survivors. Today, she would make her family comfortable. She spent a moment longer absorbing the feel of the sea before diving into the water and steering her precious cargo back to dry land.

* * * * *

Gabrielle felt that their search had been quite successful. A pile of dead wood sat in the middle of the sand near their fire. An even smaller pile of food sat next to it, a handful of figs and a few tubers being the most exciting discoveries from a full candlemark of looking.

Marina was getting restless, so Gabrielle had her help put everything out to dry on the warm

sand. There was nothing worse than trying to sleep with a wet blanket. This gave her the chance to look through what Xena had found on the ship the day before. There was some dried and salted food that could be added to the stores, plus any fish that Xena could catch. As she had said, they wouldn't starve.

Gabrielle joined Marina at the shoreline and helped her build a castle out of wet sand as Xena slowly made her way towards the beach. Marina's skin was getting a little pink and she felt her own skin prickle with sunburn.

She was about to move back towards the shade of the nearby trees when she looked up and saw Xena emerge from the sea. "Sweet Aphrodite..." The woman stood up in the water, cascading droplets in all directions as her flimsy cotton shift clung to her, outlining every muscle and sinew in sensuous detail.

Gabrielle had never felt a hunger so deep as she did looking at this woman who strode out of the sea like a nymph. A siren more likely - her attraction reaching so deep inside that she thought she would die from want. Those blue eyes, that outshone the sea from which she had just emerged, looked deep into her own and held an answering glow. If the child had not been there, she would have taken her there and there on the sand.

Xena watched in amusement as Gabrielle quietly panted. *I must have been a picture coming out of the water, if that look is anything to go by.* She couldn't help but react to Gabrielle's sensitised state. *I can't wait much longer.*

"So, what have you two been up to?" *Is my voice lower than usual?* She thought Gabrielle was about to dissolve into a puddle. *Must be...*

Marina watched the exchange with some confusion. *It's this love stuff again...* "Come on, mama. You said you would build a shelter. Can I help?"

"You sure can, sweetie. First, let me get this stuff off the rafts and then we'll start." She turned to a bewildered Gabrielle. "How about you build up the fire while shortie and me here start on a shelter?"

"Huh?" She was having enough trouble trying to collect her scattered wits, let alone trying to get anything comprehensible out of her mouth. Nothing ... nothing had affected her like this. It was all she could do to stop herself walking over to the woman. *C'mon, stop this! There's nothing you can do about it at the present.*

* * * * *

The shelter went up without incident and the three of them sat around the fire eating dinner in the dying light. "So how was today, Marina?" Xena suspected that her daughter saw this as one big adventure.

"Mama, it was fun. Gabby and me found lots of wood. Can we go back for more tomorrow?"

"We sure can. In fact, we'll go for a little walk tomorrow. You like that idea?"

"Can we? You and me and Gabby?"

"Sure can, little one. It's been a long day and it promises to be an even longer one tomorrow. How about you get some sleep?"

Marina came up and gave Xena a big hug and a sloppy kiss. She threw herself into Gabrielle's waiting arms and did the same. "Goodnight, mama, Gabby."

The two women joined in unison, "Good night."

* * * * *

Xena looked across the fire to a pensive Gabrielle. Dark emerald eyes caught her attention and smouldered with unfulfilled desire. *Oh by the Gods!* The poor girl looked like she was going to explode. Both sat in silence, impatiently waiting for Marina to fall asleep.

Xena stood and looked inside the shelter at her sleeping daughter. Without a word, she extended her hand to the seated woman. Pulling her to her feet, Xena steered Gabrielle into the forest behind them. When they were at a suitable distance, Xena turned her around and pushed her up against a tree. Passions overrode any hint of propriety. They were both too far gone to worry about where they were and time was short.

It had been way too long and the simmering tension that had been present since the afternoon sent them both into a frenzy. Love was shuffled to the side as lust, passion and want drove their desires to a frantic pinnacle, ending in them both sated and panting.

Xena's ears listened for any sign that the child had woken. She pressed her forehead to the smaller woman plastered against the tree in front of her. "Sorry."

"Please, don't be sorry about this."

"Never. I'm just sorry that I had to resort to a tree instead of a bed, my love. You deserve better than this." As an afterthought, "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Don't be silly. Did you hear me complaining? Gods, Xena, that was amazing."

A sexy smile crossed Xena's face. "I aim to please."

Gabrielle swatted her shoulder. "Very funny." Under the light of a full moon, she looked into the

cooling azure eyes, still seeing desire swirling around in their depths. She pulled the dark head in and lovingly kissed her, searching out and finding her lover's tongue in a slow, sensual dance of seduction.

Gabrielle flipped them over so Xena was leaning against the tree. "My turn," she whispered, and then slowly and deliberately showed her lover how much she had come to mean to her.

* * * * *

Back at camp later, "I'm going to have to talk to Marina, aren't I?"

"You don't have to Xena. If we can keep control of this and be careful, she doesn't have to know." Gabrielle knew logically the smart thing to do would be to protect the child from sexual matters. Wasn't life hard enough to cope with at the moment without throwing in sex on top of it? She felt a pang of hurt that maybe Xena didn't want to acknowledge their relationship to the child.

"No. She has to know. After all, next to her, you are the most important person in my life. She should know that." She looked down to find her large hand captured by two smaller ones.

"I'll find a way." The thought terrified Xena. "WE'LL find a way," Gabrielle reassured her.

* * * * *

Chapter 3

Marina emerged from the shelter, refreshed and ready for a full day of fun. She ran over to her mother who was sitting quietly, like a silent sentinel, looking out to sea. "Hello, mama!" She threw herself into waiting arms, surprised when Xena didn't answer. "Mama?"

"Hmmm?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, sweetie. Why do you ask?"

"Where's Gabby?" Just as she spoke she saw Gabrielle emerge from the surf a short distance down the beach. She had no clothes on!

"Mama, what is Gabby doing? Where are her clothes?" Xena looked in the direction of her partner, who was shaking water off herself like a damp dog.

"Gabrielle is having a bath honey. You don't bathe with all your clothes on, do you?"

"But, mama, you're not supposed to look!" Marina grabbed her mama's face and turned her away.

"Why aren't I supposed to look?"

"Because it's not right!"

Xena tried very hard not to laugh at the indignant look on Marina's face. Her sense of decency was making a stand at this display of nudity. Gabrielle laid out a blanket on the warm sand, laying down to receive the sun's attention like some sun worshipper.

"What is she doing now?"

Xena glanced over to where her partner was lying. "Well, she can't very well put her clothes back on while she is all wet. She's just waiting for the sun to dry her skin before getting dressed again." Marina accepted that explanation.

Xena stood up and offered a hand to her daughter. "Why don't we go get some breakfast?"

"What about Gabby?"

"She'll come a little later. Let's go." Xena took the child's hand and they sauntered up the beach to find food, leaving Gabrielle to finish her bath.

After breakfast, Xena came down to find Gabrielle quietly soaking up the sun's rays. "Just what do you think you are doing?" Xena's voice had dropped an octave and she could hear the want in it.

"Just having a bath. Why?"

"You are shocking poor Marina. Never mind what you are doing to me."

"Well, what was I supposed to do? I stank like a horse and I needed a bath. I can't very well bathe with my clothes on."

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you? Getting me back for yesterday?"

"Why would I do that? Xena, where am I supposed to go?"

"Further down the beach."

"How far is further down the beach?"

"About a league that way." Xena waved her hand frantically in the direction of the distant shore. Gabrielle couldn't help but smile at the older woman's flustered state.

"Xena, I'm far enough away as it is. You know very well that if something happens I don't know how to defend myself. The safest place at the moment is here."

Xena took a deep breath. "Yeah, yeah I know, but Marina is not used to seeing this and you're making it very hard for me to appear disinterested in front of her. You're not helping matters here, Gabrielle. You're dry now, so please get your clothes on. I'm barely hanging on by a thread." She practically threw the linen shift over her partner's body. Xena towered over the woman lying casually on the blanket, and her eyes couldn't help but scan down the perfectly sculptured body that had been on display moments before. She closed her eyes, trying to calm her raging emotions, and walked away, slowly retreating up the sand to find her daughter.

* * * * *

After breakfast Gabrielle found Xena seated under a tree bordering the beach. The woman seemed deep in thought while idly fashioning a reed doll for her daughter. She patiently waited for Xena's eyes to track to her, but finally gave up in defeat. Even clearing her throat didn't distract the older woman.

"Xena? Are you alright?"

"Hmmm? Oh, Gabrielle."

"You were deep in thought there."

"Yeah, sorry."

"You O.K.?"

"Just thinking, that's all."

"That must have been some pretty heavy thinking there." When Xena didn't answer, she continued. "I'm sorry about this morning. I should have had my bath earlier, while Marina was still asleep, but it was too cold. I suppose the last year and a half in slavery took away a lot of my inhibitions. I should have been more sensitive to your daughter."

"No, Gabrielle, you are right. She needs to learn that the human body is not something to be feared. We should take this opportunity to teach her about life before my family, friends and total strangers all try to change her." She took a steadying breath, trying to say what needed to be said. "As hard as it is, we have to control ourselves. She's too young to see this sort of thing."

"I know that only too well, but you make it very hard for me to control myself. The way you look at me just makes me want to be bad, you know what I mean?" She could see the tight lines around Xena's mouth. "I'll try, Xena. I'll try very hard. OK?" She offered a small smile to the pensive woman.

Xena said nothing. She needed to mend some bridges, and murmured, "I just can't believe a

woman as beautiful as you could ever be interested in me." She saw blue eyes rise up to look into her own. "You are a miracle in my life Xena. You not only saved my life, you saved my soul." Fingertips lightly traced her cheeks, the rough skin catching on the fine hairs of her face.

"So when I see you staring at me like... like you want to devour me, well I just can't help but tease you a bit. It drives me crazy to drive you crazy."

Xena sighed deeply. How could she be angry with her? She felt exactly the same way. Placing the doll on the grass, she grabbed Gabrielle's smaller hands in her own. "Do you know what I said to Antillia that first day I saw you on the auctioneer's block?" Blond hair swayed from side to side. "I said nothing. I was struck speechless. Antillia thought I had gone nuts. I was waving my hands around like a mad woman."

"From the first moment I saw you, Gabrielle, I was lost. So utterly lost. It scared the Hades out of me."

I know only too well myself. Why do you think I fought it? Gabrielle could sympathize with her partner. It may have taken her a little longer than Xena to accept, but she eventually came to the same conclusion.

"So, I know how you feel. I thank the gods every day for bringing you into my life. The last ten years had all been worth it. For if I wasn't in Rome, I would never have met you."

This gave some insight into Xena she hadn't seen before. The last ten years of her life had been a living hell and for her to claim it was worth it, well it was certainly saying something that was for sure.

"And you are the beautiful one, Gabrielle. You take my breath away constantly. But if you want to tease me, please make sure that I can take advantage of it O.K.? It's hard to be left hanging all the time."

"Understood, but now you know how I felt yesterday when you came out of the water like some sea nymph. I was so wound up I could barely walk." A smile passed between them. "So, what's happening today?"

"I was thinking that we go for a walk up the beach that way." She waved her finger towards the long stretch of beach. "When I was out at the wreck yesterday, I thought I saw movement at the end."

"That's good, isn't it?"

There was silence. "Isn't it?"

"I don't know. The little voice inside me is telling me to beware. It's never been wrong before. You two are coming with me. I'm not going to separate us, just in case."

Gabrielle started to make a move to rise. "Before you go, I wanted to discuss something with you..." *Oh Hades!* "I want to teach you to use a weapon."

Gabrielle's head was shaking from side to side even before she voiced her concerns. "Oh no, no, no. That's your job, my warrior."

"But, Gab..."

"NO, Xena."

"At least tell me why."

"I, I just can't."

"What is it that scares you?"

"Nothing... nothing." She spoke too quickly, giving Xena a clue that there was something definitely stopping her.

"C'mon, tell me what's wrong. It's nothing to be afraid of Gabrielle."

"I just don't want to, alright?" Gabrielle started fidgeting, pulling away from her partner.

"I'm not asking you to kill anybody. I just want you to be able to fend off an attack that's all."

"I'm not going to use a sword, Xena."

"I didn't say anything about a sword. I was thinking of a staff. With your compact body and quick movement, you would be good at it. Would you at least try for me? Please? I'm worried about leaving you two alone without at least some form of protection."

Gabrielle stood, visibly agitated, and paced back and forth. Xena reached out, grabbed her hand and pulled her down to the ground. "Now, listen! Talk to me!"

How could she explain to her partner this unreasoning fear? "From very early on I was... taught that rebellion was not tolerated. Even as a child I was expected to tow the line."

Xena could see her struggling to express herself. This was something that Gabrielle had lived with for a long, long time. Something that was ingrained from childhood.

"Do you know what it's like not to fit in? That what you wanted to do was looked down upon? To be humiliated and intimidated into being what you just couldn't be? This... what you want me to do would have meant swift punishment, Xena. I don't know if I can do this."

How do I help her through this? She had always been encouraged to express herself and her spirit soared under the freely-given freedom. While she had been gently guided into adolescence,

she had learnt from her own mistakes, not from what others had instructed her to do. This is what she needed to give her partner - gentle guidance and freely-given freedom. But there was little time and this was necessary. *Maybe later...*

"There will be no retribution here, Gabrielle. I can understand your dilemma, I really do, but you need to learn this. I'm so sorry."

"Why?"

"Because if we get separated for any reason, you are on your own. Just you. You need to be prepared for anything, Gabrielle. You have to do this - for you and for Marina. Look, we'll take it slow and steady. A little bit at a time, alright?"

Sighing deeply, Gabrielle knew that Xena was right. Every time she went off to hunt or fish or... whatever... it left them at a disadvantage. She could see the logic of it, but still, she found it hard to see herself able to attack someone.

"Let me think about it."

"Good enough." Xena stood and extended her hand down to the small woman and helped her up.

"Let's go get ready for this little jaunt."

* * * * *

The walk was postponed until lunch when Xena decided to hide their supplies, just in case. The uneasy feeling she had at breakfast had not gone away. While Gabrielle and Marina covered over a part of their supplies in plain sight, Xena moved the bulk of the goods into the forest. Some she buried and a second cache was placed on the wooden raft and hoisted into the canopy overhead. She didn't want to come back to find all of their supplies gone. Hopefully, the small pile of equipment left near the shelter would appease whoever might want to rob them.

They enjoyed lunch in companionable silence. Xena ate lunch pensively while mulling over in her mind what to say to her daughter. After last night, things could get embarrassing for all concerned unless she had a mother-to-daughter talk real soon. There was no time like the present.

"Marina, sweetheart, come here and sit down." The child settled at her mother's side and looked up with keen, intelligent eyes. *Here goes nothing...*

"I think we need to have a little talk about... Gabrielle and I." Blue eyes glanced over to green and Gabrielle sat back against a tree, mildly amused at Xena's discomfort.

"You know that I love you, right? And you love me." Marina nodded enthusiastically and threw

her arms around her mother. Xena glanced over the child's shoulder in exasperation at her partner. Marina was puzzled but let her mama speak. *Is this about love and stuff?*

"I love you but I also love Gabrielle. And she loves me." Xena sighed. This was harder than she thought. She looked up at Gabrielle. *Help me out here...*

Gabrielle just shook her head in the negative. She was having too much fun seeing Xena squirm under the regard of one small child.

"Well, the love between you and I is different from the love between Gabrielle and I." *Where am I going with this? Round in circles by the sounds of it. Let's try a different tact.*

"Do you know about love between grown-ups? How they touch each other? Hug and kiss?"

Marina slowly nodded. *So it was love... Could Gabby be her parent also?* That thought appealed to her - both mama and Gabby could look after her.

"Well, sometimes they hug and kiss and... stuff." Xena could feel the blush creep up from chest. She heard the chuckles coming from a very amused Gabrielle, who was not intimidated in the least by the blazing blue eyes staring at her. She finally took pity.

"Marina. How do you feel about your mama and me?"

"Do you and mama like hugging and kissing?"

It was now Gabrielle's turn to blush. She heard the quiet chuckle next to her. "Yes I do honey. It's nice and warm and comforting. It's how I tell her I love her." "Then why don't you just tell her?"

"That's one way, Marina, but sometimes grown-ups need to express it in lots of ways. By a simple touch, or a kiss, or a hug, or by simply saying 'I love you'. So if you see me give your mama a hug or a kiss, I'm just saying 'I love you' to her."

You think it's that easy Gabrielle? Just wait until she catches us. If her daughter had one-tenth the curiosity she had at that age she will be getting an education earlier than expected. *Hope you're not worried about getting caught. What a sight that will be!* She only hoped she didn't hit the child into next week if she thought they were wrestling and decided to join in.

Xena's libido struggled under the yoke of abstinence and she knew that if she didn't do something soon to solve this problem, there was going to be trouble. Perhaps in a day or so she could go looking inland for a spot for a more permanent structure with two bedrooms and a very thick wall.

What Gabby said, Marina understood. *Why didn't mama just say that in the first place?* Before she could stop herself, Marina blurted out, "Are you both my parents now?"

Oh boy. "Do you want me to be?"

The unruly mop of black hair bounced up and down.

"Can I ask you why?"

"Isn't that what people in love do? Have kids and look after them?"

"Yes they do, Marina. What would you like to call me?" Gabrielle could see the child was struggling for an answer.

"How about just call me Gabby for now. Maybe later we can come up with a better name. Is that alright mama?" Gabrielle thought she better ask the person most affected by this turn of events before she agreed. A larger unruly mop of midnight black hair bobbed up and down.

Marina jumped up and gave them a hug, each in turn, then sat down. A frown creased the child's brow and Xena immediately became anxious. "What's wrong, honey?"

She was pensive for a moment then answered. "My other parents were never happy like you two, and they didn't love me like you do. I never saw any of that love stuff. And that other man who used to come and get me. I didn't like him at all. He was angry all the time."

Xena's blood began to boil. "Did he do anything to you?" Gabrielle looked over in concern as she heard the steely edge in Xena's voice.

"No. He did nothing. He just came and got me to take me to you."

Xena couldn't help herself, but she wanted to know how much her daughter knew. "Did you know who he was?"

Marina nodded slowly and a lone tear trickled down the child's face, melting the hearts of both parents.

"Did he tell you?"

She shook her head. Marina could not seem to find the voice to speak. She paused for a moment and tried again. "I heard them talking. What did I do to make him hate me, mama?"

Xena held her daughter in silent comfort while she battled with what to tell her; the truth or something that would appease her young mind?

"I don't think it had anything to do with you, sweetheart. It had more to do with me. He knew that I loved you and he used you to hurt me." It broke her heart to tear down the child's father, but she didn't want her thinking that it was anything she did either.

"Do you understand? He never really got to know what a special child you are. He didn't want to know. But I love you with all my heart and I'm sure that Gabrielle does too." She looked up to

find shining emerald eyes watching the two of them. "And we will do our best to love you and protect you."

Gabrielle studied her partner as she spoke and caught the quiet glow of love residing in those blue pools. While she felt the same commitment as Xena did, she silently wondered if this promise could stand the pressure of the outside world when they got home.

The three of them sat quietly for a while absorbing the conversation they just had. For the moment, things would be fine.

* * * * *

The sun had just passed its mid-point in the sky when they set off down the beach. Each carried a backpack, loaded with supplies in case the afternoon walk became an overnight camp. Xena had found each of them a 'walking stick' as she called it, but Gabrielle knew it was a staff. She was trying to get her used to the idea of carrying it.

Marina stopped and started all the way down the beach, picking up shells and rocks and running back to show the two women, who walked side by side. Xena felt she should have brought another bag as Marina's stash of shells and rocks steadily grew. She had to resort to surreptitiously dropping the occasional shell when her daughter wasn't looking.

They reached the spot that Xena estimated had been where she had seen the movement. Gabrielle asked Marina to show her the shells she had collected while Xena studied the area. Someone had been here but the fire pit was cold to the touch. It hadn't been used for at least a day. She looked back down the beach to where their shelter was and realized they were in plain sight of whoever was here. There was no way he could have missed them. Why all this hiding?

Her search area expanded and she found footprints heading down a well-defined path towards the centre of the island. Further exploration down that path was necessary, she knew that. What if there was a whole village down there? What if they weren't really shipwrecked at all? Xena felt a bit sheepish at the thought that she could have possibly got it all wrong. While one part of her wanted to go off after the mysterious stranger, another part pleaded caution. After all, there was no hurry. The path was fairly easy to find and they could come back when they were more prepared.

"Let's go back." Xena herded her little brood in the direction of their shelter.

"Didn't find what you were looking for?"

"Yep. Found a path."

"Then why aren't we following it?"

"Because, Gabrielle, we are not prepared for it or whatever danger there is in there." She cast a glance to Marina, making sure Gabrielle saw her. The younger woman remained silent for the

time being. But knowing Xena, she doubted that she would be content to sit back at their shelter and do nothing.

Chapter 4

While Gabrielle was teaching Marina how to cook, Xena poured over the maps recovered from the ship. She knew roughly where they were when the storm struck. By her reckoning they had only been in the storm-tossed seas for a candlemark or two before they hit rocks, but for the life of her she couldn't see any islands within that vicinity on any of them. This island simply didn't exist. That thought tickled the back of her brain. If the island didn't exist to the mortal world...

That raised even more questions though. Had they been deliberately steered to this island, and to what end? Did only the three of them survive? Where was everyone else?

Marina proudly walked up with a bowl in her hands. "Dinner mama!"

"Thank you sweetheart. What have we here?"

"Fish stew. Gabby showed me how to make it."

"Well, thank you Gabrielle." She looked up to jade eyes watching the two of them with quiet joy. *My family.*

"Now, let's eat." Xena kept her suspicions to herself, to wanting to add to their already complicated circumstances.

"Oh, by the way... I found this in one of the sacks you brought back yesterday." Gabrielle handed over the tattered piece of parchment. Xena put down her bowl and examined the paper. It contained a set of nautical directions. She suspected where those directions would lead, but she put it aside until she was alone

Around the campfire, the three of them sat and talked and laughed at little word games. Xena even showed Marina the star gazing game she and Gabrielle played from time to time. Finally, sleep overtook the child and her mother carried her to bed, tucking her in with her makeshift dolly.

She came back to the fire and sat down.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on in that brain of yours?"

"Nothing's going on." But that didn't appease the young woman seated across the fire.

"C'mon Xena. Stop trying to protect me. You've figured something out and you're afraid to tell me." There was silence. "That's it, isn't it? How bad can it be?"

"Bad." That was all she said. What more could one say? She bowed her head in silence. Xena could feel those eyes boring a hole into the top of her head. *Damn!* "You may wish you hadn't asked."

"Let me be the judge of that. I think I have a right to know all the facts."

"Keep in mind these are just my suspicions, not fact."

"Well, your suspicions are just as good as anybody else's facts." That brought a smile to the older woman's face.

"I've studied the maps and this island is not on any of them."

"Are you sure you're looking in the right place?" Blue eyes came up to meet her own. "Stupid question - of course you are. You wouldn't make those sorts of mistakes."

"I'm only making an intuitive leap here, but I figure if this island doesn't exist to the mortal world, then -"

"Then perhaps it belongs in another plane of existence. Such as, say, a playground of the gods?" Gabrielle completed her thought.

Smart girl. She's gonna keep me on my toes in our old age.

"Why are we here, then?"

There was silence across the campfire. "This isn't something that's going to come back and bite me in the butt, is it?"

"Maybe. I've done a lot of bad things in my life, Gabrielle, so it could be connected to any one of them. Then again, it may just be coincidence that we are here. Be very careful what you ask for, Gabrielle. You may not want to know about my past. It's not pretty."

"Didn't we go through this last time? How much worse can it be than what you did as a pirate?"

Again that silence. Gabrielle was quickly realizing that she didn't know the woman she was in love with at all. *C'mon girl, pull yourself together. You knew that loving her meant everything she was. Besides, the woman in front of you isn't anything like what she is going to tell you. Remember that.*

"I want to know." Gabrielle stood up and moved around next to Xena. Seated, she took her partner's hand and waited patiently.

Xena took a deep breath then began her tale. "When I was fifteen summers old, my village was attacked by the warlord Cortese. During that attack, my younger brother died and Cortese laid

waste the township. On the head of Ares, I swore revenge for my brother's death and set off in pursuit. While I could fight and was strong and determined, I had no direction for my rage. So, with my youthful exuberance, I went off in search of blood, death and revenge."

"I stumbled into the first temple to Ares I could find and offered my sword arm and demanded justice. To my surprise he appeared before me and offered to train me. He became my mentor, Gabrielle."

During her speech she hadn't been courageous enough to look into her lover's eyes, fearful of the horror she would find there. Eventually, her curiosity got the better of her and she looked up to be met with a patient gaze.

"So he trained me to fight and offered me an army to exact my revenge with. I didn't realize then how strong and seductive that sort of power can be. I was young and passionate and soon was overtaken by the power of having an army under my control to do with as I wished."

"I'd forgotten about Cortese, only to discover later that I had become him. I was doing what he was doing. Raiding villages, disrupting lives..." Xena hung her head in shame. "Destroying families."

"So, Gabrielle, if I had been at home and not in Rome, you could very well have been facing me that fateful day in Potadeia." A lone tear trickled down the high-planed cheek, followed by another.

Gabrielle thought long, hard and very carefully about what she was going to say next as it would have a big impact on the distraught woman next to her. Long moments passed before she spoke. "That may be, Xena, but I believe that we were meant to be together no matter what. I think you would have felt what was between us, even then."

She moved down onto her knees, facing Xena, before continuing. "The fact that you are agonising now over what you have done tells me that you have changed. It's in the past, let it go." Xena seemed unconvinced. She was going to bear this guilt for the rest of her life, no matter what Gabrielle said.

"Don't feel guilty, Xena. Ten years in the gladiatorial arena is more than enough punishment for your past deeds. Be happy with the way things are now."

Eyes brimming with tears met her own. "I am. You know I'm happy. There are just times, like now, when it all comes back and threatens to swallow me whole."

"I will always be here, Xena. You won't be alone anymore."

The stars moved slowly overhead as the two women took consolation in one another, just enjoying the simple contact of a gentle hug.

"So, who do you think is responsible for this then?"

"It could be anyone. I made a lot of people angry, gods and mortals alike, in my time."

"Mortals?"

"That piece of parchment you gave me had nautical directions on it. So yes, a mortal could have been responsible for this."

Xena watched the blonde's features harden. "Well, I don't care who it is, he's in for a fight then. I own your heart and your soul and I'm not going to let them destroy you! No one is going to take away what is mine!"

Xena couldn't help but smile at the girl's possessive nature. *Gods, she is so cute when she's all fired up!* "I want you to do something for me." Gabrielle nodded. "If you can get off this island, please get Marina home for me."

"No. No, I'm not leaving you. We're in this together. I'm not running away at the first sign of trouble, Xena." Gabrielle started pacing, getting agitated at all this talk of separation.

"Calm down!" Xena pulled her partner into her lap but Gabrielle was having none of it. She was angry and feeling very self-righteous. "This is only if something happens to me. I want to make sure Marina is taken care of, that's all."

"If something happens to you, Xena, you better try your hardest to get back to me, because if I have to come after you, even if I have to stand in front of Hades himself, I will be well and truly pissed off!"

Taking great gulps of air, Gabrielle could feel her heart trying to jump out of her chest. She knew logically that Xena would never abandon her but it scared her that what was to come was out of her hands. She wanted to fight for her lover but the war could be over before she even had the chance to take a swing at whoever was responsible for this...

Xena observed her partner in her agitated state and couldn't help but feel pride for her defence of their love, ready to face anyone and everyone. Blue eyes darkened in arousal as she watched her stalk around the fire, arms waving wildly in frustration, her blonde hair in disarray, her skin flushed and damp, breasts heaving, those green eyes flashing with sparks of fire and her body quivering in indignation. *Maybe we should make the most of the quiet time we have.*

"Gabiieeelllllee." The young woman stopped short at the deep rumbling of her name. She looked over to see those blue eyes nearly black. *Oh.* Her body answered the call and all thoughts of gods and battles disappeared in a puff of smoke.

* * * * *

The sun had barely begun its path across the sky when Xena awoke. Gabrielle had attached herself like a clinging vine and she hadn't the heart to disengage herself from the soft body nestled next to her. Snuggling back into the warmth of the embrace, Xena floated in a state of semi-wakefulness, her mind filtering through all the information of the past few days, formulating a plan here and there.

She heard a nearby rustle and knew Marina had woken up. Her eyes opened to see the girl looking at them, a look of hurt on her face. "Come here sweetheart," she whispered and her daughter climbed into bed with them, burrowing into the welcoming arms of her mother. Surrounded by her family, Xena gave up trying to get up and let herself slide back into the land of dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

"Marina, come on! Don't be silly. You can't have a bath with your clothes on." Xena had decided to follow Gabrielle's example and stood at the water's edge naked. She was trying very hard not to laugh at the outraged look on her daughter's face. Marina was steadfastly refusing to take her clothes off. "All right then, don't complain to me when you start to itch."

She waded into the gentle surf, enjoying the cool water on her skin. She looked back up the beach to see Gabrielle watching her with hooded eyes. It constantly amazed her how easily they could affect each other this way. A look, a sigh or a word and they would be looking for a quiet hideaway.

The young blonde strode over to Marina and seemed to be in deep conversation with her. She could see the mop of black hair bob up and down and her shift was removed. The child came screaming down the sand and leapt into her mother's waiting arms. She still had her breeches on but it was a big step from being fully clothed.

Gabrielle went back to her task under the shade of a nearby tree. Gods what that woman could do to her! The rope looked a mess at present. She had been trying to separate it into a number of strands, some of which would be used for a makeshift bow or two. Xena had found some flexible wood good enough for the bow itself but they were short the string.

Nimble fingers went back to their task while pale green eyes watched mother and daughter playfully bathe in the surf. Slowly and painstakingly, she managed to separate half a dozen strands thin enough for stringing a bow.

After washing, Xena took the opportunity to start teaching Marina to swim. White foam from flailing arms and legs made it near impossible to see if the child was in fact going anywhere. The amount of energy Marina was burning up to swim would guarantee that they would get some peace and quiet that afternoon.

Gabrielle watched the tentative swimming lesson continue, and enjoyed the look of utter joy of

such a simple task plastered all over Xena's face. So intent had everyone been on Marina's progress that no one had noticed a fin in the water, slowly weaving its way closer to shore. The shark was just about on top of them before Gabrielle screamed out a warning. Xena swivelled to meet her attacker, barely able to get her arms up before the creature was on top of her.

Gabrielle watched in horror as the shark attacked, and it took precious seconds for her to respond, grabbing her knife and running down the sand into the water. She splashed through the surf, heading for Marina while Xena wrestled with the beast.

Marina thought mama was funny, splashing around in the water with great enthusiasm. She stood stock still watching, not aware of the imminent danger. Gabby grabbed her arm and pulled her towards the sand, pushing her over before turning to run back into the water.

"Xena!" Her voice was hoarse with emotion. White wash made it impossible to see where her partner began and the shark finished. She held hope though; at least the water wasn't red. She waded up to her stomach, feeling around underwater for familiar skin. Touching an arm she grabbed hold tightly and pulled, lifting Xena out of the water.

The creature was proving to be quite strong and determined and it was taking all her skill to stop those powerful jaws from closing around one of her limbs. The shark was crafty and managed to keep her below the surface. Her lungs were slowly leaking her dwindling air and the pressure began to build in her chest. She needed to get to the surface for air but the creature kept nudging her down to the bottom.

She had just about reached the point of no return when a small hand latched onto her arm and pulled hard, lifting her towards the surface and her salvation. The shark had broken away and was now circling them both, the predator of the sea moving in on its prey.

Pulling in great gulps of air, Xena kept herself between Gabrielle and this denizen of the deep, and now armed with a knife, she waited her chance. But her nemesis was clever, trying to herd them out into deeper water where they would be easier targets.

As getting back to shore was now no longer possible, Xena was going to have to end this, once and for all. Gabrielle was barely able to stand in the deeper water, the gentle pull of the outgoing tide nudging her in the direction of her hunter. Xena spared a quick glance at her partner, her eyes glowing with the richness of their love, and imparted all that she was in that one look. "Go." Taking a steadying breath, she dove into the water towards her enemy, knowing that one of them would not be returning.

Gabrielle felt helpless as she returned to shore. She had to be there with Xena, but putting herself in danger by staying was not an option; they could not leave the child alone. Silently, on the sand, Marina and Gabrielle stood hand in hand, as the life and death struggle took place not fifteen paces away, watching events unfold before them.

Xena went after the shark but it swam just out of her reach, waiting for that elusive chance when she would have to re-surface for air. This was a wily creature and was not acting like a normal

shark.

It's funny what goes through one's mind in a life and death struggle. Sometimes it's the worth of one's life, or the loved ones left behind. Sometimes it's what to cook for dinner. Xena's mind contemplated the island they were on. What was going on? These were not shark-infested waters, and this creature hunted like a human. Instinctively, a shark should just attack, not manoeuvre her or wait for an advantage. This was not normal in any respect.

The pain in her chest intensified as her need for air increased. She was either going to drown or be eaten. With the last speck of air in her lungs and the dwindling strength in her body she lunged at it, sending it skittering away. With that precious few seconds, she broke the surface of the water and gasped, working furiously to get oxygen back into her blood. A menacing fin broke the water not far away, picking up speed as it came towards her.

This was it. The shark was just about upon her when she forced her hands through the water, landing on its snout and vaulting herself over the top of it to land with a splash behind. She grabbed the knife from her teeth and swiftly cut through the tail. The fish swam out of reach, trailing blood in its wake from the deep gash.

Xena tried to wade back to shore but the shark made another pass, its teeth grazing her thigh, leaving a deep cut of its own. Now they were even. She was standing in waist deep water and better able to stand. The water was clearer here and she could see the menacing eye of her hunter, and the malevolent intelligence residing there.

This beast, she surmised, had to be a product of the gods; perhaps a guard to stop anyone escaping the island. There was obviously something on this island worth killing for.

Xena and her opponent faced off against one another, like combatants in a gladiator ring. She had lived, breathed and fought in this type of battle for the last ten years of her life. This she understood only too well. Kill or be killed.

The creature moved towards her, its movements now sluggish and ragged because of the damaged tail fin. Xena could feel the warm blood ooze out of her leg, its heat dissipating as it hit the cold sea water. The stinging from the salt galvanized her senses, focusing her attention on the killing machine coming right at her.

She could feel her blood pump in slow even pulses, as it always did in battle, as her mind narrowed down to one object in her field of vision. The shark came closer and closer, its giant head raising up in the water as it prepared to attack. Massive jaws filled with rows of jagged teeth were now clearly visible, opening wider and wider until they nearly obscured her vision.

Knife in hand, she waited until the last possible moment. Just as the beast's mouth closed around her, she pushed the knife up through the roof of its mouth up into its brain. Razor sharp teeth grazed her back as she made her escape. She stood back and watched the death throes of this ungodly creature.

With the remains of her energy, she staggered back towards the beach, landing clumsily in the bubbling surf. She turned to watch her enemy continue to struggle until life left its body. Lifting her head to the sky, she closed her eyes in relief.

"Are you alright?!" Xena could hear the panic in Gabrielle's voice.

Xena barely had the energy to answer. "Hmmm." Everything ached. Her head pounded from the beginnings of a massive headache and the various nicks and cuts were making themselves known.

"C'mon, Marina's worried." She helped her partner up onto her unsteady feet. *That's an understatement.* It had taken a considerable amount of Gabrielle's strength to stop the child from running to help her mother. Then again, it had taken the rest of her strength to stop herself from doing the same thing. Standing there helpless, trusting her partner to take care of it, had been the hardest thing she had ever done in her life.

* * * * *

"I thought you would have been half-way down that path by now."

Xena leant back, observing her handiwork on her bleeding leg. Their provisions were poor for needle and thread, so there was not much gut to hold the gash together. "I'm not going until I'm ready." She pushed aside the throbbing in her leg.

Gabrielle's studied the damaged leg, wincing every time the bone needle pierced her partner's skin. "How can you do that?"

"Hmmm?"

"How can you do that to yourself?"

"Someone has to do it. You want to do it?" The momentary lapse of concentration took her mind off the pain.

"No way! I couldn't push a needle through you, Xena."

"But what if it's on my back where I can't reach? Then you'd have to. Here." Xena handed over the bloodied bone needle.

Gabrielle extended a shaking hand and took the offering. She looked at the sharp point and then the wound, trying to settle her queasy stomach.

"I can't do this."

A large, warm hand touched her cheek, causing her gaze to lift to calm blue eyes across from

her. "It's alright Gabrielle. You can do this. Try."

She took an experimental stab with the needle, feeling the skin give way under the sharp point, sliding the bone until it re-surfaced on the other side of the wound. Her stomach turned at the sight. Gabrielle looked up at Xena for a reaction and was met with a look of cool disinterest. If she didn't know better, it was as if Xena didn't even know that she was stitching her up. The hand on her cheek continued its gentle caress, affirming that everything was fine.

"I hope you're not going to make a habit of this. I'll do it, but I won't like it."

"Good girl." The comment was so quiet that Gabrielle wondered if she had heard it at all.

To take her mind off what she was doing, Gabrielle continued the previous conversation. "I just don't understand why you're taking your time about this. Why aren't we walking down that path now?"

"Because we don't have the supplies to just go stumbling on in there. We're just about out of fresh water and I want to try some hunting a little later." She hesitated, "And I want to have a bit of time to teach you the staff."

She could see the gathering storm clouds in her partner's face. "Don't fight me on this, please Gabrielle. If something happens," she held up a hand to stop any reply, "if something happens, I want you to at least have a chance of fighting back. I know I can't teach you much in the time I have, but if I can explain some things I know, you can figure out the rest if needs be."

"Why are you talking like this? It's scaring me."

"There's something more going on here, and if my suspicions about this island are correct, then it's going to be very dangerous. I'm just trying to give you every chance to survive if something goes wrong."

"If something happened to you, I'd be right behind you." A gentle tear rolled down the young woman's cheek, to be intercepted by a work-roughened finger. A quiet understanding passed between them. "But I know I have to live for Marina, so please give me every chance to live a long joyous life with you."

"I'm not going to throw my life away, Gabrielle. It's taken me all my life to find you and I'm not going to waste this opportunity, but things happen unexpectedly." Xena thought for a moment, wanting to express what was in her heart. "I want you to know that you are the best thing in my life, and both you and Marina have brought me great joy. These last few weeks have been wonderful, and I will do everything in my power to make sure that continues."

Marina observed the two women from her hole in the sand. Lately they'd been hugging and talking a lot, and looking very sad. A frown creased her brow as she saw Gabby starting to cry. She picked up her seashells and wandered over to her mama.

"Here Gabby."

Gabrielle started crying harder at the unexpected present from the young girl.

"Thank you, sweetheart."

"Why are you so sad Gabby?"

"Because she didn't like hurting me with this needle." Xena interjected as she held up the offending object. She glanced over to Gabrielle and pleaded silently not to say anything.

"Yeah. I can't stand to see your mama in pain." Gabrielle hated lying to the youngster but acceded to her partner's wishes.

"So how about you two come looking for water with me, eh?" Xena was desperate to move the conversation away from potential disaster.

Gathering up the empty flasks, they set off into the forest behind them. Xena strung the bow and took her new weapon with her, slinging the arrows in its makeshift quiver over her shoulder, in case the opportunity for food presented itself. Of course, she never went anywhere without her trusty sword either.

* * * * *

Ancient trees towered overhead as Xena slashed her way through the undergrowth. Their legs and arms were a mass of scratches from dry brush and an eerie silence hung over the area. It was like the very air itself was alive.

The atmosphere was oppressive and it felt as if the forest was physically closing in on them. Stumbling through the mass of bushes, they burst onto an open meadow, with a small stream trickling beneath a grove of weeping willows. The scene before them was strangely peaceful and at odds with the wild untamed nature outside the grove.

The water was cool and sweet and a welcome treat after sweating through the outside barrier. They filled all their flasks, testing their weight and knew it was going to be tough going getting them back to camp.

Gabrielle and Marina dangled their hot feet in the cool stream, watching the water gently cascade over the well-worn rocks. Xena checked the perimeter, looking for anything that would be of help to them. Using her new bow, she managed to bag a couple of rabbits, her mouth already watering at the thought of fresh meat for dinner.

Wisps of smoke finally caught her attention and she called over her two travelling companions.

They approached the small hut slowly, continually watching out for a trap to be sprung.

It was a strange little house, a single room structure with windows and shingles. Out the front was a tiny vegetable garden. How civilized! Xena couldn't help but make mental sarcastic remarks at the absurdity of such a dwelling.

The thick windows gave out no light and looking in proved fruitless. Xena was about to knock on the door when it opened unexpectedly. A wizened old man, bent with age and sporting a long white beard, greeted her. "Come in Xena."

Stranger and stranger. "You know who I am?"

"I've been waiting a long time for you."

"You have? How come I didn't know that?"

"Your destiny was foreseen long before you were even born. Xena, the great warrior. Great things are expected of you, my dear. All three of you have an important role to play in the great tapestry of life."

This is rubbish. "I think you may have me mixed up with someone else."

"No, no mistake. You are Xena of Amphipolis, are you not?"

"Yes, but ..."

"And you, little bard, are Gabrielle of Potadeia?" This mysterious man had all the answers.

"Bard? I'm not a bard." Gabrielle was confused.

"Not yet..." He just smiled knowingly.

"Enough of this. Why are you here? Is this island real?" Xena wanted some answers.

"As real as it needs to be." Now he was talking in riddles.

"No word games, old man. Does this island exist in the mortal realm?"

"I think you have answered your own question, warrior."

"Stop calling me warrior. I'm no warrior. Who are you?"

"My name is Theron, but you have not heard of me."

"Whom do you serve, Theron?"

"I serve the gods, but I am directly responsible to the Fates. It is by their will that I am able to foresee your destinies."

"Do you know why we've been brought here?"

"All will become clear soon, Xena of Amphipolis. You will be sent on a quest, warrior, and it has been ordained that I warn you. The journey will be fraught with danger and your very lives will be at stake. The prize itself may not turn out to be what you expected." *Riddles again.*

"What is the name of this island?"

"Demnos, little bard."

"Never heard of it."

"I doubt that anyone has."

"What is the prize?"

"I can tell you no more, warrior, except beware. What may seem a great prize could turn out to be a terrible burden. Think carefully before acting."

"But..."

"No, no more. I have revealed too much already. I am pleased to meet you, hero. Now it is time for you to go and prepare yourselves for the great task ahead of you." The seer extended his hand for a handshake and it was only then that Xena could see that he was blind. She grabbed his arm and offered a warrior's farewell.

"You may like to help yourselves to some of the vegetables from my garden on your way out. The island is not very productive for food, so feel free to return if you need food or water. The gods are watching you, Xena." With that final statement, he closed the door.

"What was that all about?" Gabrielle didn't really expect Xena to have an answer and she seemed as perplexed as she was.

"I have no idea. But I won't pass up any vegetables though." She emptied one of the canvas sacks holding the water flasks and began digging. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of rabbit stew.

The return trip to their camp seemed a lot easier than the earlier trip from the beach. It was nearly as if the forest had given them permission to pass through. Since meeting with Theron the island seemed more hospitable towards them.

A great quest, eh? Well, he said that we were destined for great things. So, does that mean we will survive this? She didn't want to take his prophecy as truth, as destinies had a way of going awry...

* * * * *

Chapter 5

As Xena had hoped, Marina toppled over with exhaustion, giving her plenty of time to start teaching Gabrielle the basics of staff use. They faced off against one another, armed with stout wooden sticks and thin cotton shifts, the overhead sun beat down on their glistening skin, adding heat to the already healthy dose of adrenaline.

"Now, do you remember the first move I taught you?" Gabrielle nodded her head, her tongue sticking out to aid her concentration, but seriously distracting Xena. *Concentrate here or she is going to knock your head off.* But that tongue shifted over her full lips, licking them with moisture, sending Xena's libido up a notch. If it wasn't necessary to teach Gabrielle, she could think of another exercise that would be much more beneficial to both of them at this point in time. Xena shook her head in the hope of dislodging the image from her brain. She looked up. *Nope, still there.*

Gabrielle looked with concern at her partner who seemed to be fighting some internal battle. She watched the piercingly blue eyes darken before her eyes and knew exactly what Xena was thinking. Her gaze wandered down the torso in front of her and her mind wandered to the same place. *We're not going to get much more done today.*

By mutual consent, they gave up fighting of one sort for a while and turned their attention to some wrestling. Well, they justified it as wrestling in case they got caught.

Bodies and minds were overheated and the sea beckoned. Warm hands skimmed over sun-darkened skin, the trail of fire left behind extinguished by cool clean water, washing away all sweat and dirt of the day's activities.

It was not only a coming together of two bodies but a merging of two halves of one soul. Xena felt her spirit calm under the steadying hand of the one person who had come to mean everything to her. As Gabrielle loved her with great passion and joy, Xena felt at peace with the world, a feeling she had never experienced before. Time had stopped for them and in this period of grace they abandoned themselves to their love for each other.

Marina awoke a couple of candlemarks later to find her parents hitting each other with sticks. After a moment of panic, her mama explained that she was teaching Gabby to use the stick to defend herself. In fact, her mama gave her a stick of her own and she used it to pound a tree while Gabby tried to hit mama. *Grown ups!*

The rabbit stew had been the best food Xena had had in a long time and made a point of complimenting Gabrielle for it. She looked out to the wreck, which by now was nothing more than a mast sticking out of the water. The sea had finally claimed the skeleton of the ship. It

seemed so long ago since the shipwreck, but it was in fact only a matter of days.

As she gazed over the ocean, she let her senses absorb the sights and sounds that she loved so well. The shark carcass has disappeared during the night and she caught sight of two fins drifting along the water near the reef, a silent warning that escape through the water was no longer an option.

"Hey, don't look so sad."

"Was I?"

Gabrielle could see the quiet depression sitting over Xena's shoulders like a well-worn cloak. "What has you so sad?"

"We have one more day."

"We could just stay here, you know."

"You're not in the least bit curious about where that path leads?"

"Not at the moment, no. Can you honestly say that the last couple of days have not been wonderful?" Gabrielle wanted Xena all to herself, without the interference of anyone else, save Marina.

"No, I can't. But I feel we have to at least try to find a way off this island. If the search comes to nothing, we can always return." Xena could see the contentment on her partner's face and was hard pressed to continue. "Don't you want to try to get home? Before you met me, that was all you wanted to do, if I recall."

"Yeah, it was, but my priorities have changed. You, and Marina, are all that matter to me now." The comment brought an indulgent smile from the older woman. "I have to admit, for a shipwreck, this has been pretty special."

They both managed to avoid talking about the seer's predictions for the time being. The thought of a great quest was scaring the willies out of both of them.

* * * * *

The sun broke the stillness of the last full day for them. Xena had a lot to accomplish before this day ended and she started early. She and Gabrielle had an early morning staff lesson, working on the finer points of a couple of moves and consolidating basic exercises to help build her upper body strength. Over breakfast, Xena sat with her family, explaining some concepts of staff fighting to Gabrielle, resorting to drawing figures in the sand to illustrate some point or other.

She watched the intelligent green eyes opposite her absorb the information. The young woman

proved to be a very good student. She was agile and strong, picking up the instructions quickly and executing them very well for someone who had just learned the moves.

She secretly wished she had more time to teach Gabrielle as she was thoroughly enjoying the exercise of imparting some of her hard-earned knowledge and experience to her partner. She could see that, given time, Gabrielle would be very, very good at it and she found that she was enjoying this new aspect of their relationship and the closeness that resulted from it. Maybe if she survived this, Gabrielle would like to continue the lessons. She could live in hope...

* * * * *

"Marina, honey, do you want to come with me to get some more vegetables?" Xena looked over the child's head to the enquiring eyes of Gabrielle. The child's head nodded slowly.

"What do you want me to do?" Gabrielle didn't know whether to feel hurt or not at being left out of this little hunting party, but suspected that Xena had something to say to Marina that she was not supposed to hear.

"Could you gather some more wood? We'll only need enough for today. We'll be packing up tomorrow morning." She could see the sadness there in those pale eyes but her plan was now in motion and putting it off was not going to make the separation any easier.

Gabrielle stood there watching the two figures walk into the forest until they were just specks in the distance, swallowed up by the vegetation surrounding them. She felt a roiling in her stomach, something akin to jealousy, over the fact that she was not party to the conversation that would be taking place. *Stop it, Gabrielle! It's not like you're married or anything.* That thought didn't stop the hurt though.

* * * * *

"Honey, is something bothering you? You were awfully quiet this morning." Xena had an idea what it was but she wanted to hear it from her daughter. But the child refused to answer, steadfastly following her mother's footsteps through the uneven undergrowth.

They found the meadow again with little problem. They picked their vegetables and Xena showed her some hunting tricks, managing to snare a small pig which she hoped to smoke this afternoon for their journey.

Under the shade of a willow, they rested. "Marina, now listen to me. Tell me what's wrong. There's not much time left and I want to know what is bothering you."

Blue eyes, tinged with anger and frustration, looked up at her, surprising her with the emotion

hidden in them. "It's her!"

"But I thought you liked Gabrielle."

"But you like her more than me!" *Ah, just as I thought.*

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you were giving her hugs in bed. You didn't do that with me. Why?"

"Remember when I told you about grown-up love and how it was different? Well, it was some grown-up hugs that we were sharing." The child was not convinced. "I shared some hugs with you, didn't I?"

The child nodded, but she was still far from happy. "You spend all your time with her!"

"But I spend time with you too. Isn't that enough?"

"No, its not. You're my mama, not hers!" Marina stood up and stomped off in the direction of their camp.

"But... Marina, where are you going?"

"I'm going home!"

Xena could do nothing but follow a few steps behind. Marina didn't want anything to do with her at the moment so all she could do was stay out of her way.

* * * * *

Gabrielle could see even from a distance that something had not gone well. The child kept walking and sat down the beach, pounding her fists into the wet sand. She looked around to Xena who shrugged her shoulders.

"What happened?"

"She's jealous."

"Of me?" *I know how she feels. Funny, we're each jealous of what the other has, which ironically is the same thing.*

"Yep."

"Let me go talk to her." "I don't think that's a good idea at the moment, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle ignored Xena's plea and continued down the beach to where the child was burying herself in the sand, sitting down with a thud. The child didn't even stir from her preoccupation with the sand.

"So..." Fiery blue eyes turned to look at her. *Woow! She's angry.*

"O.K. Here's your chance. Tell me what is bothering you."

The pounding continued and it looked as if Marina was just going to sit there without speaking. Before Gabrielle was ready, the child launched herself at her, toppling them both into the wash of the breaking waves.

"She's mine! I don't want you here any more!" *This was serious stuff.*

"Why, honey? What did I do?"

"Don't call me honey. I'm not your honey, or sweetheart. Go away! You are no longer my friend."

Gabrielle could feel the pain down to her soul. This child, whom she had come to love as her own, was disowning her. She was heartbroken but she was going to fight for her. *Enough is enough!*

"Now you listen to me, young lady. You stop this at once! You look at your mama. What do you see?" Marina looked up at the beach at the tall woman, seated in the sand looking downcast. "You have broken her heart, Marina. She survived ten years for you. Ten years! All she wanted to do was to die but she lived for you in the hope that one day she would have her little girl back with her."

Marina remained quiet, watching her mother with sullen eyes.

"I'm sorry that you feel that way about me, but I love her with all my heart and would do anything for her. People like me will come and go in her life, but you are her little girl and you will always be her little girl. She will love you no matter what."

The blue eyes lost a little of their animosity as she listened to Gabrielle. She had always liked Gabby. Why was it so hard to share her mama?

The young woman held out her arms and she reluctantly crawled into them. She whispered in her ear, "I'm the one who should be jealous, Marina. You will always have her love. I hope I do too but I'm not certain that will always be the case."

That last statement made Marina feel better. Maybe she wasn't second after all. She looked up into sad green eyes and realized that Gabby felt like she did. All this love stuff was hard work.

"Now, go and give your mama a big hug. It looks like she could use one." Gabrielle pushed the

child to her feet and nudged her in the direction of her mother. A slow smile crossed her features as she watched mother and daughter reunite with a warm, gentle hug.

* * * * *

Gabrielle stayed behind to look after the makeshift smoking box covering the cooking meat, which Xena hoped would be enough for their needs. She didn't want to waste time hunting unless it was absolutely necessary. Her reflexes would be on hair trigger until this was all over and looking for food would be a serious distraction.

She watched from the trees as mother and daughter played at the water's edge building wet sandcastles, Xena trying to reinforce their tentative bond. Marina's outburst this morning had shaken her mother to the core. Xena had quietly approached Gabrielle after things had been smoothed over and thanked her profusely for her help.

The child seemed a little more subdued but she was enjoying the one-to-one time with her mother. Little did the girl realize that if they got back to Amphipolis - no, not if, when they got back to Amphipolis - she was going to have to share her mother with even more people. Tantrums were going to be part of life for a while until she became confident in her relationship with Xena. It was going to take understanding on all sides.

Her mind wandered to future days and what it would be like. Xena said she would get her home to see her family. Then what? She hoped that Xena would ask her to stay with her but would she? It was idyllic here and life was so much simpler. Would the pressure from both families drive them apart?

The tall woman emerged from the surf, water sluicing off her lengthy frame in sheets. The child next to her waddled up, still bathing with her breeches on, looking a lot more relaxed than a candlemark before.

Xena laid out a couple of blankets in front of Gabrielle in the sun. Wet bodies sighed in relief as tired muscles relaxed under the heat. Xena raised her head and looked ahead. "You looked deep in thought."

"Hmmm? Yeah."

"What were you thinking about?"

"Us."

"Us?"

"The *three* of us." Gabrielle made a point of including Marina. A tiny mop of dark hair moved as the girl looked up. "Just thinking about what we're going to do when you get home."

"What brought that up?"

Do I raise this now? It may be my only chance. "Things are a lot simpler here than they will be back home. Your family - my family, if they're still alive - there will be pressure and expectations."

"What are you saying?"

"Where do we go from here, Xena? Am I going to get left in Potadeia?" *There. It's out.*

There was a guarded look on the older woman's face. "Do you want to be left at home?" Gabrielle could nearly see the hurt in her eyes.

"No. No I don't. I... I just don't know how you feel about it. Rome and here are different places and times, Xena. We are going home to people who know us. What is our future after this is all over?"

"First of all, I promised I would take you home. Then... then, I don't know." Xena didn't know how to ask her to stay.

"What do you want out of this relationship, Xena?" Gabrielle looked over to see Marina watching the exchange carefully.

Xena took a deep breath and hoped that she was not about to destroy what they shared. "I want you with me, Gabrielle. I want us all to be a family." She paused, "I need you."

A sweet smile broke out on the young blonde, sending laughter lines skittering across her sun-tanned face. "Just what I wanted to hear. I love you too." Her small hand reached across the gap to caress the tanned cheek of her partner.

She turned her attention to the youngster, "And what do you think, Marina? Do you think we can all be a family together?" Both women waited with baited breath while the child thought about her answer.

Marina still had some residual resentment towards Gabby, and she could see that her friend had done nothing to deserve it, but she still couldn't help feeling that way. She wanted Gabby to stay, she really did, but it was hard to answer, so she just nodded. Maybe later she could say sorry.

The three of them remained silent until moisture on wet bodies evaporated and they could get dressed.

* * * * *

Preparations were nearly complete. Xena finished her instruction to Gabrielle, keeping the moves

simple and direct. They exchanged some basic blows, enough that the young woman could defend herself and retaliate if need be.

Clouds gathered overhead, hinting that showers were close at hand. The two women grabbed some canvas and threw it over their shelter, extending it over the fire. Supplies had been sorted, most of which were going to be discarded as they could only carry sleeping gear, food and water.

Marina went to bed early, physically and emotionally exhausted from the day. Xena put her long arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and pulled her in, both enjoying the shared body heat as the temperature dropped with the cooling rain.

Together, they watched the dying sun sink into the sea, giving the water a fiery glow, until all that was left were clouds heavy with rain. As twilight descended and the light began to fade they sat side by side, feeling the touch of skin against skin, listening to the light pattering of raindrops hitting the shelter.

Xena stood up and leaned over to check her sleeping daughter. Reaching down, she hauled Gabrielle to her feet and led her out into the shower, gently laughing at the confused look on her partner's face. Slowly, hand in hand, they wandered down along the water's edge, letting toes mingle with the surf-soaked sand.

At a suitable distance, Xena pulled her young lover into an easy embrace, moulding herself to the vibrant body under her fingers. It still surprised Xena how easy her relationship with Gabrielle was. With all the others, it had always been a matter of her and whoever she was with. With Gabrielle, her heart and her mind agreed that it was always "us". Such unconditional love and trust given so freely had made that unconscious decision so very, very simple.

In the dying light, she gazed down to those verdant eyes, darkening with the arrival of night, and read all that Gabrielle was within those depths. She knew her eyes returned the emotion when she saw their look soften. She brushed her thumb over wet skin before she slowly pulled in the one she held so dear for a kiss that spoke volumes.

Rainwater cascaded over the two of them, soaking their shifts to transparency. Xena spared a glance back to the shelter, pleased to see that all still remained quiet. She turned her attention to the shorter woman, her large hands slowly running over all the dips and curves her mind's eye knew by heart.

There was no hurry here, only gentle affirmation and loving intensity. Tonight could possibly be their last together, and she wanted Gabrielle to carry this night with her in her heart, as she would do. For her, it would be a living beacon in a land full of dark memories.

By feel, Xena peeled off Gabrielle's soaked shift with some difficulty, the material refusing to give up its territory so easily. There was a quiet chuckle in front of her as she pulled harder, nearly hearing the sucking noise as the cotton gave way under her constant tugging. Warm hands replaced cold material and slowly heated the cool skin in front of her.

Xena lowered them to the sand, using their shifts as a barrier to the itching sand. Breaking surf gently bubbled around them, bathing them in effervescent water. With the light all but gone, Xena closed her eyes and used her other senses to slowly explore the warm, moist skin beneath her lips and fingers. She delighted in the gasps and whimpers she was able to elicit from the young woman, using them to push both of them to a higher plane of pleasure.

She continued her gentle assault, using her knowledge of the mapped skin beneath her to lovingly and reverently discover the many facets of her partner all over again. It brought her great happiness that there was no pressure to perform here, but merely to express her boundless love for Gabrielle in all its flavours, until finally her lover's cries broke the silence, her joy shared with the heavens above.

Xena lay her head on Gabrielle's chest, listening to the rapid heartbeat until it slowed and calmed. Small hands buried themselves in her wet hair, slowly massaging her scalp with firm fingertips. A hand moved to her shoulder and she looked up out of habit, forgetting that she couldn't see her in the dark. The firm young body moved and she found herself on her back on the sand, their wet shifts balled up in the middle of her back.

Xena arched up, grabbing the wadded material and moving it aside. Her body glided over the slick sand, the cool water flowing around her periphery and tickling her sensitised skin. She closed her eyes and gave her emotions free rein as warm lips teased and taunted her, promising, but not delivering, the pleasure to come. A smile touched her lips as an errant tongue darted out and coaxed a response from her, tantalizing her until she growled in frustration. A wicked little chuckle could be heard above her and she grabbed Gabrielle's head and brought her in for a hungry kiss.

"Don't do this to me," she whispered.

"It'll be worth the wait, I promise you." The disembodied voice dripped with emotion. "I love you, Xena. Now and forever."

"And I love you too, Gabrielle. Until the end of time." Two bodies took a moment to reaffirm their bond, as two souls made a solemn promise to one another for eternity.

Xena felt her wild and untamed spirit settle under the warm and loving touch of her little blonde. It was a place where only her partner could take her, where there was no outside world. It was only the two of them, suspended in time, and her soul could find peace for a while. There was no past to atone for and no future to live up to; only the now, without worries or fears, alone with the one person she was meant to be with.

She lay quietly as Gabrielle resumed her roaming, immersing herself in the sensations her lover was so cleverly drawing from her. Talented fingers found all her secret places, while soft whispers of love and devotion gently guided her towards completion. Xena soon found herself at that spot Gabrielle had been in not long before.

They lay entwined for quite a while, letting their emotions and bodies cool in the receding surf.

Finally, the chill of the night forced them back up, foregoing wet shifts for dry, warm ones once they returned to their shelter. Slowly they wandered back to where Marina slept, each lost in their own thoughts.

Gabrielle stood in front of the fire, letting its warmth seep through her chilled skin. Xena retrieved a couple of dry shifts, emerging from the shelter to quietly watch the young woman standing in the firelight. Her eyes took in the young body, perfectly sculpted and well toned, unblemished by time or scars. She was truly beautiful and Xena felt her heart squeeze at the thought that this woman was really hers, that they were bound together by mutual love and commitment for as long as they both lived. And then some.

Gabrielle could feel Xena watching her even without her eyesight. She opened her eyes to see what she already knew. But it was not a look of want or desire, but one of adoration and understanding. She knew what Xena was silently saying to her, and she replied with a look of her own.

As the night wore on, they sat in front of the fire, sharing a warm herb tea, talking about inconsequential things to pass the time. The gentle lapping of water at the seashore was joined by the sound of raindrops, blending into a harmonious symphony of nature that lulled Gabrielle into sleep, wrapped in the arms of love.

With Gabrielle snuggled into her chest, Xena watched the firelight slowly dwindle until all that was left was embers, the dying light reflecting off pale eyes watching her precious family in slumber. Today was the last day. Xena contemplated the last few days and locked them tight in her heart as a small miracle in her life. It had been a chance to live a quiet life with her family without expectations or demands from the outside world.

Tomorrow, she would put aside her gentler side and take on the mantle of the warrior. She would don her armour for the first time in quite a while, and with that would come the responsibility that mantle bestowed on her. Tomorrow, it begins...

Chapter 6

The overnight rain had given away to bright sunshine as Gabrielle awoke to an empty bed. She had quickly become accustomed to being snuggled up against Xena, who often woke up before her but stayed in bed until Gabrielle was awake as well. It felt strange to be alone. She knew this was a feeling she was going to have to get used to, despite how much she hated it.

She had known this woman only a few short weeks and already she was unable to sleep without that heartbeat drumming slowly in her ear. She realized she was not going to be able function without her from now on. It would be like missing an arm, a leg... or a heart - she would not be complete without her.

Gabrielle gave Xena some space to get herself ready for their journey, seeking Marina's help to pack up their camp. She knew that it was as much mental preparation as it was the donning of her armour and weapons.

Xena emerged from the forest in her new leathers and armour, standing there like one of those bronze statues of Rome's heroes. This was how she pictured her partner, a larger-than-life hero.

"Wow!" Gabrielle expressed her appreciation of the new clothes.

"Yeah, not bad." Xena had been secretly impressed with the Roman's work.

"Makes you look... bigger."

"Bigger? That's all I need. Aren't I big enough already?"

"Pretty impressive, Xena. Where did the pattern come from?" She reached out and ran her fingers over the embossed pattern on the armour, following the contours of the woman's body. A hand wound behind her and pulled her in. They didn't have time for this, but damn she was so sexy in all this leather. Gabrielle pulled the dark head in to share a warm, wet kiss that was slow and full of promise.

Xena cleared her throat. "I had seen something similar a long time ago." Xena felt a touch of remorse as she remembered back to her days on the high seas. She had grown rather fond of a young girl who had stowed away, and despite their language difficulties, they had found other ways to communicate.

Guilt crashed down on her as she watched Gabrielle's eye glow with unfulfilled desire. *She's looking at me that way and I'm thinking of a long-lost love. Don't do this, Xena. Here is the person you will share your life with.*

She had always wondered what had happened to that young foreigner who had wormed her way into a cold woman's heart. Who had taught her many things about life... and love; who had taught her "the pinch" with a certain amount of trepidation but had trusted Xena not to kill her. Caesar had separated them so she had no idea if the girl had survived or not. *Don't dwell on it. Let the past stay in the past.*

After a moment, Xena continued, "I described it to the armourer and this was what he came up with. I rather like it."

Gabrielle felt her heart do flip-flops looking at this woman who now showed her another facet of herself. The warrior. *Everyone loves a warrior, right? Oh yeah, very sexy.*

Xena took in the look of admiration and preened under her partner's intent gaze. She sighed. "No point putting this off. We ready to go?"

Gabrielle sadly looked around what had been their home for the last few days, fondly

remembering it as a special moment in their lives. Maybe when this was all over they could find another beach somewhere and try to re-capture this wonderful feeling...

"Yeah." But she sounded less than enthusiastic. They grabbed their packs and slowly began their journey, struggling with each step. Gabrielle had her staff with her and Xena was pleased to see her little reed dolly peeking out of Marina's backpack.

* * * * *

They had only moved half a dozen steps before four men stepped out from the thick undergrowth of the forest, one or two whom she recognised from the ship they had been on. They were dishevelled and their demeanour was serious. Xena looked them over with distaste. *Only four? The amount of noise they were making, I thought there were more.*

The designated leader of this rough group spoke with menace. "Don't give us trouble, Xena. We just want your supplies."

"Now why should I just hand them over to you?" She would have willingly given it to them if they had asked, but since they were demanding it, well... well that was different.

"Because we outnumber you and I really don't want to have to kill you."

Both Xena and Gabrielle couldn't help but laugh at the threat. They obviously hadn't heard of her, not that it would have mattered in Xena's mind. This battle was over before she had even removed her sword from the scabbard on her back.

"You think so? I think you overestimate your chances there, Acacius."

The leader became decidedly nervous now that Xena spoke his name. It was like marking him as a target.

"Oh, yes. I know your name," she purred. "And Nikomedes, behind you. I make sure I know my enemies." Nothing escaped her on the ship, and these two were sexual predators of the highest order. It took all her willpower not to rip their hearts out when then openly ogled Gabrielle during the voyage.

There was furious shuffling and shifting of weapons. Acacius' fist tightened on his weapon, the long scar on his forearm stood out in bold relief from the tension.

There was a whisper on the wind as Xena's sword slid out of its safe haven, the sun glinting off the newly sharpened weapon. She twirled the sword in a show of manual dexterity, causing the sailors to look at each other in dismay. Hesitation and uncertainty had now replaced the confidence and arrogance that had been present just a moment before.

"Xena!" Gabrielle's cry alerted her to movement behind her. Keeping the four men in front of her she shifted to take in the younger woman in her peripheral vision.

Two more men had arrived and were slowly moving in on her partner and her child. What had started as an exercise had now turned deadly.

She spoke to Acacius. "You leave her out of this or I will take each and every one of you apart." Her voice dropped to its lowest register, the vibration tickling their eardrums.

Acacius, seeing they were six to her one, re-gained his confidence. "Oh no, Xena. That little blonde is an added bonus. The six of us and her; just the thing to while away the hours."

Wrong thing to say...

Gabrielle watched the transformation and it scared her. With each step towards her adversaries, Xena shed her gentler self, taking on a hardness and determination Gabrielle hadn't seen before. The woman fairly exuded an air of menace. She was going to have to get Marina away from this before she saw too much, but she had problems of her own. Two desperate men moved deliberately towards her. "Xena!"

"Just like I showed you, Gabrielle. It's just you. Do it!"

Uncertainly, she brought up her staff, preparing herself for the first strike. *Keep it simple, Gabrielle.*

Surprisingly, her block held, the sword sliding off her staff and to the side. She was pleased with herself but had to line herself again quickly for the next strike. She knew she was in trouble because they would keep hitting her while she just defended. Xena had four men to defeat, so she was on her own and had to protect Marina.

Memories of all those years of holding back pounded in her head. While she hesitated, one of her two attackers started to move around her towards Marina. "Nooo!" It was the danger to Marina that galvanized her attack. Her staff was swung with purpose and great strength, and before she had time to think, both men were unconscious on the ground.

Xena kept the four men in front of her at arm's distance, not engaging them seriously while Gabrielle was in danger. She heard the two loud thwacks from the staff, followed by the dull thuds of two bodies hitting the ground, and breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn't sure whether the imminent danger would set off Gabrielle's self-preservation instincts, but she was glad to hear the obvious results.

"Gabrielle? Take Marina out of sight." *Don't let her see this, please.*

"Let me know when you're finished."

"This won't take long." She now turned her full attention to the four hapless victims in front of

her. "You should have checked up on me, Acacius. If you had, you wouldn't even be trying this."

"Stop talking, Xena. Let's get this over with. I'm in the mood for a blonde."

The colour in her sky blue eyes slowly drained away, to be replaced by the palest of pale blue, ice cold and hard like their owner. "Over my dead body, Acacius. Give my regards to Hades." She moved in quickly, engaging the leader in solid swordplay. In a matter of moments, she had disarmed him and powered through a stroke to remove his head from his shoulders.

The three remaining sailors stepped back in awe. "Who are you?"

"Now you ask? I was the Champion of Rome, you idiots." Without another word, they dropped their swords and ran off, not looking back at any time.

Xena stood for a moment, letting the adrenaline flowing through her to run its course. She surveyed the carnage left behind. *What a waste.* Had they waited until she had left they could have had it all... except for Gabrielle, of course. No one could have her except the one she had chosen. *Lucky me.*

She wiped her sword on the dead man's clothing, having trouble sheathing it. Had it been that long since she had her own weapons? *Damn, it used to be easier than this.*

Gathering her belongings she headed down the beach, detouring into the bushes to gather her family. She kept herself between Marina and the view back towards their shelter, not wanting the child to see the results of her actions. There were some things she still wanted to preserve in her daughter.

* * * * *

They reached the head of the path just before midday and decided to stop to eat before moving off into unknown territory. Lunch was a sombre affair, each of them emersed in their own thoughts.

Xena could see that Gabrielle was upset. "Gabrielle, you did the right thing. You've done well."

The young woman looked at her still-shaking hands. *I don't know if I can get used to this.* "I know I had to do it, Xena, but it doesn't mean I have to like it. I could have killed both of them."

"But you didn't. If you hadn't stepped in, Marina could have been killed. You saved her life and I thank you."

The praise elicited a small smile from the blonde. "You're welcome," she whispered, looking shyly up at her partner through long lashes.

Xena felt a lurch in her chest. *Damn! How does she do that?*

"C'mon. Let's go." The tall woman offered a hand and Gabrielle grabbed it, being physically pulled to her feet with negligent ease. "Marina, honey, let's go for a walk." Xena quietly slipped a tattered piece of parchment into Gabrielle's hand. Before she could ask, Xena replied, "It's a note for my mother, if you meet her."

Gabrielle smiled at her quizzically. "Don't ask. If something happens and you get the opportunity, give it to her for me, alright? I want Marina safe and sound at home."

Storm clouds gathered in those young eyes, pale green darkening to deep jade, holding a question Xena was loathe to answer. "Just remember I love you, Gabrielle, with all my heart."

I hate this, I really hate this. She may just be taking precautions, but Gabrielle could feel Xena slipping away from her. She was losing her gentle lover to the warrior, and while she knew that she needed that to be successful, it was like losing part of her soul.

* * * * *

The path wound gently towards the centre of the island, and was easy and comfortable to traverse. They made good time and found a small clearing to set up a shelter for the night. Xena afforded them a small fire and they hunkered around it to absorb the little warmth it gave.

The stars overhead were barely visible through the overhanging trees. "That one looks like a goat," she whispered.

"You say something?"

She sighed and looked over at the sad green eyes watching her. "No... nothing." She cried inside for the loss of those early days when their love was young and innocent. Those days were now gone.

By mid-morning the next day, Xena was mentally on edge, sensing her travelling companions were getting decidedly nervous.

She felt a displacement of air and the fine hairs on her skin all stood up on end. *About time...*

A deep chuckle bounced around the forest before the air in front of them shifted and swirled. A barely visible form twisted and turned until it solidified into a giant of a man, topping Xena's height by a full head.

Seeing them together, Gabrielle could swear that they were related. Both dressed in black leather, their demeanor exuded confidence and sensuality. Their hawk-like features hinted of a similar parentage but Gabrielle knew that to be wrong. Still, if she didn't know better...

"Well, hello, there sweet cheeks. Where have you been?" Ares ignored everyone else.

"In Rome, Ares. Not that you helped. And it makes me wonder how you got us here."

"Well, I called in a favour from my uncle."

"It's good to have relatives, eh Ares? Let's cut to the chase. What do you want?"

"Xena, I'm hurt. Can't I say hello to my favourite mortal gal?"

An elegant eyebrow raised in disbelief. "Alright. Now that you're back home, I want you back in the fold."

"Not interested, Ares. I have a family now."

The tall god finally turned his attention to the two remaining members of the party and seemed unimpressed. He turned his attention back to the one person who held his interest. "Tell you what I'll do - you help me and I'll help you."

"I'm listening". She saw out of the corner of her eye Gabrielle moving towards her and she held up her hand. "What's the deal?"

"I'll send these two home if you go on a little errand for me."

"Errand? What kind of errand?"

"Just a small one. There is a temple along this pathway and inside is a weapon, a chakram. Just go in and bring it to me."

"That's it?"

"Yep, that's it."

"What's the catch?"

"What makes you think there's a catch?" "With you, Ares, there's always a catch. Besides, we were going home before you interfered. You manipulated this situation to your own benefit. Why should I help you?"

"Because I can send these two anywhere in Greece if I want to. Don't push me, Xena." The air crackled around the dark-haired god as his temper rose. Sparks rippled along his skin, charging the air with static, and his dark eyes took on a fiery glow.

Marina started to cry and buried her head in Xena's chest. The warrior gave Ares an outraged look. "Look what you've done, Ares. You upset her."

"Like I care. Do this, Xena, or you will live to regret your decision."

Gabrielle had finally had enough. "Now you listen. I don't care who you are! She said butt out, so just leave."

"Now, listen here blondie. You are this close to being a small pile of ash."

"Yeah, you and whose army?"

He raised his hand and a small ball of energy began to form. Xena stepped in between them and he stopped his attack. "Send them home." Xena said quietly, her deep voice cutting through the cacophony of sound.

"No, Xena, I am NOT going to Amphipolis alone, you hear me? I refuse to go to that place without you." *Damn you, Xena, you knew this was going to happen, didn't you? You give me a note for your mother in case - why didn't I see that coming?*

Both Gabrielle and Marina faded out, leaving Xena and Ares alone. The silence was deafening. Now she could concentrate on getting herself out of this mess.

* * * * *

Damn. Damn. Damn. The queasy feeling left her unsteady on her feet. Gabrielle reached over and picked up the fallen Marina. They were in farmland district and it looked hauntingly familiar. She pulled the child into a gentle hug.

"Gabby, where's mama?" Marina was frightened when that man just appeared out of the air. "Your mama will be alright. C'mon let's get you home." Gabrielle tried to sound confident but she was fooling no one, least of all herself. Standing, she grabbed the small hand and they began walking down the path to a nearby village.

They stopped, spotting a farmer tending his field, and called, "Excuse me, sir, but what village is this?"

"Amphipolis, young woman."

"Thank you." At least he put them down in the right place. He could very well have sent them to the far corner of Greece. Alone and without protection they would have been easy prey for local bands of brigands. *Small mercies.*

"Can you tell me where the inn is, kind sir?"

He left his work and came over to her. He pointed down the path, "See that large building there

with smoke out the chimney? That's Cyrene's place."

"Thank you again." *So, Xena's mother still lived.* She only hoped that she would be as friendly as this farmer was...

* * * * *

"Now we're alone, what do you really want, Ares?"

"I told you what I want, Xena. I want you in front of an army scouring the countryside in my name. You remember what that was like, don't you? All that lovely killing and maiming." His voice was like dark honey, and he moved closer to her so she could feel the lure of his power. *Like old times.*

This was the link that they shared like no one else; a common bond in blood, death and glory. He let the seductive pull of his power stretch out to encompass them both and she felt the full dark power of the God of War flow through her. It was intoxicating and pulsed in time with her own heartbeat.

It scared her that it was so easy to fall back into the warm pool of his attraction. This was going to be harder to resist than she had at first thought. The last ten years passed away as if they never existed.

She struggled to speak. "S... so...so why do you need this chakram?"

"With this weapon, civilizations will fall to you. We can share the world. The world, Xena." His voice remained low and hypnotic.

"I thought this chakram was for you."

"In your hands, Xena, and in my name, it will be mine. As you will be."

Chapter 7

As they approached the aged building, Gabrielle looked around the birthplace of her partner. It was like many other small townships, including her own, where everyone knew everyone else and there were no secrets. Pairs of eyes watched their arrival and she knew the rumour mills would be starting soon about the mysterious strangers arriving at Cyrene's inn.

She had no idea what to say to this woman. *What can one say? Hello, my name is Gabrielle. By the way here is your granddaughter.* The one thing in her favour was that the child looked a lot like Xena and would hopefully aid her case in convincing the woman of the truth of her statement.

It was lunch hour and business was brisk. They found an empty table and sat down. Gabrielle searched through her belongings for the small pouch Xena had given her and extracted a couple of coins for lunch for both of them.

While waiting for their meal to arrive, she found the piece of parchment. Her curiosity got the better of her and she read Xena's message to her mother:

Mother,

This is my partner, Gabrielle, who is in need of a friend right now. The child is my daughter - your granddaughter, mother.

Please look after them until my return. I love you.

X.

She studied the bold script and the message it delivered. A woman of middling height, weary with age and long hours of work, brought two plates of steaming stew to their table. Gabrielle was about to speak when she looked into bright blue eyes, so reminiscent of one so dear to her.

"Your name wouldn't happen to be Cyrene, would it?"

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"Do you have a moment to talk?"

The older woman wiped her hands on her apron and took a seat. Cyrene asked the serving maid to bring drinks, and the ale proved to be cold and very tasty, quenching her dry throat.

"Now, what is it that you have to discuss with me? "

"Gabrielle."

"Gabrielle. What do you want?"

"I don't know where to start. I... " Her voice faltered and she handed over the parchment. Her eyes never wavered from the older woman as she read the note, watching the face darken with astonishment, concern and then finally anger. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No. No, it's no joke. I... "

"Get out. I don't appreciate this kind of sick humour."

"I'm not lying. Look at the child."

Cyrene's eyes turned to the youngster sitting quietly next to the young woman. She gasped. It was like time had turned back twenty years. Here was Xena all over again. "It's true?" Gabrielle just nodded.

Gabrielle had to move quickly as it looked like Cyrene was about to faint. She grabbed the older woman's arm, supporting her until her balance returned.

"Oh my." *Oh my, indeed.*

* * * * *

Xena managed to put some space between her and Ares. His seductive power, while still pulsing in the background, lessened with distance. Her resolve, for the moment, was in disarray under the onslaught of his presence. She sat quietly while trying to rally her defences to fight this.

She drew on her memories of Gabrielle, looking for that elusive peace she managed to find when she was with the young woman. Remembering back to the night before on the beach, when she had felt that ethereal calm in her soul, she felt her body steady.

I have to get away from this.

Gathering her belongings, she walked down the path towards the temple. Ares appeared at her side. "So, you've agreed then. We will be so good together, Xena."

"Leave me alone, Ares."

"Don't fight it. You won't win."

She turned to face him. "Is that what you want, Ares? A puppet?"

"And what a beautiful puppet you would make, Xena. But no, I want your fire and your guile, it's what makes you so unique. Don't you realize that I am as much drawn to you as you are to me?"

"Come on, Ares. Don't sweet talk me. I've been killing for the last ten years. I just want some peace and quiet with Gabrielle and Marina for a while."

Ares' eyes closed involuntarily at the thought of Xena in full battle cry. His mind filled with images of her dark hair flying and blue eyes flashing as her muscular body flexed and bunched, her bloodied sword held in a velvet-like grip, swirling overhead and removing the head from her opponent's shoulders. He could nearly smell her battle lust.

He couldn't stop the groan that escaped his full lips. Slowly he opened his eyes, letting his gaze brazenly wander over the lithe form standing in front of him. Her long legs were on full display in the short battle dress that snugly fit her muscular figure, accentuating every dip and curve of her body. If it was possible, she had grown even more beautiful with age.

"Why do you want to waste away in some backwater of a home with blondie? You were meant for so much more, Xena. The world is there for those who are prepared to take it." "What would I do with the world?"

"Rule it in my name, Xena. Have you forgotten so quickly that feeling of utter control? To have your every whim fulfilled? To crush anyone who defies your will? I seem to remember that you enjoyed that part in particular. "

"You just don't get it, do you? I may have wanted it a long time ago, but those days are past. I have everything I want and you don't figure in it."

"It's her, isn't it?" *I should have gotten rid of her.*

"Her name is Gabrielle. And, yes it is. But before you do anything rash - if you so much as touch a hair on her head, I'll hunt you down."

Ares looked deep into those familiar blue eyes and knew Xena had just made a promise.
"Alright, she's safe from me."

"I will get your damn chakram. After that, we are finished." With her final word, she walked away.

That's what you think, Xena.

* * * * *

"How did this happen?"

Gabrielle raised her eyebrow.

"No. I know how this happened. But how did it happen?" Cyrene was not making much sense.

"I met Xena in Rome. She had been captured by Julius Caesar ten years before and was sent to Rome to become a gladiator. It took her all those years to gain her freedom and find her child."

Gabrielle knew the next question even before she asked it. "The father is Caesar."

"Oh my." Cyrene's brain had given up trying to formulate sentences any more. The revelations this young woman unfolded to her were taking away any rational thought she had left. It was just all too unbelievable, but here was the physical proof of her story.

She watched the child, who had snuggled in close to the blonde's side, and could not believe it. Here, she thought her daughter long dead so many years ago. Now, she found that not only had

her daughter survived, but that she had now become a grandmother.

"Can we at least get a room in your inn?" Gabrielle reached for the hidden pouch and was stopped.

"No need. You are family. Come with me and we'll get you settled in. We will need to talk some more once you've had a rest." She turned her attention to Marina. "And you, little one, I will get to know you better as well." She kneeled stiffly. "And you are..."

"Marina." Gabrielle answered.

"Marina. Such a pretty name. And you, Marina... I am your grandmother, sweetie. I am your mother's mother."

"Grandma? Where's mama?" Marina's plaintive cry tore into her grandmother's heart. Cyrene looked up to the waiting Gabrielle.

"She's with Ares, honey." Cyrene's eyebrows disappeared into her hairline.

"We were on our way home when our ship was shipwrecked. Ares is trying to claim her back." The older woman pursed her lips, angry about the news.

"I'm not about to let that happen." There was a steely tone to Gabrielle's voice that caused the older woman to look up. Gabrielle glanced at Marina then back to Xena's mother. *We will talk later.*

Gabrielle and Marina had been shown to Cyrene's best room, which was bright and cheery. It was all so different from Rome. Where Antillia's home screamed opulence, Cyrene's inn exuded an air of country comfort. The furniture was well made and sturdy, built for practical use rather than ostentation. A bedspread of natural hues covered a soft downy mattress. In the corner stood a half-barrel, which substituted for a bath. Nearby, several buckets warmed by the fire, ready for use.

Gabrielle liked it. It was like home as she remembered it and she felt a forgotten urge to see her family again. But she had made a silent promise to herself not to go without Xena, because without her warrior her home wouldn't be complete.

The room seemed positively decadent after the last few days sleeping under the stars. Marina fell asleep within minutes of laying her head on the soft pillow, and Gabrielle had her first hot bath in weeks.

Warm water glided over her sun-kissed skin, soaking away the aches and pains of a difficult few days. Her mind wandered to Xena, silently wishing that she was here with her. She closed her eyes and could almost feel the soft caress of roughened fingers sliding over her skin, finding all

those hidden spots that elicited a response from her.

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes to find herself alone. Her thoughts turned to her partner who was hundreds of leagues and a different dimension away. *I'm coming, Xena, hold on.*

* * * * *

Xena trudged on towards her goal, glad for the respite from Ares. She now had time to take in the countryside around her and start to formulate a plan. She glanced down to her arm and she stopped dead in her tracks. The scar from the recent arrow wound had disappeared, as had the recent gash on her leg. Instinctively, she reached for her back and found unblemished skin. What happened?

Her contact with Ares had been an intense one, her senses overwhelmed in an orgy of dark power. She now suspected that he had used some of his power to influence her, a side effect being the healing of her body. Taking some solace from the fact that it took more than just his charisma to affect her, Xena's steps took on a lighter tone. Things were not so dark anymore and her return to Ares' fold was no longer inevitable. Now, one more step towards her goal was one more step towards Gabrielle.

The forest had started to thin out and the deathly quiet grated on her nerves. Xena sensed the danger before she saw it and was ready with sword drawn. Strange birds circled above, eyeing her with intent. She stood her ground not knowing what to expect. Feathers rained down from the sky, their sharp points piercing her skin.

Backing into the shadows of the overhead trees, she knew she was cornered. Without going back, her path was now a gauntlet to the next set of trees. Between her and protection on the other side was an open piece of ground and a bridge fording a stream.

She studied the creatures hovering above for a while, deciding on her next course of action. The birds were not like anything she had seen before. They were reminiscent of large vultures but were less hideous in appearance. Their wing span easily surpassed her body length and they glided effortlessly around in circles above her, barely using any of the impressive strength in those large wings. Their colour was not quite black but more vibrant midnight blue, the sun shimmering across the feathers, making them seem barely visible.

She unslung her bow and nocked an arrow. Pulling the string back, she aimed for the underbelly of one of the flying beasts and released it. The arrow flew true to its target and brought it down not far from her. She could see there were more birds than she had arrows for, so an alternate plan would be needed.

As she contemplated her next move, she noticed that the deadly missiles stuck into the carcass of the downed bird but bounced off its feathers. Bracing herself for the onslaught, she ran to the

massive bird and dragged it back under cover.

The plumage of the large bird was actually quite beautiful. The feathers were dark, but held a golden hue and seemed to vibrate in the sunlight, sending colours dancing in a rainbow overhead.

Xena tried to remove one and cut her hand. She studied the feathers more closely. The surface was soft to the touch but they had razor-sharp edges. She gave the problem long thought and emptied her backpack in the hope of finding a solution.

Sifting through the contents, Xena had a revelation. This bag held the last ten years of her life and she took a moment to reflect on it. Besides the medallion from the Roman Senate, she had a couple of small items that belonged to Antillia. She could not leave Rome without a memento or two of her adopted mother. A signet ring, bearing the crest of Antillia's family, held special significance. The older woman wore the ring constantly and it was the sigil that sealed her release from bondage. The only other item she allowed herself to take was a necklace that was a special favourite of her benefactor. Maybe one day she'd go back to pay her respects properly.

Her hand rested on some aged leather. *Ahhh...* This, if nothing else, was the one piece that had defined her over the last ten years - her gladiator attire. The miniscule costume had become a second skin over the years, and her fingers warmed to the soft leather like an old friend.

She had, at one point, thought about getting rid of it but Gabrielle stopped her. When she questioned it, the small blonde leant over and whispered in her ear. Now, she would die first before getting rid of it, waiting for the day when Gabrielle would fulfil the promise she had made. *Oh yeah...* Xena's mind filled with images of hedonistic pleasure and fantasy play. Her body reacted with a jolt at the thought of what that small woman would do to her.

C'mon, Xena, back to business. There was really nothing in her pack useful for extracting the feathers. What she really needed was a pair of blacksmith's pliers. She had no metal except what was in her armour. With that thought in mind, she looked down and found what she was looking for. Detaching a couple of the smaller plates, she used them to grab the feather, sandwiching it in between them.

As quickly and carefully as she could, she plucked its feathers, repeating the exercise until she had a small pile of them next to her. Gathering branches, she made herself a crude shield, weaving the collected feathers into its surface. She re-attached her armour pieces with bloodied fingers.

By now, the air was thick with flying feathers, all trying to find her. Raising the shield overhead, Xena made her way over the open ground steadily and quickly, trying to keep as much of herself under the protection of the makeshift covering.

The air fairly sang with the sound of flying projectiles whizzing around the sky. If it was possible, the number of feathered arrows increased, and some of the birds resorted to diving at her in a suicide mission to stop her at all costs.

She was dodging backwards and forwards, trying to keep her path irregular and unpredictable. Birds of huge size crashed into the ground, their feathers brushing her legs and leaving cuts in their wake. She reached the bridge and had no choice but to run in a straight line.

It was a matter of hurdling downed birds as they tried to block her path. Her goal was only a few steps away and she ran as fast as her long legs would carry her, ignoring the searing pain from a number of wounds.

As she reached the safe haven of a grove of trees, the attack stopped. She slid down a tree trunk, pulling in great gulps of air as her stressed body cried out for rest. Her body was a mass of nicks and cuts from the feathers, her damaged hands barely able to hold her sword. A godly chuckle echoed around the forest.

"Is this some sort of sick game, Ares?" she called out to empty air.

A disembodied voice answered, "I gotta see if you still have it, Xena. I'm glad to see you didn't disappoint me."

"What in Hades were those birds?"

"Just some little pets of mine, Xena. They're called *Ornithes Areos*. I borrowed them from my shrine in the Black Sea."

"Hope you enjoyed the show," she mumbled before closing her eyes in exhaustion.

* * * * *

Gabrielle could not put off any longer the long talk she knew was coming with Xena's mother. Leaving Marina in easy slumber in their room, she sought out Cyrene.

"Are you rested now, my dear?"

"Yes, thank you. The bath was wonderful."

Cyrene steered her to a quiet corner of the inn, away from prying eyes and ears. Over herb tea, Gabrielle filled in Xena's mother with what she had been told herself, leaving out the more unsavoury aspects of the history for Xena to tell herself if she felt the need.

"So, how does she look?" Cyrene's memory held an image of a fifteen summer-old adolescent, all arms and legs, with a fiery disposition and an impetuous nature.

"Good. Very good." Gabrielle's eyes held a hidden glow that was not missed by the older woman. *So...*

"She has grown into a very beautiful woman, Cyrene. She's very determined when she needs to be, but she is also very generous and loving. Despite her checkered history, she has a noble spirit, which all of Rome can attest to. She was the beloved Champion of Rome, the people's choice. She fought with great honour and was respected by all, including the Roman Senate."

Cyrene listened with pride, glad that despite the anger she had left home with, Xena had found herself again. She studied the young woman in front of her, seeing age beyond her physical years in those pale green eyes.

"And what's your tale, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle hadn't wanted to answer at first, but she knew this would be the first of many requests for her story. *A bard, didn't the seer say?*

"I come from a small farming community near here - Potadeia." Cyrene nodded. "About two summers ago, the warlord Draco swept through and took some of us as slaves. After a while, I ended up in Rome."

Her mind relived those months of horror, especially at the beginning. She was inexperienced and untouched and her first time was memorable for all the wrong reasons, in the service of a man who used her and left her alone, broken by shattered dreams and harsh realities.

She had eventually managed to flee from his clutches but was soon again on the block, marked as a troublemaker for escaping, to be sold to a more amenable master. But inside she had shrivelled up, no longer the bright, lively youngster who had a joy for life envied by all her friends. She had died inside - until Xena. If nothing else, she would be forever grateful to the gods for sending Xena to her. It was like she had been born again.

"I was on the slave trader's block, when this woman came up to inspect me. She was so tall I had to strain my neck to look up. I looked into those blue eyes and..." *How much do I reveal?* She saw the quiet look of understanding in those familiar blue eyes. "And I was lost. It was like she touched something deep within my soul."

"I think she felt the same way because the next thing I knew I had been bought. That brought me into the service of a wealthy patrician named Antillia Maxima. She was Xena's mistress. I had to admit I thought it was a little strange that a woman had bought me, because..." Gabrielle blushed. Admitting to a stranger what she had been was hard. She hung her head. "I'm usually bought by men."

An aged hand enveloped her own, giving it a gentle squeeze. Tear-filled eyes lifted to meet her partner's mother. "I was a body slave, Cyrene." She was mortified at finally voicing her deepest shame. A hand held her chin, forcing her eyes up.

"You have nothing to hang your head about, Gabrielle. You had no say in what was going on and had to do what you had to do to survive."

"I hope my parents are as understanding as you are."

"Well, if they're not, then they should be ashamed of themselves." A warm hand came up and patted her cheek, a smile appearing on Cyrene's thoughtful face. She gave Cyrene an answering smile, releasing a breath she didn't know she was holding.

* * * * *

Xena opened her eyes some time later. It was late afternoon and she would need to find shelter soon. Looking down at her hands, she saw that they had already begun to heal. Ares' power was still helping her. She hated using his gifts, but perversely she hoped it would be permanent. Quick healing would be a big advantage in the warrior business. She quietly chuckled. She was already thinking of herself in the terms of the seer. *A warrior. A warrior and her bard, wasn't that what the seer had said?*

It sounded really appealing. Maybe she should encourage Gabrielle to start telling stories, perhaps to Marina to start with... *Marina. What is to happen to her?* A warrior and her bard was one thing but a warrior, her bard, and her child was another dangerous thing altogether.

While munching her dried dinner, Xena contemplated her future. Six moons ago, she didn't think she had a future. Now she had a family - her partner and her child. Would she be content to make her home in Amphipolis or would the road call to her? Would Gabrielle go with her? What to do about Marina? *So many questions with so few answers.*

First things first though. She had to take Gabrielle home to her parents, if they were still alive. What if she wanted to stay? She felt a twisting in her guts at the thought of her partner staying in Potadeia. Her soul let out a lonely howl, looking for an answering call from its other half.

* * * * *

Back in her room, Gabrielle lay quietly waiting for Marina to wake. She felt a tugging in her heart and her thoughts turned to her missing partner. *What are you up to, Xena?* She closed her eyes and her mind's eye painted a picture of her brave warrior, alone and unguarded against the God of War. *You can't have her Ares, she's mine!*

She could feel her anger rise at the thought of her being at the mercy of Ares. Xena was there alone to fend off his immortal advances... Ares would use every godly trick in the book to sway her partner back to his fold. Gabrielle knew Xena needed her help, but first she had to get back to the island.

Her only hope of getting back to Xena was to plead her case to a god. But the caprices of the

gods were well known, so finding one that would answer her prayers, let alone agree to help her, would be nearly non-existent, but she had to try.

* * * * *

Before leaving, Xena salvaged some more feathers from the dead birds, not wanting to waste the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of getting a supply of something of such high value. Storing them in her bag would slice it to bits, so she resorted to tying one of Gabrielle's bowstrings around the quills, hanging them off a pole to avoid the deadly sharp edges. It was awkward to carry but she would manage for this rare prize.

After another hour of travel, Xena decided to camp in a small, secluded glade off the main track. Ares had left her alone and she felt a deep loneliness, wishing for the company of the one person her heart wanted. She tried playing the star game but it was not the same any more, not without her little blonde. Wrapped in a weather-beaten blanket, Xena could nearly hear the soft burr of her partner's voice arguing over what a constellation looked like as she drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

Gabrielle tried to be polite during dinner but a quiet depression had set over her since her afternoon rest. She wanted nothing more than to be wrapped up in the loving warmth of her warrior; to feel that steady heartbeat under her cheek and hear the low rumbling of that voice that flowed over her like warm honey.

She looked up into the concerned eyes of Cyrene. "I'm going to bed. Marina, honey, you can stay up for a while to get to know your grandma. Good night."

Cyrene followed her up the stairs to her room.

"Gabrielle, are you alright?"

"Yeah. Just worried I guess. I have a bit of a headache."

"Well, get some rest then, child. I'll put Marina to bed in a little while."

"Thank you Cyrene, for everything. For taking us in and accepting Marina. Xena will appreciate the effort you have taken."

"No effort at all, my dear. I can see she is my grandchild. It's like seeing Xena all over again."

"She looks like Xena?"

"The spitting image. Not as rambunctious as my little scamp, but she's Xena's daughter alright."

"Hmmm," Gabrielle couldn't help but manage a small smile at the thought of Xena as a child.
"You can tell me all about it another day."

"Good night then, Gabrielle."

"Good night, Cyrene."

The room was warm with a cheery fire blazing in the fireplace, but despite the warmth of the fire, Gabrielle felt a chill in her bones. As she slowly relaxed, her thoughts turned to Xena...

* * * * *

Chapter 8

The day was bright and sunny and the glade was picturesque. Sitting against a tree, Gabrielle breathed in the wonderfully fresh, clean air, letting her lungs fill to capacity before breathing out in utter contentment. Xena's head lay in her lap, her eyes closed and a shy smile playing around those full, rose-red lips. Emerald eyes tracked down the muscular body laying in a relaxed posture, arms and legs crossed in casual repose.

Gabrielle watched in amusement as she lightly brushed her finger over Xena's face, her partner trying to swat away the distraction. Electric blue eyes opened, coming into sharp focus and showing her the full range of emotions lying behind that façade. A callused finger came up and caressed her face, lingering on the plane of her cheek.

The large hand continued its path around to the back of her neck and pulled her down, sharing a long leisurely kiss. This was a kiss of commitment, freely given to the other without expectation or demand. It was a slow exploration, and they were both happy just to enjoy the simple contact and the silent company of one another for a while.

The sun's journey across the sky eventually put them in the shade and the temperature dropped, sending goose bumps skittering across Gabrielle's cold skin. Xena stood and extended her hand down to her partner. Lifting her up, she led the younger woman back out into the warmth of the sun's rays and found a small mound of sweet-smelling grass. Xena's eyebrow rose in question as they both looked at the makeshift bed in the sun.

Eyes the colour of the meadow surrounding them darkened and a smile full of invitation crossed those perfectly shaped lips. The distance between them shortened dramatically and long fingers fumbled for ties, trying to gain access to the treasure beneath.

Gabrielle gasped as the cooling air touched her skin, to be moments later warmed by wandering hands. *How does she do that?* She had barely found the ties on Xena's outfit and she was already naked. *Practice... lots and lots of practice. Or maybe it was the long fingers.* Cringing at the thought of where Xena would get all that practice, she opted for the latter reason. *Yeah, it was*

definitely the long fingers.

When warm lips brushed her earlobe, her fingers lost their ability to function. "Arrggh!!" A small chuckle escaped Xena's lips at Gabrielle's frustration and she brushed the small hand away, lending her own longer digits to help in the cause.

"There you go," and breathed a sigh as the warming touch was reciprocated. Xena's lips returned to their previous spot, tasting skin on their downward journey along her partner's neck. A gentle nip elicited a welcome response.

Gabrielle felt her knees begin to buckle under the onslaught. *Lay down Gabrielle. Nothing happened. Gabrielle... lay down before you fall down. Still no reply. Do it stupid!*

Finally the message got through and Gabrielle pulled them both down to the springy mattress. Gabrielle quickly flipped over her bigger companion, feeling in the mood for giving rather than receiving. She looked down at that face she had come to dream about, even in her waking hours. Closing her eyes, her fingers mapped intimate territory as they slid over the silky skin beneath her, her mind's eye easily able to fill in the details her vision could not.

Hands, nearly as familiar as her own, caressed her back gently as she was allowed to roam over the perfect body so freely given for her to play with. And as she opened herself fully to the emotions this woman could stir in her, Gabrielle felt herself truly blessed for having known her.

As the sun continued its homeward journey for the day, two eager bodies revelled in the sun, the fresh air and their love for one another in the peace and quiet of a lonely meadow.

Later, as they lay facing one another on the crushed grass, Gabrielle ran her hand over the expanse of Xena's back, pulling back at the sensation of smooth skin. Raising herself onto one elbow, Gabrielle leaned over and looked closely. Blue eyes opened, watching her.

"What happened? Where did they go?"

"Ares." Xena felt that was all the explanation that was needed.

"What did he do, Xena?" Gabrielle could feel her ire rising.

Xena reached across, grabbing Gabrielle's hand. She waited for the smaller woman to look at her before continuing. "He tried to get me to join him, but you knew that. He just tried a little harder this time, that's all."

"And how did he try to win you over?" Xena could hear the jealousy oozing out of that statement.

"Why? You're not jealous or anything, are you?" She couldn't help but tease her a bit. Her ego preened under the sudden attention.

"Me? Don't be silly." Gabrielle tried to laugh it off but both of them knew better. Of course she was jealous.

"You have nothing to worry about, Gabrielle. I am all yours, just as you are mine." That statement made it final. There would be no more doubt.

"He and I share a bond, I suppose you'd call it. His power draws my dark side, where my fighting skills live inside me. We share a bond in death and blood, Gabrielle. He wishes it were more but I'm not interested. I have everything I want right in front of me." A shy smile crossed her lips as her eyes shone with the love she had for the small blonde lying next to her.

"When he approached me, I was falling fast into that pit I had lived in after I left home. I thought I was doomed to begin all over again. Later, I noticed that my arrow wound had disappeared." She looked at her arm where the scar had been and rubbed her finger over the useless stitches in her leg. "And so the lash marks it seems. He must have used a bit of his power to try to bring me over to him."

"Well, some good came out of it then, right?"

Xena remained silent.

"Right? Isn't it?" Gabrielle could sense something wrong. "What is it?"

"I didn't want to lose those lash marks, Gabrielle."

"Why on earth do you want to keep them?"

Xena's mouth opened and closed a couple of times as she tried to express what her mind barely grasped itself. "They were part of my punishment, Gabrielle. My trial by fire, as it were. Without them, I feel that I have atoned for nothing in the last ten years."

"That's silly." But she could see that Xena was serious about this. She obviously felt that she deserved them.

"We both know that you suffered for those lashes, Xena. Isn't that enough?"

"No, it's not." Those pleading blue eyes begged her for some sort of resolution to this dilemma. How could she appease the older woman's sense of justice?

"What do you want me to do? I hope you're not asking me to give you the lash, because I won't." She tried to put some levity into the situation but worried at Xena's pensiveness.

"Those lash marks reminded me that there were consequences to my actions, Gabrielle. That all those years of chaos and mayhem came at a price. I need them as a constant reminder of what can happen when I lose sight of cause and effect." "Maybe you can ask Ares to give them back to you."

Xena glared at her with an 'as if' stare. She had unwittingly been given the ability to heal. The last thing she would do would be to deliberately ask him for something. Any boon of the gods came at a price.

"Let me think about it." The lengthening sun drew them into a pool of lethargy. Eventually drooping eyes gave way to increasing sleepiness. Entwined, they finally succumbed to the drowsiness that had been tugging at them for some time.

* * * * *

Gabrielle awoke in the darkness, feeling desperately around in her empty bed for her missing partner. Tears welled in sleepy eyes, cascading down cool cheeks and pooling on the sheets. It was all a dream...

The next morning, she sought out Cyrene. "I can't stay." She was on the verge of tears, trying to express what her soul was crying out to do. "I have to go and find her and bring her home."

Cyrene could see the young woman had been crying during the night, her red-rimmed eyes sad and lifeless. "Please, both of you, return to me safely." She gathered her in and gave her a warm, loving hug.

Gabrielle whispered into her ear, "Please, look after Marina. If something happens, tell her... tell her I'm sorry, but I had to be with Xena at the end."

Cyrene pulled back, "Now you listen to me, you will be back for her. I don't want to hear talk like that! She is **not** going to grow up without her parents."

Sadly, she looked up, "I need to find a temple or shrine."

"You're in luck, there's a shrine to Aphrodite just outside the next village, about two candelmarks away. Go say goodbye to Marina and I'll find someone to guide you."

"Thank you, and goodbye," she whispered.

"Until you return," Cyrene promised.

Now comes the hard part.

* * * * *

Marina looked up at the creak of the door, quickly pulling her bed sheet over what she was trying

to hide.

"Marina, honey?" That melodious voice attracted her attention.

"Hello." She tried to sound nonchalant and busily preoccupied. She searched frantically for her reed dolly.

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing." But she couldn't look Gabby in the eye.

"What are you hiding there?"

"Nothing..." *Oh oh.*

"C'mon, show me what you're hiding."

Blue eyes, their colour subdued with her uncertainty, looked up through dark lashes to the woman approaching her bed. She slowly pulled back the covers to reveal a large egg, about twice the size of a duck's egg, orange in colour, sitting in a nest of clothing.

"Where did you get that?"

"I found it."

"Where did you find it?" It was like pulling teeth, trying to get information that the girl obviously didn't want to give.

"On the island."

"When did you find it, honey? I don't remember you picking this up."

"The last night we were there. When we went for that walk."

The last night before we were separated...

"Can I keep it, Gabby? Please?"

"I suppose so. Keep it and ask your mama when she gets back." *IF she gets back.*

Gabrielle moved closer to the egg, running her fingers over the rough surface of the shell and listening to the faint scratching coming from within. Was there any harm in her keeping the egg? Maybe it would help her in the long lonely days to come.

"Keep it warm, Marina, and it may hatch for you." She pulled the covers over the top, putting the egg into a nice, warm cocoon. She pulled Marina into her lap. "I have to go away for a while,

Marina. I'm going to go and get your mama and bring her back home. OK?" The girl started to wriggle. "No, sweetheart, your mama needs help and I have to go. Be good for grandma, please."

"But why, Gabby? First mama, and now you. Why?"

"You know your mama is a strong fighter, right?" The girl nodded enthusiastically, despite the tears collecting in her eyes. "Sometimes that isn't enough. She needs someone to stand beside her and show her she is not alone. Do you understand?"

"But why don't I come too? I can stand too."

"I know you can, honey, but she will worry if you are in danger. She wants you to look after grandma. That's your job, to look after her and protect her." She looked pensively at the bed. "And now you have this egg to look after. That's your job too. By taking that egg you're now its mama, and mamas have to look after their children. That's the rule."

Marina slumped in defeat. "All right."

"That's my girl. I'll get mama and come back as soon as I can." Gabrielle didn't have the heart to reveal the harsh reality that they may not come back at all. "I don't know how long that will be, Marina, but think of it like when you were seeing your mama back in Rome. It may be a long, long time, but you will always be in our hearts and our thoughts and we will try very, very hard to get back here."

Gabrielle pulled the child into a long, warm hug, trying to instil into the child all that she felt for this family whom she had adopted as her own. She really wanted to get to know this child of Xena's, to watch her grow up into adolescence and hopefully be part of guiding her into adulthood.

She quietly gathered her belongings and her staff and left, passing Cyrene on the stairs as the older woman went to divert the child's attention away from the separation. She looked into those familial blue eyes and silently said goodbye, before closing the door and starting her journey.

* * * * *

The dawn of a new day and Xena felt only mildly like wanting to face it. Last night's dream had been just what she needed, but it only increased her need to feel Gabrielle in the flesh. Her partner had only been gone a day and she already missed her.

She afforded herself a small fire to prepare some herbal tea. While sipping the hot beverage, she contemplated what the day would hold. Hopefully, today would bring her within sight of the Temple and this would all be over.

With no one to talk to and nothing to do, Xena packed up quickly and moved on. For the

moment she brought her feather shield. Not one to waste an opportunity, she was not about to forego something that could help her. If it protected her once, then it may do so again.

* * * * *

Steps echoed around the large Hall, gradually becoming louder at the approach of a lone figure. Three women, untouched by the passage of time, were gathered around a loom, studying the results of their work. Out of the shadows stepped a tall man, standing there regally observing them.

"Zeus."

"Atropos, Lachesis, Clotho" He addressed each one in turn, accepting the bow of their heads in tribute. "You have requested my presence."

Atropos stepped forward, shears grasped in a wrinkled hand, "Yes. Events are moving quickly and your intervention may be needed."

This was highly unusual. It was usually forbidden for the gods to intervene in the matters of mortals. For the Fates to summon him meant that the future of the world could very well be at stake.

"It seems, Zeus, that Xena is within sight of the Chakram." Clotho was loathe to say the word out loud, and it sent a shiver through her ageless body.

A rumbling could be heard through the Hall. "How did this happen?" Zeus's voice had picked up a steely edge to it.

The three women looked at each other, none of them wanted to be the bringer of bad news. Lachesis, who had been standing in the background, stepped forward. "It seems that your son, Ares, put her there."

"Foolish boy!" Zeus's anger grew and the rumbling increased, shaking the Hall itself.

Atropos spoke, "All is not lost."

In concert, the three Fates made their final plea. Lachesis began, "My lord, help must come from..."

Clotho continued, "those you least expect."

Atropos finished, "Look to your children."

This requires some thought. He stroked his beard and contemplated the cryptic words. "Thank you. I will take your counsel under consideration." He lengthened his strides as he left the Hall of the Fates.

* * * * *

Chapter 9

The morning was bright and sunny, at odds with Gabrielle's gloomy disposition. The young lad Cyrene had found to lead her to the next village was constantly chatting, and for once she silently begged for peace and quiet.

"So where do you come from, Gabrielle?"

"Potadeia."

"Nice farming country there. They've re-built Potadeia recently and there's now a pretty good market for produce." He could see that the girl was unimpressed with his proud show of knowledge.

Carpus was met with stony silence from the pretty blonde. When Cyrene had asked him to escort someone to the next village he grudgingly agreed. When it turned out to be a beautiful young woman, he thought the Fates had blessed him. However trying to engage her in any kind of conversation was proving very difficult indeed.

"Are we meeting up with a boyfriend?"

A deadly glare silenced his questions for a while.

Gabrielle tried to take an interest in the surrounding countryside, after all she had been away for nearly two summers from her home, but she found it very hard to muster any kind of enthusiasm in that knowledge. She picked up the pace, trying to turn two candlemarks into one, causing the young man next to her to stumble in an effort to get out of her way.

"My, my, we are in a hurry."

She couldn't explain her need for speed, except that her heart was telling her to hurry. Was it a sign that time was running out?

* * * * *

Xena could see the spires of the Temple not far ahead and breathed a sigh of relief. Soon it would be over and she could go home, or so she hoped. She was never sure with Ares. The path widened, opening onto a dirt courtyard leading up steps to the entrance of the Temple. She could feel the heaviness in the air as soon as she had stepped into the courtyard. A massive serpent slithered its way out of the undergrowth, blocking her path.

The thing reared its ugly head, showing row upon row of jagged teeth, intent on making her its next meal. Standing up on its muscled tail, the snake easily bested her height by at least five body lengths. Xena backed up, giving herself plenty of room between them, while she contemplated her next move.

The creature twisted and writhed, now woken from its slumber and ready to defend the entrance at all costs, its dark, malevolent eyes studying the human crouched in the undergrowth. A long, flickering tongue tested the surrounding air.

Xena considered her options. The serpent did not attack but simply stood its ground, waiting for her to approach. There was no way around this thing to get to the front door. Well, she could wait. Rushing in at this point would get her killed.

* * * * *

Despite her haste, Gabrielle had not saved much in time, arriving at the next village in a little under the two candlemarks. She thanked the smitten lad and sent him on his way. She had no intention of returning to Amphipolis any time soon, at least not without her partner.

She approached the small shrine, barely a tiny stone altar, that had slipped into disrepair. Brushing away dried leaves and dead flowers, Gabrielle thought about what she would say to the goddess. She laid a small token on the altar, a bracelet made by Xena for her on their sea journey. Before she had opened her mouth, her heart cried out in open supplication, saying all that she needed to say.

"Took you long enough." A female voice scared her from her reverie. She turned to see a woman in a see-through pink nightie. Gabrielle closed her eyes and opened them again. *Yep, that's what I saw.*

"Aphrodite?"

"In the flesh, sweetie."

In the flesh, indeed... too much flesh. "Um." Gabrielle couldn't take her eyes off the apparition, watching the unrestrained breasts of the goddess shake every time she spoke.

"I'm here to ask a boon."

"I already know. I've been watching you." "Me?" *What did I do?*

"Well, you and tall, dark and deadly. Where is she, by the way?"

"You've been watching us?" All the things they had done together came flooding into her brain,

starting a blush in her chest, rising quickly to stain her face.

"Certainly have. That's what I do." Aphrodite chuckled at the blonde's embarrassment. "And by the way, very nice..."

Gabrielle shuffled her feet, trying to get rid of the images in her brain. Try as she might, she couldn't shift them; in fact, the harder she tried not to think of them, more poured into to fill the void.

"Xena is with Ares on an island somewhere." Aphrodite's demeanor changed immediately.

"An island?"

"Um, I think it was called Demnos."

"Ares, of all the stupid..." Aphrodite muttered under her breath.

"I need to get back to her. Can you help me?"

"Wait one moment, sweetpea. I will return." With that, the goddess disappeared in a shower of sparkles, leaving a bewildered Gabrielle behind to ponder what had just happened.

* * * * *

Xena sat quietly watching the serpent settle, lowering itself into a coil in front of the stairs, its serpentine eyes watching her every move. Killing it was not going to be easy. Large, thick scales covered its body and she had doubts that her sword was going to make much of a dent on the skin. She looked at her makeshift bow and arrows. They might work but would not cause enough damage for her to move in and finish it off.

The feather shield lay in front of her and she idly brushed a finger over the soft surface. The edges were razor sharp, even sharper than her sword, and could inflict a great deal of damage if used effectively. But how?

Perhaps she could attach them to her arrows, but only a small part of the edge would be used. She needed something that would use as much of the sharp edge as possible, inflicting large open wounds that she could get her sword into.

Xena quickly attached a feather to one of her arrows and fired. The projectile stuck in the large scales of the beast, but it seemed to have little effect, even with the razor sharp feather embedded in it. This was going to require some thought.

Trying to attach them to her sword may prove fruitful, but she still had to get close enough to use it, and she doubted the creature was going to give her the chance to do that. She needed

something she could throw at it, something that could use a large part of the cutting surface to inflict damage.

Her mind flashed back to her childhood days when she and her brother Lyceus used to skim stones along the water's surface. Flicking a stone so it could spin and skip and make it seem like it was flying.

As she formulated a plan, Xena began detaching two plates from her armour and reaching for the pile of loose feathers. *Here we go again.*

* * * * *

Aphrodite materialised in a massive hall, surrounded by huge marble columns and godly opulence. The sounds of her footfalls echoed in the Great Hall of Olympus as she made her way down the long walkway to the dais at the end. Bowing in reverence, she greeted Zeus.

"Father."

"Aphrodite. What are you doing here? I thought you'd be off causing havoc amongst the mortals."

"Something has come to my attention that I think you should know."

"If it concerns Ares, the Fates have already advised me of his indiscretion." "I have Gabrielle at one of my shrines. What shall I do with her?"

"Gabrielle?" "Xena's... lover. She has asked to be sent to Xena's side. What do you wish me to do?"

The Fates' words echoed in Zeus's head. The wheels were now in motion. "Do as she asks, Aphrodite. She may go."

"And Ares, father?"

"I will see to it. Your responsibility is the girl. Protect her, daughter, she is more valuable than you know."

"Very well."

The goddess's high heels click-clacked on the marble floor as she left the Hall.

* * * * *

Several attempts and cut fingers later, Xena had fashioned a working model of her weapon. In theory it should work, but the only way to know would be to try it. It was crude at best, and she would only get one shot at it, but it was the best she could come up with.

It had to be the weirdest idea she had ever had, but the strange feathers from those mythical birds had given her the chance to try ideas that would have otherwise been out of the realm of possibility. They had been a lot of trouble to carry, but she hoped she could get some of them home, giving her the opportunity to create something truly unique and beautiful for a weapon.

If this didn't work, then it was up to her trusty sword, which would prove very hard work indeed. Taking a moment to prepare for her attack, Xena sent a thought to her absent partner.

Confidently, she strode out into the open courtyard, attracting the attention of her enemy. Slowly, the massive serpent unwound itself, rising up to look down on its tiny opponent. In a show of ferocity, it bared its teeth again, hoping to freeze its prey in place before striking.

Xena stood stock still, waiting for the creature to make its move. It struck down quickly, jaws open to receive the tasty morsel standing before it. At the last second she flipped herself out of the way, throwing the feathered ball into the open jaws that passed so close by her. She back-flipped out of the way and awaited the outcome.

The serpent slithered from side to side trying to dislodge the pain lodged in its throat. With every flick of its muscular body, the feathers embedded further into the flesh, cutting through muscle and tissue.

It was struggling with the damage the ball was inflicting, its lifeblood leaking out of its gaping mouth. Xena let out her battle cry and ran in, her sword raised in one hand. Half a dozen slashes later and the serpent's body writhed around unaware that it no longer had a head. Xena stood in a pool of blood, watching the dying twitches of her enemy, feeling the haunting sensation of satisfaction.

She had a moment to feel the horror before she was drawn into the vortex of days gone by, where her blood lust was unrivalled. She had lived for death and power and everything in between, when she was teetering on the edge of being lost to her darkness forever.

Taking a steadying breath, she knew she was walking that edge again. One little push and she would fall. She inhaled and her lungs filled with the odour of blood, fresh blood. Her pulse beat in her head, slowly and steadily, sending a red curtain across her eyes, bathing her vision in crimson.

A half-grin, tinged with menace, crossed her face, and she slowly ascended the stairs to her destiny.

Xena could feel the raw power as soon as she entered the chamber, throbbing through her in time

to her own heartbeat. Images of her past were drawn into her head, scenes of carnage and bloodshed that she had tried so recently to forget. A new thirst for blood surfaced, and she could nearly feel the familiar hilt of her sword resting in her hand, sending tingles up her arm and reminding her of those days when killing and mayhem tasted like sweet vintage wine.

Dead torches buried in sconces in the walls burst into life, acknowledging her presence in the room. The very air itself seemed to come to life, inhaling and exhaling its stale breath over the flickering flames.

There it sat on an altar in the middle of the chamber: the Chakram. The weapon was truly beautiful; a perfect harmony of shape and power, its azure gems glistening in the reflected light. She could feel her fingers itching to hold it, to feel its cold smoothness in the palm of her hand.

Despite herself, her right hand reached out towards the weapon of its own free will. It took all her willpower to stop herself from grabbing it, and she stepped back into the shadows of the wall, pushing herself against the cold surface. The cool menace she could now clearly feel emanating from the Chakram pulled at her resolve, willing her to step forward to claim the prize in front of her.

Her plan seemed to be unravelling at a rapid rate, and she now questioned the validity of this action. She thought she could control this situation but was finding the opposite to be true. Perhaps trying to turn the tables on Ares was going to end up destroying them all.

In a final act of desperation, she forced herself to stick to her plan, praying that this risk would pay off. The pull became stronger and she found herself unable to ignore it any longer. Step by step, she moved closer, her hand extending itself. As her fingers closed around the circle of darkness, it felt as if a nest of ants had crawled inside her head...

* * * * *

Cyrene sat on a faded, tattered bedspread, a large wooden box lay open at her feet filled with mementos of a past life that she had thought long gone. In her hands rested a small rag doll, brand new despite its age. Here were memories of her wild and tempestuous daughter who had been a constant source of frustration to her.

The doll had never been used by Xena, who was more interested in fighting imaginary battles than raising an imaginary family. She had never been, nor ever would be, what was considered a normal little girl. Her hand ran through the ragged woollen hair idly as her thoughts turned inward to a gawky child who would take on the older boys and usually beat them at their own game.

"Grandma! Grandma!" In ran the nine year-old who was the embodiment of her daughter; a child whose boundless energy tired out her grandmother just watching her. Marina slowed at the sight of the open box, her curiosity getting the better of her as she knelt in front of it in homage. She

looked up at her grandma with beseeching eyes.

A fond smile touched the woman's lips and she nodded permission. A wide grin split Marina's face, lighting up her features from within. Eager hands rummaged through the pile of toys, looking for booty to add to her own meagre supply. A tiny wooden sword, its hilt fitting perfectly into her small hand, took her attention. She lifted it and swung it around in imitation of her mother. Cyrene sighed, *like mother, like daughter...*

What Marina did next did surprise her, though. The child put down the sword next to her then reached for the doll in Cyrene's hands. She pulled the rag figure to her chest and cuddled it, swaying softly from side to side. The older woman felt a tear come to her eye watching the young child whisper to her own make believe child. It was a tender scene that broke her heart and she made a decision to find her granddaughter some real friends to ease the loneliness. Or perhaps a nice brother or sister. *He he...*

"C'mon Marina." Cyrene stood up and took the child's hand, leading her downstairs to some milk and cookies. At the bottom of the stairs the building shook, sending pottery jars flying off the shelves. Dragging Marina along behind her, Cyrene ran outside. *By the Gods...*

* * * * *

"Are you ready to go?" Gabrielle jumped with a start, unaware that the goddess had returned.

"Ah, yeah. What is your price Aphrodite?"

"Let's just say this one is free for all the good memories you have given me."

Gabrielle had just gotten rid of one blush to have it replaced by another. Watching the Goddess of Love's breasts jiggle around as she laughed only deepened the blush. *Aww, no...*

The ground shifted under their feet. "What in Hades was that?" Gabrielle looked up at the concerned look of the immortal. "I don't want to know, do I?"

"But you're going to find out." She mumbled just before sending them both off in a mass of stars.

* * * * *

Even the distant Halls on Mount Olympus felt the upheaval. A solitary figure seated on a massive throne bowed his head. "Damn..."

* * * * *

Ares awaited Xena's re-emergence from the Temple with unrestrained enthusiasm. She would now be his again. He saw movement from within. "Welcome back sweet..." His voice felt like it had been ripped from his throat and left him cowering in the dirt.

What he saw... for the first time in his immortal life he was truly scared. This creature standing in front of him was barely Xena. An eerie glow emanated from her eyes, its power dwarfing his own substantial power. He knew he had made a fatal mistake.

Xena felt like she was in quicksand, slowly sinking into the memories of her past. Writhing bodies of her fallen enemies surrounded her, trying to draw her down into their festering pool of dead humanity. *Oh Gods, Gabbriieeellleeee!!!!* Her spirit cried out for help.

She rallied her defences and drew herself out of the ungodly pit of despair intent on killing her. Her soul was not theirs to have; it belonged to another. Just as Gabrielle's belonged to her. She drew her mental line in the sand to fight and set her mind to that task. If this evil wanted her, then it would have to take her kicking and screaming...

[Continued In Part 2.](#)

[Aurelia's Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)

~ Chakram ~

by Aurelia

General Disclaimer: [See Part 1.](#)

FEEDBACK: Any positive feedback is appreciated at aurelia_fan@yahoo.com.au

© July 2005

Chapter 10

Gabrielle's knees gave out as her body materialized with a rush. She stood on rubbery legs and took deep breaths to get her equilibrium. Slowly the world righted itself and she could move, albeit unsteadily.

It was only then that they both noticed what was going on at the temple. Xena stood there, leaning over a cowering Ares. Aphrodite's eyes became round like saucers at seeing her brother in such a submissive position. Gabrielle was more interested in the one standing over him. It was

a stranger.

Even from a distance, Gabrielle could see that this person was not the Xena she knew. As she stepped closer, even she could feel the breathing malevolence in the air. She didn't need godly powers to feel the oppressiveness weighing down on her. Blue eyes, hooded and cold as ice turned their stare on her, stripping away her defences and laying her soul bare. *What in Hades has happened here?*

Aphrodite started stepping away, putting Gabrielle in the line of fire.

"Xena?" Gabrielle's voice was barely a whisper.

The older woman didn't speak; she just stood there surveying the scene in front of her. Ares didn't dare move or even breathe. *What had he done?*

Gabrielle could see a strange object in Xena's hand, a circle of metal covered in jewels and emitting an eerie glow. She moved steadily forward, forcibly putting one step in front of another until she was close enough to touch the god. She tapped his shoulder and motioned him to move away. Visibly relieved, Ares scrambled away without so much as a smart comment.

"Xena?" The woman turned her full attention to the young blonde standing in front of her. A frown creased her brow and she seemed to lose her ramrod posture.

"Gabrielle?" The voice sounded lost and bewildered.

Gabrielle reached out to touch her and it felt as if she had been stung. The jolt caused her to pull back her hand, shaking it to relieve the pain.

"Xena, are you in there?" She searched long and hard in those eyes that had been a window to her partner's soul. Now the curtain had been pulled across; sheer enough to see her partner there, but still stopping any clear view of the one she loved so dear.

"Gabrielle, get away from here. Far, far away." Her voice was dark and deep.

"What is going on?"

"I can tell you what's going on." Aphrodite spoke for the first time. "Ares has tricked Xena into taking the Chakram of Darkness." "Chakram of Darkness? That doesn't sound good."

"No, it's not. Why do you think it was hidden here? Anyone who touches it becomes the vessel of its malevolence. It contains evil, Gabrielle. It is evil itself."

Gabrielle turned to observe her partner. She could see the woman visibly shaking, aware that Xena was fighting an internal battle for her very soul.

"What will happen?"

"The power of the Chakram will gradually consume her until there is no more of the woman you know, only an all-powerful killing machine bent on destroying the world."

Gabrielle turned her attention to a prostrate Ares and started kicking him. "You did this to her! You egotistical, self-centred, arrogant ..." She was so angry that she sputtered and puffed. "Man!"

The sky clouded over and thunder rumbled.

"Oh oh..." That was all Ares could manage before he disappeared in a blinding flash.

Gabrielle glanced over to Aphrodite. "Zeus." *Oh, sent to the corner by daddy...*

"Now what do we do?"

"We have to destroy it."

"And what about Xena?" Aphrodite's face remained still, sending chills down Gabrielle's spine. "Well?"

"I'm sorry Gabrielle. Destroying the Chakram comes first. She may have to be sacrificed."

"No... NO. She's in there fighting. We have to give her every chance to survive this. Is there any way to slow down the process?"

Aphrodite thought for a moment. "Perhaps... Give me a moment." She disappeared in a sprinkle of stars.

Gabrielle turned her attention to her lover, straining to hold herself together. Despite the danger, she approached.

"Xena? Let me help you. You know I can't stay away. I'm with you to the end."

For a moment those sky-blue eyes returned, filled with the love for her little blonde that had been her beacon of light for the last few weeks. Her large hand came out and cupped a tear-streaked cheek. "Take this while I'm able to give it to you." Xena unsteadily grabbed her bag and shoved the offending weapon inside. The damage had been done, but hopefully removing it from her touch would stop any further contamination. With a sad smile, she ran her thumb over the soft skin under it.

"This has to be done, Gabrielle." Her voice was hoarse and strained, both from emotion and struggle. "I want you to look after them for me."

"No. Don't you give up, you hear me? I'm not ready to lose you yet. I love you and I want to have a family with you. I'm greedy, Xena. I want it all and you're it."

Xena bowed her head, taking solace from Gabrielle's words, which had expressed out aloud her own wishes. Isn't that worth fighting for?

"Alright. I'll do what I can."

"No, Xena. Don't try, just do it. Isn't that what you told me? Do it for me." She smiled a bittersweet smile. "Besides I still have a promise to fulfil, don't I?"

"Hmmm... " Images of what could be flooded her mind and gave her that extra boost to continue the good fight.

"Remember what we are like together, Xena. Use that to fight it."

Desperately, Xena reached for that peace of body and mind her lover could inspire. The blackness in her heart retreated for a while, giving her breathing space.

"Thank you, Gabrielle." She gave her partner a wink and was able to manage a smile.

* * * * *

Ares stood before his father, feeling the anger rolling off the King of the Gods as if it were a tangible thing. "How stupid can you be, Ares?"

"But... "

"NO!" He bellowed and the room shook with his fury.

"You have put the world in danger because of this rash action. And Xena, of all people. She is the one who could be responsible for the downfall of us all."

"But she was mine to control."

"She was no one's to control, Ares. You know that, and yet you still persist. That was incredibly selfish of you. You will pay the price for this, son, and I'm helpless to stop it. She has to be destroyed, you know that."

"There has to be a way."

"You have no one to blame but yourself. You manipulated this and now we all have to pay." Zeus tapped his long beard and thought. "You are going to fix this, Ares. No games, no tricks and no lies. You and Aphrodite will have to get her to the Temple of the Chakram to destroy it. She is expendable Ares, just remember that."

Aphrodite appeared at the end of the conversation, catching Xena's death sentence.

"Father." Aphrodite stayed quiet until she was acknowledged.

"Yes?"

"Gabrielle has come up with an idea. Is there any way we can slow down the takeover of Xena's body?"

"We could try. Any extra time we can get will make it less hazardous for your journey."

"Journey?" *What had she gotten herself into?*

"You and your brother are taking her to the Temple of the Chakram. I would suggest you put something warm on, Aphrodite."

She looked down her body at the diaphanous gown and thought better of it. "Hmm. I see your point."

* * * * *

The air shimmered and twisted with the arrival of Aphrodite and Ares. Xena lifted her head from her seated position, barely acknowledging their presence. Aphrodite looked around in concern and Gabrielle lifted Xena's bag in silent answer.

A greater shift in the atmosphere nearly knocked the blonde off her feet. Tiny wisps of electrical discharge swirled around the forming figure. Within moments, a tall, elderly man stood regally in its place, his wizened hand slowly stroking his grey beard.

"So, Xena, it seems we have a problem." His deep voice resonated around the courtyard of the temple.

Bright blue, saddened eyes tracked to him, acknowledging what they all knew. She was doomed to die. While Gabrielle, in her ignorance, fought on to save her, she had heard stories about this weapon and knew it was only a matter of time before she was lost completely to its power.

"Do something!" If the matter had not been so grave, Gabrielle's insolence would have been met with instant incineration.

Eyes as old as time itself turned their attention to her. "And you are?"

Aphrodite quietly stepped in. "This is Gabrielle, father. Xena's partner."

"Well, Gabrielle, it seems that my son here has done something completely stupid."

"Tell me something that I don't know. Trying to take her away from me was stupid in itself." Xena looked up in astonishment at her lover's lack of propriety. She glanced over at Zeus to find

an amused look on his face. *Well, she can be lucky...*

A small chuckle escaped his perfectly formed lips. "I keep telling him that, my dear, but he won't listen." His features hardened. "Are you aware of what is going on?"

"Not really, no." Gabrielle seemed to be the only one present who didn't know what was going on.

"There is only one place that the Chakram of Darkness can be destroyed, but until now we have had no way of getting it there. Ares has forced our hand and we have to move quickly. The power of the Chakram will eventually consume her and then there is no way of stopping it. Xena will destroy the world and eventually us as well."

"Young woman, listen to me very carefully." Zeus guided her over out of earshot from Xena. "I can see only one possibility here, my dear. We need to keep her calm and composed so that she may direct her energies to keeping the power at bay. She needs help... your help."

Without hesitation, Gabrielle answered. "What must I do?"

"What I propose is very dangerous for you, for if she falls, so will you." He watched the young woman's face for a reaction. Her child-like features hardened with determination and purpose.

Gabrielle repeated, "What must I do?"

"The Fates had foreseen your meeting with Xena. You were destined to be together, Gabrielle, and Aphrodite has blessed this union." Gabrielle looked over to the silent goddess and saw her nod her head.

"You have a tentative connection with Xena, I think you already suspect that. What I propose is that we increase the connection that you two have. You will truly be fighting beside her, Gabrielle, but that will mean you will be in danger as well."

"I intend placing your soul in Xena's body, lending your own considerable will to her own to fight this, but beware, that if one of you dies the other will perish also." Zeus paused for dramatic effect. "Think carefully, Gabrielle, Xena has a very small chance to survive this. If the evil inside is not kept at bay, she is to be destroyed at the Temple. That is the only way we can stop it. So if she dies so will you while you inhabit her body."

Gabrielle had already made her mind up; she would do anything for this woman who had so utterly claimed her heart. If it meant dying with her, then so be it. *Marina, please forgive me.*

She spared a moment to think of those she would leave behind. Marina, while Xena's daughter, had come to mean a lot to her in the short time she had known her. Here was a child with boundless love and joy for life that reminded her a lot of herself at that age. Cyrene would now be faced with the task of raising her. Perhaps the child's likeness to Xena would help ease the

pain. Her thoughts turned to her own family - to her own parents, if they were still alive, who would never know that their daughter had been on her way home to find them, and finally to her sister, Lila, whom she had thought of often since the day that Draco had separated them. Funny how in such a short time her priorities had changed so dramatically. She turned to face the tall god. "Let's do this."

"Hopefully this is only temporary, Gabrielle. Aphrodite will place your body in stasis for safe keeping." *If you return...* Zeus couldn't help but feel a bit of pride for this young human who was showing so much courage and determination, something he wished he could have inspired in some of his own progeny.

"I understand."

Moving back to the seated woman, Zeus spoke, "Xena, we are going to help you with your burden. Gabrielle will join you in holding the darkness at bay. Please stand."

The mention of Gabrielle's participation galvanised Xena's preservation instincts. "No, she's not to become involved in this. Don't do it!"

"Xena!" Zeus raised his voice to attract the older woman's attention, the volume rattling the stonework of the temple. "There is no choice in this. If you are taken over, and we cannot stop you, she is lost anyway. Give her a chance to help you."

"Xena. Let me do this, please. If you are lost, then so am I. Let me at least go down fighting next to you."

Xena hung her head. She lifted her eyes to meet the steady gaze of her partner watching her. "I don't want you to feel this, please. If it comes to it, I'll make it quick. Zeus, please stop her from doing this. I can manage on my own."

"No, Xena. She has made her decision. It is safer for all of us for her to help you."

Zeus stood quietly before them, eyes closed, as he summoned forth the power that made him the King of the Gods. The air pressure changed and swirled around the two women, energy skittering across their skin, sensitising them to the change that was to come.

"Gabrielle, please stop this. This is not what it seems. It's all a tr..." Xena felt as if her heart had been ripped out of her chest. Breathless, she collapsed to her knees, looking across to her partner to see her fall also. She desperately reached across the distance and held her hand, forcing her eyes to look to the deep green pools of her lover.

Zeus increased his power, surrounding the two women in an aura, while Aphrodite and Ares stood by, silent witnesses to their father's actions. The air continued to swirl, gathering in the blue and green wisps of vapour emerging from the two humans. In deference to Zeus's greater power, the immortals bowed their heads in supplication.

Gabrielle held on tight to Xena's hand, trying to keep eye contact as her very soul slipped from her body. Held upright by Zeus's will, they watched on helplessly as the wisps aligned themselves side by side. Zeus increased his power further, causing a deep rumbling, shaking the earth, and sending the wisps skittering back into the taller woman's body.

Their bodies were released from Zeus's control and both women collapsed to the ground. It was the strangest thing, Gabrielle thought. She could sense Xena next to her, feeling herself rise up in a body not her own and looking down on her own fallen body, seconds before it slowly faded away from view.

It was a joyous union, moments before the blackness eating away at Xena's resolve pulsed to life. The emanating power nearly took Gabrielle's breath away, her hand instinctively reaching for her throat, only to have that hand stopped by another. *Concentrate, Gabrielle, we need to work together on this.*

The very thought of Gabrielle putting herself in so much danger scared the Hades out of Xena, but it was done now and she had to live with it. She was quite touched by Gabrielle's sacrifice, but now she had to make sure the sacrifice was not in vain.

Zeus backed away, allowing the women time to adjust to their new circumstance. He called over his children. "As soon as they are able to stand, start your journey. Do not tarry, for we have precious little time." He looked deeply into each child's eyes. "The fate of the world rests on your shoulders, my children." *I only hope the Fates are right about this...*

* * * * *

Chapter 11

How the Hades did we end up here? How, indeed.

Gabrielle, this would make a great tale...

Don't start that bard stuff, Xena. How could you let Ares do this to you?

Let him? What choice did we have? Who is in whose body here?

Why did you do this?

Hey, I had a plan here...

Well, I hate to tell you, but your plan sucks. There was a moment of silence in the void. I'm sorry Xena, I shouldn't take this out on you.

Look, this sniping doesn't help either of us. We're in this mess and we're gonna have to work

together to get out of it.

A whisper of a sigh crossed their thoughts. Yeah, I know. But all I wanted to do was to go home, you know? I don't know if I'm up to all this hero stuff, Xena.

I know what you mean. I don't know where people get the idea that I'm some sort of hero.

Gabrielle mentally laughed at the ridiculous statement. Xena, you just have to breathe to be a hero. You don't get it, do you? Your stature, your confidence, your very nature, screams warrior and hero. You can't help it.

Yeah, yeah...

Xena was glad for the company, despite the risk. Gabrielle was very nicely diverting her attention away from the menace pulsing in the background.

*So, what's the plan then, **Miss Hero**...?*

*Well then, **Miss Bard**... Xena paused for a moment, trying to adjust to this new turn of events. So far it's just there, as you can feel. I suppose the closer we get to the Temple, the more active and powerful it will become, and we'll have to work together to put up a united front against it. She sighed. Why did you have to go and do this, Gabrielle? I needed you home. I could have handled this by myself.*

You know I can't do that. Would you have done the same? I doubt it. We have to be together. No matter what happens, I have to be here.

Yeah, I know, but I wish it wasn't so.

C'mon they're waiting for a reaction from you. Let's get this started so we can go home.

* * * * *

Slowly, Xena struggled to stand, experimentally straightening out her limbs. Blue eyes swivelled around the courtyard, taking in the gods standing there.

"Xena? Gabrielle?" The tall woman gave a nod.

"Where do we go from here?"

"Well, first of all we better get you warmer clothing. Aphrodite?" The young goddess stepped forward and with a wave of her well-manicured fingers, dressed the warrior in something suitable. Xena looked down to find her armour still in place, but a body suit of fine black wool was pressed against her skin, underneath her leathers, warming her immediately.

She looked up at the Goddess of Love and nodded her approval, bestowing a smile on her for a job well done. Aphrodite couldn't help but smile in return, taking in the close fit of the fine wool, fitting the tall woman like a second skin and leaving little to the imagination. It wasn't often that she was thanked for her efforts. *Yeah, you can thank me aaannytime you want, Xena.*

Xena reached down and picked up her bag. "I really don't want to lose all my belongings. Is there any way I can carry the Chakram without touching it?" In the blink of an eye, a small metallic hook appeared on the side of her armour. *Interesting.*

Xena gave her partner a mental warning as she reached in to grab the weapon. Dark, visceral images crossed their minds as she lifted it out and placed in on the hook on her hip. The images receded and the entity died down to the ever-present pulsing in the background.

"Can this be placed somewhere safe?" Xena picked up her bag and the feathered shield and pole. Aphrodite raised an elegant eyebrow at the warrior. "These are very, very special. I don't want to lose them." The goddess acceded to her request and sent them off in a shower of stars.

With all her immediate problems now taken care of, Xena approached Zeus. "OK. We're ready." Before she had finished the last syllable, they had materialized on a dusty track, the temperature having dropped several degrees in a matter of a heartbeat. Xena glanced over at Aphrodite, rolling her eyes in appreciation for the warm clothing. The goddess handed over a large fur-lined cloak, which Xena took enthusiastically and swung over her shoulders to keep her partner warm.

"Thank you, Aphrodite." She held the immortal's eye for a moment, letting her know that her sentiments were appreciated. Xena had to admit that as far as gods go, Aphrodite was proving to be one of the better ones. Her brother, on the other hand...

Xena looked over to the two gods in question. Ares' eyes roamed over her body, taking in every line and curve outlined in black wool and leather. *Mustn't look too bad then...*

"Wow, warrior babe! Very sexy. You totally rock!" Xena could only assume that whatever Aphrodite had just said was a good thing.

"This is as far as I can go, Xena. From here on, you are on your own." Zeus waved his hand and three backpacks materialized containing their supplies for the trip.

"Why don't you just drop us at the front door?"

"It's a long story."

"I got time." Xena wasn't going to budge until she got the full story.

Zeus's brows knitted together and Xena thought she may have overstepped her bounds. "Some years back, the Chakram of Darkness resided in the Chakram Temple along side its twin, the Chakram of Light. While they rested side by side, Darkness and Light, the world was in

balance."

"Well, someone stole it and the world was thrown into chaos. The Chakram of Darkness's power grew and possessed the man who took it, using his body as a vessel for its malevolence. Its power expanded to the point that we were barely able to stop it. Where he fell was where you found the Chakram, Xena, and ever since I have kept the island hidden from mortal eyes."

Zeus glared at his son. "Now, because of Ares' thoughtless actions, the world is again in danger." "Why don't you just destroy me where I stand?" "Because, Xena, unlike what you mortals think, I don't destroy unless I have to. You have a very strong will, as does Gabrielle within you, and I am hopeful that we can get you to the Temple safely. There, we stand a chance of destroying it once and for all."

"But if we take it back to the Temple, won't the Chakram of Light neutralize it?"

"Ahh, there's the problem. Soon after the Chakram of Darkness left the Temple, the Chakram of Light just disappeared. No one has ever heard of it again."

"So that's why you knew what was going to happen to me. Back to my question, why don't you just drop us at the front door?"

"Because the god whose domain the Temple resides in, Kal, wanted to halt any more godly interference. He placed a barrier around the area, stopping any immortal from entering."

Xena's mind secretly smiled, *so that means...* This trip may not be so bad after all.

"Hang on, godly interference? Do you mean that a god was responsible for all this trouble in the first place?" She couldn't help herself and turned to Ares, who at least had the good sense to blush.

"Very good, Xena. You guessed it."

"You tried this before and you didn't learn from the first time?" *What a bonehead.*

"Hey! No name calling!"

And stop reading my mind, Ares.

Xena leaned in towards Zeus and whispered, "Do they know?"

He chuckled at her enjoyment of the situation. "No." He whispered back.

"Can I tell them?" Merriment filled those blue pools, and he was glad to see she still had a sense of humour at this point of the journey.

"Go ahead." He stood back to watch his children squirm under the news.

"Hey, bonehead."

"Xena, so help me if you keep calling me that..."

"You'll what? C'mon do your worst, Ares. It can't get any worse for me right now."

"What about blondie then, Xena? You gonna let her die right now?"

"I don't want to, Ares. But it's gotta be better than the slow death you have planned for both of us with this idiotic plan of yours." A frown crossed her brow at that particular thought. "Well, I have some good news and some bad news." She waited for him to ask, enjoying this childish game with her old mentor.

"Alright, I'll bite. What's the good news?"

"You get time with me on this journey."

"Yeah? Alright." Alone with Xena... yeah, he could live with that.

"You don't want to know the bad news?"

"Nope. That's all the news I need to hear."

"Aww, come on, Ares. Play the game."

He sighed deeply. "Alright. What's the bad news?"

"You get to spend time with me as a mortal. A **mortal**, Ares."

Zeus tried very hard not to laugh at the stunned look on his son's face. It was like he had been slapped in the face with a dead fish. He watched his daughter's face as well, as the news was delivered. While she was shocked, she at least had a better expression than her brother.

Ares turned to his father. "She's kidding, right?" Zeus remained silent. "Right?" Still no answer. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. No way. Look for someone else." The disapproving look in his father's eye told him that he was cornered. Whether he liked it or not, he was going... as a mortal.

* * * * *

Xena shifted over to the elder god. "I can understand Ares going, but why Aphrodite? No that her presence is not appreciated, but..."

"I could easily say that the decisions of the gods are none of your business, but as your lives are involved here, perhaps I can make an exception." He bestowed a smile on these two women who

were risking everything in an endeavour they had been unwittingly dragged into.

"Ares has to go because he has caused this mess and should be involved in cleaning it up. Aphrodite, well my daughter has been underestimated in the past, perhaps it's because of her particular vocation, or perhaps because she appears frivolous and self-absorbed at times. Your journey is as much about getting the Chakram to the Temple as it is about these two learning a little humility and self-worth."

Zeus looked at his two children with warm eyes. "I think Aphrodite will be fine. Give her a chance to help. The journey should be relatively easy and the Temple is up this path on that far peak." He pointed a majestic finger up the path to a distant crag, the spires barely visible in the surrounding mist. "There is not much left in the day and there is a small village a couple of candlemarks away."

"Ares, Aphrodite." The two immortals came when their father beckoned. "Anything you want before you begin this journey?" Ares stared with a scowl on his face and Aphrodite... well she didn't quite know what to think. Zeus drew his daughter aside. "Daughter, you are going as a mortal, that's all there is to it."

"But, but..."

"I think you may need something more practical here. Perhaps a weapon or two?"

A weapon? When did this get so deadly? Confused, she changed her clothing to her warm hunting gear, a long bow in her hand with two quivers of arrows. Her long platinum blond hair was pulled back into a plait down her back and a warm fur cloak hung from her shoulders.

"Ahh, much better. Now I must say farewell. I will see you at the end of your journey." The goddess mutely nodded her head, still wondering why she was going at all. Zeus leaned in and whispered in her ear before placing a fatherly kiss on her cheek.

"Ares, come here." The tall god sauntered over to his father, dragging his feet like a naughty little boy. "Listen to me, no tricks. You understand me?" Zeus's stern voice alerted his son that he was serious. "When you get to the Temple there is a vessel inside there that contains the power that locks the Temple shut to immortals. You will need to destroy it for the barrier to be lifted."

Zeus could nearly see the wheels turning in the God of War's mind. "Don't you even think about it, Ares. You have tried this ruse twice and both times it failed. Don't be foolish to try it again." His eyes narrowed, trying to instil a bit of fear into his impetuous son.

Zeus turned to face the two remaining figures awaiting him. Raising his hands to the sky, lightening sparks flickered across his fingers, arcing across the distance to join together. He closed his eyes and muttered. Glowing auras surrounded Ares and Aphrodite, pulsing in intensity and slowly drawing strength from them. Driven to the ground, both young gods gasped for breath as their immortal life force was taken away, leaving them weak and panting on the ground.

Xena stepped in to help Aphrodite to her feet, leaving Ares to get himself up. "How do you mortals do this?" Aphrodite had been mortal for just moments and she already hated it.

"Well, you just live with it, I suppose." What could one say? You were born mortal and you died mortal. It's not every day you got the chance to be a god.

"Bummer..."

"Hey, a little hand over here." Ares struggled to get to his feet. Xena gave him a cursory glance and went back to helping the young goddess.

* * * * *

Bonehead, Xena?

Yeah, well, he was being a pain in the ass. Don't forget he's the one that caused all this.

Hmmm.... Gabrielle directed her frustration towards the dethroned god. Is he going to whine all the way there? I may be tempted to kick him off the side of the mountain.

I hope not. I may beat you to it.

* * * * *

As Zeus had promised, the road was easily traversable and they eventually made it to the small village just before sundown. Xena had to constantly slow down for the two immortals who struggled with walking such a long distance. It was going to be a long, long trip...

"A bow, Aphrodite?" Xena had never thought about the goddess actually ever using a weapon.

"Swords, knives and stuff are too sharp for me. I could cut myself or something."

"Well, that is the point of them you know."

"That's why we have warriors like you."

"Hey, what about me?" A slightly miffed voice could be heard behind them.

"Exactly. What about you?" Xena couldn't help the jibe at Ares' expense.

"So, do you actually ever get the chance to use it?"

"Not really, no, but I did teach Cupid to shoot his arrows."

"Yeah," Ares snorted, "The arrows of luurve."

"Hey, that's my Cupie you're talking about there. Watch it!"

"What's he gonna do? Shoot me with his iddy-biddy arrows? Big threat there."

"Well, I'm not carrying any 'arrows of luurve' and your butt is no longer arrow-proof. Don't make me use you for target practice."

Oh dear, we're going on a life and death journey with a couple of kids...

* * * * *

It took a little prompting to get her two companions through the door of the inn, but after a couple of drinks they began to loosen up.

Xena and Gabrielle sat back, relaxed in the warrior's body, watching as the two gods ate and drank for the first time, unaware of the side effects of alcohol. As the night wore on, they started giggling, finding the smallest thing amusing.

Well, this was worth the price of admission. Gabrielle couldn't help but laugh at their antics.

Shhhh.... Xena watched amusedly, deciding these two had just about had enough for the night.

Ares slowly slid off the bench, landing on his ass on the floor, sending Aphrodite into a new round of raucous laughter and finger pointing at her brother sprawled out below her.

"Now, now children. You've had enough for tonight." She would have got more response out of Marina than she was getting from these two. Xena spared a quiet thought for her absent daughter, wishing she was home with her.

"Aw, Xena. No fair. It's our first night as mortals. I'm not finished yet." Xena's eyebrows disappeared into her hairline as Ares sat there with a pout on his lips. A pout! It looked so incongruous on the God of War.

"Oh, yes you are. Come one, time for bed."

"Bed?" Aphrodite's eyes lit up. "That sounds good." She looked around for a suitable bed companion, disappointed that the room came up sadly lacking. Her eyes fell on the woman helping her up.

"Oh, no. Don't even think about it." It took all of Gabrielle's willpower to stop herself from taking control of Xena's hand and slugging the woman.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm barely holding Gabrielle off from hitting you, that's why."

"Oh." She was suitably chastised and went along meekly with the warrior.

"Hey! What about me?"

Xena turned and looked at Ares sprawled out on the floor, a large mug in one hand and a foamy white moustache plastered on his cheerfully inebriated face. She shook her head and assisted the goddess to her room, leaving the drunken god on the floor where he fell.

* * * * *

"Xena, you call this a bed?"

"For a small country inn, yes I do."

"You expect me to lie on that?" Aphrodite thought Xena had lost her mind.

"No, I expect you to sleep on that."

"Sleep? That is so croaty, Xena. It's... it's... like so rumped. Sweaty, smelly men have slept on that."

Xena pushed the swaying goddess to the mattress, lifting her legs up. "And you'll live. Now you're mortal, Aphrodite, you have to sleep. Close your eyes..." Xena found a spare blanket and tucked it around her young charge. "Let your body relax. Wipe all thoughts from your mind and let it wander." She could see the goddess start to relax as the alcohol started to take effect. "That's it, just relax and let yourself drift off."

When she was fully asleep, Xena tiptoed out of the room, gently closing the door on her way out.

Well, let's go and collect the other one.

Couldn't we just leave him face down in the dirt?

Hmmm, nice thought, but we need him in some sort of shape tomorrow for the trek.

Damn, I rather liked that image.

Sure enough, Ares was just where they had left him minutes before, unable to find his legs to stand.

"C'mon Ares." Xena struggled to pick up the dead weight as Ares resisted her attempts to lift

him. "Damn, why do these gods have to be so heavy?"

"I knew you liked me, Xena." His alcoholic breath blew over her face, the stench nearly causing her to lose her dinner. Xena grabbed the half-full mug still in his hand, slamming it down on the table.

"Hey! I was still drinking that!"

"Not any more, Ares. Time for bed." His face lit up at the thought of he and Xena in the same bed. "You can forget that thought right now."

"How did you know? Are you a mind reader, or someth'n." His words started to slur as the alcohol made him sleepy.

"I don't need to be a mind reader to know what you're thinking, Ares." She managed to get herself under his armpit and manhandled him up the stairs to his room. Unlike Aphrodite, Xena grabbed his boots and yanked them off and roughly covered him with a blanket before leaving the room.

Now that the kids are tucked in...

Well, what do we do now?

Hmmmm...

That particular thought needed no interpretation for Gabrielle. *Yeah, me too. What do you think? Can we?*

Why not? I had a really nice dream the other day and you weren't there, but it seemed very real to me.

You did? When was this?

That first night after you left the island.

No, it wasn't possible, was it? Gabrielle hesitantly asked, *What was it about?*

We were in a meadow in the shadows...

Gabrielle continued the image, *And you led me out into the sun to a mound of grass.*

Xena hesitantly filled in more of the picture. *And you had trouble getting my tunic off.*

This is really, really strange. *And afterwards you showed me your back and your scars were gone.*

Two minds took time to get over the shock of their mutual dream. *What is going on here?*

I have absolutely no idea, but if it worked once, it may work again. You want to try?

Hey, if it's gonna keep you calm and relaxed, well then I'm all for it.

Calm and relaxed? Then I'm not doing it right. Later perhaps.

Gabrielle couldn't help but chuckle at her partner's easy banter. A lover to the end...

* * * * *

Chapter 12

Xena made herself comfortable on the bed. *So, Gabrielle, what are you in the mood for?*

Besides the obvious, you mean?

Xena's intellectual eyebrow rose in question. *I was thinking more the where than the who at this point.*

Ohhh.... You know what I really miss? A nice big, fluffy bed and perhaps a warm fire would be nice. Oh, and if I'm ordering, a bath for two.

Oh, yeah... I've forgotten what that feels like.

Speaking of which, your mom's inn is very nice, Xena.

Yeah? It's been so long since I've seen it. How is my mom?

She's looking well, although a little tired.

How did she take the news?

At first she thought I was lying, but one look at Marina cured that. She nearly fell off her chair.

Xena chuckled. *I bet she did. Marina sort of looks like me, doesn't she?*

A bit? Xena, your mom thought she'd seen a ghost. I think it was what they both needed though, a piece of family to keep them both grounded. Oh, before I forget - it seems your daughter picked up an egg on the island and has taken to mothering it.

An egg?

Hmmm... I don't know what's in it but it's pretty big, about double the size of a duck's egg, and it's brown in colour. Any ideas? I suppose we'll find out when we get back.

Xena stopped herself from thinking anything. She nearly let slip "if" we get back. Gabrielle picked up on the silence and tried not to think the same thought.

I told her she had to look after it until you got back, then she had to ask you if she could keep it. I have a feeling that whatever is inside is going to be a surprise.

Yeah, I only hope she doesn't end up with a hydra or something equally hazardous.

Oh, I hadn't thought of that. I was thinking more of a goose or perhaps a lizard.

Gabrielle, it's an island of the Gods. I think a goose is pretty boring for them.

So, we could come home to find your daughter eaten and the inn flattened by whatever is in that egg, eh?

At the very least... And my mom would be standing in the ruins trying to bat it away with her broom. They both chuckled at the amusing image.

But, for the moment let's just worry about us. Now, just relax, and think of a nice hot bath for two, a warm fire and me wrapped around you.

Oh yeeaaahhh...

* * * * *

It was dark, but her nose picked up the smell of wood smoke, a nice fragrant aroma permeating the air. Xena could feel the warm water gently lapping at her body and smooth skin resting against her chest. She was loathe to open her eyes at present as she was enjoying what her other senses were relaying to her brain. A gentle stroking drew her attention to a small hand slowly running down her thigh, idly caressing the skin without much thought or direction.

A smile crossed her face in response to the tingles left in the wake of those nimble fingers, and her hands twitched in anticipation of reciprocating the pleasure. Unable to stop herself any longer, Xena opened her eyes and peered over her lover's shoulder, watching as her own hands came up to claim the skin in front of her. Delighted at the whispered gasp she drew from Gabrielle, she continued her gentle roaming.

She scooped up hands full of water and poured it over her partner's skin, letting it cascade down the tanned flesh and watching it stop at twin points before gravity finally allowed the drops to fall. She repeated the action several times, each time watching the drops stop for a moment before falling back into the cooling water. Xena licked her lips in anticipation, as she knew her

tongue would be following that same path very soon.

Gabrielle sat quietly, allowing her warrior to do whatever she wanted. The water felt nice gliding over her, and she almost giggled at the tickling sensation where the water left her skin. She looked up over her shoulder to the waiting blue eyes, full of expectation, vibrantly glowing in the candlelight. Emotions rich in colour and depth passed between them, spanning time older than the few meagre weeks they had known each other.

As Xena's hands slowly caressed her, Gabrielle reached up, cupping a hand behind her head and pulling her partner down for a slow, sweet kiss.

Xena looked into familiar eyes, coloured amber in the reflected flames from the fire, knowing that deep down inside her, there was a core that belonged to this woman, and only her. She wanted this particular dream to last into the early hours, to make love to her partner in as many and varied ways as she could. She would catalogue every sound, taste, touch, smell and image in her mind, saving them for the dark days ahead, for she knew she was going to be tested. Even though the darkness would never touch that part of her that belonged to Gabrielle, she had reservations about the rest of her tortured soul.

Xena glanced over to the window, seeing the darkness lurking outside. It battered the glass, looking for a way in, but so far the barrier held. She turned her attention back to the woman in her arms, closing her eyes once more and feeling the firm skin under the rough pads of her fingers. The different textures teased and tantalized her, feeding her fevered imagination with images that had been burned into it from the moment she had seen her little blonde on the slaver's block back in Rome.

What a journey it had been. From that tentative first step together until today, where they could so freely give and take without a single word of encouragement, knowing exactly what the other needed. And yet there was still so much more to discover. Xena doubted she would ever find out everything about her enigmatic partner in this lifetime or the next.

Xena nudged Gabrielle forward then eased herself out of the water, letting the thin film of liquid slide down her body to the pool below. She looked down to find aroused green eyes, slowly darkening to a deep emerald, gliding over her skin. She didn't know if it was the cooling air or the heated gaze, but she felt her own skin pebble at the thought of what Gabrielle was about to do to her.

"Come on." Xena extended a hand down to help the smaller woman out of the bath, both standing on the cold floor as the older woman reached for a dry towel. Using the cloth was just too slow for Xena's liking. She handed over the towel to Gabrielle, then fell to her knees, bringing the damp body closer to her. Lips and tongue made quick work of the moisture, often labouring on when the skin was dry. Not that either of them noticed.

Xena looked up from her work to see Gabrielle's face in rapture: eyes closed, mouth open in a silent cry and her features set in a look of hedonistic pleasure. She continued her ministrations, trying to watch the fleeting emotions crossing her partner's face. Small fingers buried themselves

in her hair, trying to pull her even closer to where Gabrielle wanted her.

"Not here." Xena's voice rose over the crackling of the fire and the distant roar of the darkness outside. She stood and grabbed both of Gabrielle's hands, gently guiding her towards the bed. Perched on the edge of the mattress, Xena pulled her partner into an embrace, her long arms encircling the slim waist. She laid her cheek on the well-toned abdomen, breathing in a scent she knew belonged to Gabrielle and Gabrielle alone. She was happy.

Looking up into that young face that held so much joy in her life, she whispered, "I love you." She felt her eyes mist over as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her.

A melodious voice, thick with its own emotion, answered, "And I love you." There was silence for a moment. "And after you have taken me back to Potadeia, I want you to take me home, to our family. Keep that in your heart, Xena. You have so much more to fight for now, remember that."

"Yes, I do... my bard."

"Yes, you do... my warrior."

They exchanged smiles, each studying the other's face. As if committing to memory every loving detail, they took in the arch of the eyebrow, the laugh lines dancing around the eyes, the elegant curve of the lips, the softness of the skin and the deep abiding love in their eyes, each a mirror of the other. Long moments were spent in just being. No words were necessary; they spoke with their hearts and their minds.

Gabrielle resisted Xena's pull and pushed her partner down onto the mattress, shifting her to a more comfortable position. Straddling the older woman, she lowered herself until their bodies met. Long, gentle kisses seemed appropriate and they were both content to keep it slow.

Xena's wandering hands played lightly across Gabrielle's back, creating a lassitude which was slowly eating at her reserves. Gabrielle tried to shake off the sleepiness, not wanting to waste a moment of their time together. Her lips moved, kissing slowly down her lover's neck and finding all those secret points that would drive her partner wild. She playfully nipped and licked the tendons that flexed with every movement of her head, not stopping her journey until she reached the base of the throat. Gabrielle knew she had Xena where she wanted her when long fingers buried themselves in her hair, massaging her scalp and trying to draw her down further.

She ignored Xena's silent pleas, working on the small erogenous zone that would stimulate her warrior's libido. Slowly and methodically she teased, nipped, toyed and licked until she could feel Xena move beneath her, unable to stay still any longer. Before she ended up on her back herself, the young blonde moved her attentions elsewhere. When those fingers in her hair became agitated and more demanding, she knew she had made the right decision.

Gabrielle knew enough about her partner's body to slowly and teasingly draw her out, building the expectation until the older woman could stand it no longer. Xena had to insistently push her

tormentor to reach completion. Gabrielle lazily licked the damp skin, allowing Xena time to quietly float in that place of satiation and contentment while she revelled in the tactile sensations she was absorbing from the body below her. Gabrielle was in no hurry, taking pleasure from her warrior's enjoyment of what she could offer her.

Her mind drifted back to the early days of her slavery, where every day was one more lesson in the harshness of life. How different sex and love could be - from the taking of one's soul to the giving of one's heart. All it had taken was the right teacher.

She felt a rumbling in the chest she was lying on and looked up. As expected, those blue pools were staring back at her, filled with peace and love. "Let it go, Gabrielle." Xena whispered. "It's in the past. I'm your teacher now."

What the...?

"What the... indeed."

Huh? Xena watched patiently as Gabrielle put the pieces together. Of course, she had forgotten that they spoke in thought now. *No more secrets, eh Xena?*

"No, Gabrielle, no more secrets."

The smaller woman rested her chin on Xena's chest, idly watching her partner. A large hand cupped her cheek, gently stroking the curved plane in a loving gesture. A sweet smile crossed Gabrielle's lips, causing her skin to wrinkle at the bridge of her nose. It was such an adorable look that Xena burst out laughing, grabbing the young woman and rolling her over.

"Now," she whispered, "Let's see what I can teach you."

* * * * *

Some time later Gabrielle's mind murmured, *Be careful what you wish for, Gabrielle...* Xena had taken her to the Elysian Fields and back. *Wow!*

"I'm glad you're happy, Gabrielle." Xena turned to her little blonde, a lascivious grin crossing her face. "Hmmm..."

"Will you stop that!"

"Sorry. It just pops into my head."

"Hades, Xena. Are you trying to kill me, or something? I feel like I've melted into the mattress."

Gabrielle looked over to the woman lying next to her to see a sexy little half-smile crossing her

lips. She closed her eyes, trying to get herself under control. She thought that after the woman had exhausted her they would now get some rest. She opened her eyes and looked over again. Xena still had that disgusting smile on her face, even broader than before. In fact, the invitation had extended to her eyes. *Oh, sweet Aphrodite!* Speaking of whom, she was glad she wasn't watching this particular dream...

"Cut that out!"

"Why?"

"I'm exhausted, you're exhausted."

"Says who?"

"Me. I say so." Gabrielle looked over to see that sexy smile replaced by a sexy pout, sad puppy eyes pleading her case. *Damn!*

"Oh, Gods!" *Awww... Who needs sleep anyway?*

"That's my girl." Xena pounced on her exhausted prey and proceeded to carry out her wish for the evening.

* * * * *

The next morning, saw four grumpy people trying to get three grumpy bodies into some form of readiness for the day's hike. Not that Xena or Gabrielle would trade their night together for anything. The body was rested but their minds were on edge from lack of sleep.

I told you we should have gotten some sleep.

Cut it out, you had fun as I recall.

I certainly did, and mentally my body is a wreck, but we need to be on guard today, Xena. These two are going to end up off a cliff, I just know it. One wrong word and I'm gonna toss them myself.

Who got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, then?

Not me. I didn't get up at all. You wouldn't let me.

Tsk, tsk. You are a grumpy one this morning, aren't you?

Don't you start...

They looked over at the two gods, heads in hands, feeling sorry for them as they battled their first mortal hangover. Xena just couldn't help herself and slapped her palms down on the wooden table and raised her voice. "OK then. Who wants breakfast?"

Blood shot eyes looked up beseechingly as stomachs roiled at the thought. Aphrodite held her face between her palms as if to stop her head from ringing and Ares just threw up, no longer able to stop his unsettled stomach from reacting.

"Ewww, what is that smell?" The goddess started smelling her clothes, her armpit, Xena and finally her brother. She shifted up to the other end of the bench, getting as much space between her and the stench emanating from the God of War. Ares looked up with agonised eyes, not quite sure what was happening with his body.

"Hang on a minute." Xena disappeared for a short time, returning with a mug of something that looked and smelled distinctly unappetising. "Drink this."

Ares stuck his nose in it. "Hades, what is that?! It smells like my uncle's stables, and those flying horses can stink up the place pretty good."

"Just drink it."

"No. You trying to kill me or something?"

"Ares, if I wanted to do that, I'd find far more satisfying ways to do it than poison you. This will help with the hangover."

He didn't quite believe Xena but, hey, he couldn't feel any worse. One sip made him change his mind. Xena put her hand on the bottom of the mug, forcing it up into his mouth before he could stop her. He could hear his stomach gurgling and he prayed that it would all stay down, not wanting to have that disgusting taste in his mouth again.

"How about you two go and wash up before we leave?" They looked at her like she had spoken a foreign language. "Go! Have a bath. Wash yourselves. Get rid of that smell. I'm not gonna walk all day that and have that odour hanging round me."

Ares' brows drew together. "I'm a man. I'm supposed to smell manly."

Xena moved right up to his face. "Manly, yes, stinking and covered in vomit, no. Go and wash or, so help me, I'll let Gabrielle loose on you and she won't be gentle." She tried very, very hard to keep a straight face as Ares had a look of terror in his eyes, the thought of the young blonde washing him to within an inch of his life scaring the life out of him.

"We will meet back here in one candlemark ready to go." The two gods dragged themselves upstairs, dreading the thought of one more mortal habit to get used to.

What did I do to deserve this, Xena? Using me as a threat?

Hey, it worked, didn't it?

At the rate you're going, I'll be lucky if my own parents talk to me.

Nah, I'll tell them that you're a pussycat in bed.

Don't you dare!!

C'mon, while they're pulling themselves together, let's get to the market and gather some supplies. With that thought, Xena strolled out of the inn, throwing a couple of extra coins on the table to cover the cleanup of the floor.

Chapter 13

The market was pretty small, but then again it was a pretty small village. Xena wandered through the half a dozen stalls, picking up some fresh fruit and vegetables, a couple of precious herbs, a pot and some dried meat.

"So, how's the hunting around here?" She decided to make some polite conversation with the fruit vendor to while away the time before collecting her errand gods. *Xena, warrior babysitter... hehe.*

"Not good," the elderly merchant replied. His aged eyes scanned up and down the tall woman, clad in leather and wool. He only wished he was thirty years younger as he took in the magnificent body on display in front of him. *What a woman!*

Xena glanced over at him, noticing the lustful gleam in his eyes. Mentally, she rolled her eyes. *Not another one...*

"There's some small game, which should do for your purposes, but the bigger game moved out of the area years ago."

"Why is that?"

"It's been steadily getting colder here, but there's a new warlord in the area and he's probably hunted out what was left."

"Get much trouble from him?"

The old man just shrugged. Xena knew what that meant. He would periodically come to call and you paid up or else. After all, that's what she used to do all those years ago.

Xena, don't go there, alright?

"What's his name?"

"Cebraxis."

"Rough time, eh? Sorry to hear that. What's the road up ahead like?"

"Depends on how far you want to go. It's pretty flat to the next couple of villages. After that, it steadily climbs up into the mountains to an abandoned Temple at the end."

"Temple?" Xena already knew the answer, but she was curious about what the locals knew. She picked up one of the merchant's apples and tossed him a coin. The apple was a little bitter but it was fresh, forcing her to wipe herself as the juice dribbled down her chin.

"Pretty old. Hasn't been used for as long as I can remember. Story around here is that it used to be a temple to the local god, Kal, but it now seems to be a temple to the local wildlife."

"Kal?"

"Used to be the God of War around here. Folks don't pray much any more. Been let down too many times by them. Why bother?"

Xena tried not to smirk. If only her companions could hear this man talk. Their hair would stand up on end!

"Why not, indeed? So, how far is it to, say, the Temple?"

"Why, you interested in going there?" Xena could hear the suspiciousness in the vendor's voice. *Oops.*

"No, just wanted to know in case we go too far. We may need to seek shelter."

"Oh. It's about a day and a half to the next village then the path separates. The lower path goes to the second village about another couple of days on. The upper path leads to the Temple, about two to three days' travel. After that, it's wild country."

"Well, thank you merchant for your valuable information." Xena turned away to head back to the inn.

"You're welcome, young woman." He smiled as she left, his eyes travelling down to watch the sexy swagger of her walk, her hips swaying from side to side in a most enticing manner. He sighed and turned away to attend to his wares, however his smile never left his face for the rest of the day.

* * * * *

What's on your mind, Xena?

We'll have to keep an eye out for that warlord, Gabrielle. I want to avoid any fights if we can help it.

The warrior looked up, watching a wagon pull away out of the village, heading up the road they would be taking later. Her attention was drawn to a young woman sitting in the back.

Xena, stop that!

What?

Stop looking at that woman.

Why? You're not jealous, are you?

Me? Jealous? Of course not. A few moments passed. Yeah.

You have absolutely nothing to worry about.

Then why are you still looking? Gabrielle's possessiveness was adorable.

Well, look at her.

I don't want to look at her.

Just look, Gabrielle. Does she look familiar to you?

No. I'm not the one interested in her.

There may be a reason for that. Just look.

Gabrielle did what her partner asked and looked. The girl was pretty enough, but nothing special grabbed her attention, except for the long blonde hair.

Nope, sorry.

She looks like you.

Gabrielle looked again and could only see a very mild resemblance. She looked to her partner.
You think so? I can't see it.

Yes, I do. Very much so.

Oh. Xena could feel her partner's hurt. Now you listen to me. I don't care about her, OK? It's you that I love and adore. She couldn't help it as her mind added, Mush, Xena. You are becoming a

complete mushball.

Awww... that is sooo sweet. Thank you for putting up with my insecurity, Xena.

Xena could feel the blush creep up her face. *You're welcome, and if you tell anyone about this I'll deny it strenuously.*

Your secret is safe with me.

Fine. Now let's collect the others and get this fiasco underway.

* * * * *

Marina awoke in a nice, soft, sweet smelling bed in grandma's inn. She expectantly looked around in the hope of finding mama and Gabby. There was silence; there would be no family today. A tiny squark drew her attention to the egg resting in its cloth nest next to her. She leaned over to watch it, the shell shifting in its safe haven. Tiny cracks appeared, becoming bigger as the hard covering pushed up and a tiny snout appeared.

"Eep! Eep!" the creature inside cried in distress.

Marina's eyes lit up at this surprise, the happiness spreading to her face, her lips spread into an excited grin. Tiny fingers slowly pulled away the broken shell, revealing more and more of what was inside.

Bright golden eyes looked up expectantly to the young girl. "Eep!"

"Cool!"

* * * * *

Aphrodite and Ares met downstairs, newly scrubbed and looking very grumpy. Ares' jacket was damp but at least the stain had been removed and smelling a lot better. Xena stood and watched them as they fussed about themselves. "Here is some food, store it in your packs." She had split the food stores so that they all carried some.

Xena, why is it they looked like they swallowed cow patties?

Xena snorted, coughing to try and cover up the smirk on her face. *Stop that!*

"Ready?"

The look on the gods' faces said it all. Aphrodite was wishing for a bed with a dozen male companions, all helping to ease her tension, while Ares wanted to just kill something, or perhaps

someone by the look he was giving her.

Without another word, Xena picked up her pack and left the building, the two siblings tagging along behind her. She sighed and took the first step along the path of what was going to be a difficult few days.

* * * * *

Gabrielle, I'm going to try to get some sleep. You want to take over?

Sleep? I didn't think you were tired.

There was a moment of hesitation. *From now on, one of us has to be conscious at all times. Xena sensed the bolt of fear coming from her partner. It's just a precaution, that's all. I'll get some rest and then you get some rest.*

Her spirit reached out to Gabrielle, surrounding her in comfort. *It will be fine. I'm here. I'll try to relax and let my body go. Try to grab it and take the limbs over as your own.*

Do you want to lie down to try this in case you fall?

"OK everyone, take a break." Xena moved away quietly, finding a solitary spot and sat down. She applied her mind to relaxing her body, letting her limbs go limp, and drawing herself into her mind, preparing for sleep.

Gabrielle, tried to expand her thought, willing herself to pick up Xena's hands. It took several attempts before she figured out how to apply her thought to achieve actual movement. She pushed the body to stand, swaying unsteadily until equilibrium was restored.

It was the strangest sensation. She could feel the breeze on her skin and feel the air move in and out of her lungs, but it was not her body. *Xena?* She could not consciously feel her warrior's presence like before, but it was a warm fuzziness that she would associate with her essence in rest.

Gabrielle looked over to the two gods as they studied her quizzically. She staggered over, her gait unsteady and clumsy on such long legs, making her feel like she was walking on stilts. She flexed the muscles under her control and could feel them respond readily. Maybe she'd better start doing some exercises when she got home.

"What's the matter with you?" Aphrodite thought she had been sneaking a drink behind the bushes.

"Nothing." Ares' eyes narrowed at the different timbre of Xena's voice.

"Alright. What's going on here? Xena, are you in there?"

Aphrodite stood up and walked over, grabbing Xena's chin and looking into her eyes. "Gabby?"

Gabby? When did it go from 'hey you' to Gabby?? She really did like Aphrodite and felt she could live with that.

"You got it."

"Awww, Hades. Why did you have to go and do that?" Ares glared at her.

"Hey, she suggested it. It's not my fault." Xena's face broke out in a wicked grin, the bridge of her nose wrinkling up in a very un-Xena-like fashion. "In fact, it's yours."

Gabrielle turned back to Aphrodite, "She's taking a rest. I'm just stepping in for a while."

"Pretty strange, huh?"

"Tell me about it."

"So, Gabrielle, how does it feel to be in charge of all of this?" Ares swept his hand down Xena's body in illustration. She knew he was jealous. She could tell by the look of disgust on his face.

"Pretty good, Ares. Not that you'll ever know." Electric blue eyes turned in his direction and gave him a wink, a slow, sweet smile gracing those curvaceous lips.

He turned away, trying not to look hurt. All he had ever wanted was this woman and the small blonde had beaten him to it. Damn her!

"C'mon let's get started. The sooner we get to the Temple, the sooner you guys are back on Mount Olympus." *And out of our hair...*

Ares strutted up to Gabrielle, looking into pale blue eyes and muttered, "Don't get too used to it, blondie. It's only temporary. Then you're gonna have to answer to me."

Aphrodite stepped in before it deteriorated into a fistfight. "Ar, stop this. You know you can't do that. Besides, I kinda like her, you know?"

The blonde looked over to the goddess who looked back at her with... something. *Oh no.* With the God of War breathing down her neck, it would be suicide not to have the Goddess of Love in her corner. She only hoped that Aphrodite didn't lose sight of the fact that her heart was already taken.

* * * * *

"So, Aphrodite, what do you do with yourself when you're not meddling in people's love lives?"

"Hey there, miss. I fill my days."

"Not much else, then?"

Nicely manicured fingernails landed on a well-endowed chest in mock hurt, Aphrodite's face twisting into a grimace. "Who put a stick up your butt then, Miss Grumpy? Why are you picking on me? What did I do to deserve that?"

Gabrielle was silent for a moment, sighing in regret. "Sorry, I'm just on edge, that's all."

"Aren't we all?"

"So, can you use this thing?" Gabrielle pointed at the bow.

"Exsqueeze me! Artie taught me a thing or two. I can manage if I have to, but I'm not keen on killing things. The image, you know??" Aphrodite's nose wrinkled up in distaste.

"Yeah, I know. I'm the same, but Xena says there are times where you have no choice. I hope I don't have to find out."

"Yeah, bummer."

"So, what's with leather boy?"

"Leather boy?"

"Your brother."

"Ah, well, you're moving in on his gal, you see. He's been pining after her for a long, long time, then you step in and, wham! He's not in the picture any more. He may be a god, but he still thinks like a man." The goddess chuckled at the expense of her brother. "He knows she likes all that dark stuff and he just feeds into that. Problem is, he sometimes gets too sneaky for his own good."

"Well, this was pretty stupid."

"Not one of his better moments."

"What about you? No one you're pining for?"

"The Goddess of Love pines for no one." She smiled then sighed. "Sometimes I wish I could, you know? My love can be fleeting and it can be deep, but that's what love is all about, isn't it? It can be nothing and it can be everything."

"That's pretty deep thinking." Gabrielle glanced across to her companion, looking at her with fresh eyes. Perhaps the goddess wasn't as shallow as she presented herself.

"But, hey, why let love stand in the way of a good roll in the bed sheets?"

Then again...

Chapter 14

Xena was now awake and back in control of her own body, and Gabrielle was safely asleep. She could feel the evil slowly getting stronger with every step along the path towards the Temple. It knew it was coming home.

She tried to protect her partner from the brunt of the attack, wrapping herself around the core of her partner's spirit. Even though Gabrielle wanted to help, she was going to spare her young partner as much of the pain and desolation as she could. She could feel it worming its way into her own darkness, stirring long forgotten memories of past campaigns and the joy and lust for conquest. Memories she thought she had left far behind.

Xena could sense Ares behind her but she chose to ignore him. Her anger still stirred within her, and she suspected the entity was feeding off that dark emotion. He picked up the pace until he was along side her. Still she said nothing.

"Xena." She refused to reply.

He grabbed her arm and they stopped dead, Aphrodite nearly running into the back of her brother. Angry glares passed between God and disciple. The goddess quickly scampered away, not wanting to get caught in the middle of the angry confrontation. Xena's eyes looked to the immortal's hand then rose to his face. "Let go." Her voice had dropped to a deadly whisper.

"No. Talk to me."

"Why should I?"

"Because you owe me that." "I owe you nothing, Ares."

"After all that I gave you?"

Xena swiftly grabbed his lapels and slammed him back against a tree trunk. "You gave me? How arrogant can you be? What did you ever give me that you didn't want something in return?"

"You came to me, as I recall, all those years ago."

"Even when it was about me, Ares, it was always about what you could get in return. Everything

came at a price, everything! You have never done an unselfish thing in your whole damn immortal life! Look what you've done to us because of your selfishness. You know very well that the chances of Gabrielle and I coming out of this alive are slim at best."

"You could have chosen not to take the Chakram, you know?"

Xena nearly laughed hysterically. "You're kidding, right? I had **no** choice. You took my choices away from me. I was going home with my family and you wouldn't even let me do that. I'm nearly tempted to let this evil take me over so that I can be rid of you."

A slim dagger slid silently out of its sheath in her boot, finding its way to Ares' throat. "Or maybe I should just be rid of you now."

The War God's adam's apple bobbed several times, a bead of sweat trickling down his temple as he awaited Xena's next move. She gently traced the blade across his throat in imitation of the genuine act, feeling the slight tremble in his body. *It would be so easy...*

Her darkness rose up looking for a kill, but she resisted the urge. Breathing deeply, she re-sheathed the blade, saving it for another day when she had more control over her dark side.

Aphrodite stood back, letting the confrontation play itself out, glad that Xena had seen reason. Not that she could blame her. She was secretly very disappointed with her brother for so shamelessly manipulating the poor woman to get what he wanted, and she silently cheered Xena on for outsmarting him again. Besides, they were her project, not his. It would have been a hard thing to tell her father that he would need to look for a new God of War.

Xena stepped back and walked away, grabbing a waterskin and sitting down, leaning against a nearby tree. Her stomach swirled with pent-up emotion, making her feel slightly ill at the thought of what had nearly happened. She grabbed her head in her hands, trying to stop the dizziness that assaulted her.

Gabrielle awoke to the dark wash that swept over her. It nearly felt like she was back on the boat again, with a swaying that left her feeling ill. *What? Xena?*

Go back to sleep, Gabrielle.

She could hear the defeat in Xena's voice. *What's wrong?*

Nothing. Xena sounded flat and emotionless. *Nothing's wrong. Go back to sleep.*

Not until you tell me what's going on.

She mentally sighed. *Not much. I nearly killed Ares, that's all.*

If Gabrielle had a hairline, her eyebrows would have disappeared into them. *You what?*

Never mind. It's over now.

No, you tell me. You just don't go trying to kill someone without reason.

How do you know, eh? How do you know? You don't know me at all! Xena's anger flared again, this time at the one person who didn't deserve it.

Hang on. Hang on. Where is this coming from?

Just leave me alone, alright? Just... arggh, never mind. Xena withdrew herself from her partner, finding some quiet corner of her mind to contemplate what nearly took place.

Gabrielle had nowhere to go. Xena had never talked to her like this, had never sounded so angry and disoriented. What could she do to mend this? Xena was content to sit back, so she wrestled control and took Xena's body over to Aphrodite.

"What just went on?"

It took the goddess a few moments to realize that the spirits had changed. "Ares pushed her and she pushed back. She drew a blade and held it to his neck. Gabby, I think it's getting to her. You're gonna have to watch her."

The young woman was beginning to realize that perhaps the greatest danger was not out in the wilderness but within Xena herself. She extended her senses toward her lover and could feel the roiling emotion there, dark and dangerous, swirling around with no solid form for the present. It had grown in strength just in the few candelmarks since leaving the village.

"How about we set up camp here tonight? I don't think any of us are up to travelling any more today. Can you see if you can find something for the pot tonight?" Blue eyes looked up in expectation, hoping the goddess could put her bow to some use. Hesitantly, she nodded and disappeared into the brush.

"Ares!" He looked over, not sure who he was talking to. Gabrielle could see the uncertainty in his eyes. "It's me, Gabrielle." She watched him relax at the news. "Can you get a fire started?" He pointed his finger but nothing happened. "The old fashioned way, Ares."

"How do I do that?"

"Oh, for goodness sake..." Gabrielle muttered under her breath. "Just collect some wood, OK?"
Gods...

* * * * *

"C'mon 'Ditie, you can do this. Artie taught you well. Just paint a target on those cute little bunny

rabbits," she murmured to herself, trying to build the confidence to actually shoot at something. The light was still good and she had no trouble seeing anything that came across her path. She nocked an arrow, slowly stepping through the undergrowth in search of prey. For about the hundredth time, she wished she had her godly powers then she could just snap up a meal, but then she wouldn't have needed to eat either. At least she wouldn't have to kill anything.

She pulled up, listening as Artemis had taught her, waiting for something to move. Several moments passed without success, and she continued her search. Half a candlemark passed before a target finally presented itself to her. *C'mon 'Ditie, do it! Just do it! Make Artie proud.* She hesitated and tried again. *We need to eat. Gabby is relying on you. C'mon, NOW!* She fired before her courage left her once again, closing her eyes so she didn't have to watch the arrow spit the rabbit. *Ewww...*

* * * * *

Gabrielle knew she was going to have to go looking for her partner. None of them knew what to do next and they needed Xena's expertise to set up camp. Aphrodite had turned up with a good size rabbit, tears rolling down her face. She understood the goddess's distress only too well.

Xena's body stayed at rest against a tree while Gabrielle went in search of the taller woman. *Xena?* She used the uneasiness as a guide and found her lover's spirit sitting in a dark corner, away from where she had resided earlier.

C'mon, we need you out there.

I don't know if I'm up to facing him right now, Gabrielle.

*I don't care about him, Xena. I care about you. I need you. **We** need you.*

She could hear the sigh in the older woman's thoughts. *Give me a moment.*

* * * * *

Xena again took control and a fire was quickly blazing away, chasing away the shadows that had begun to form. Without a word, she prepared the rabbit for Gabrielle who took over momentarily to combine the ingredients to make a nice hot rabbit stew.

Dinner was a sombre affair. Not a word was spoken, but eyes flickered from one companion to the next, waiting for Xena to say something. The tall warrior took out her sword and proceeded to sharpen it, the sound of the whetstone sliding down the blade breaking the silence. Several minutes passed before Xena finally spoke. "Why?"

Both gods looked up, wondering who the tall woman spoke to. Shadowed blue eyes looked over

to the God of War and repeated her question. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you steal the Chakram in the first place? Didn't you know it was going to be trouble? It's called the Chakram of Darkness, for crying out loud!" Xena's volume steadily rose, her anger getting the better of her.

Xena, calm down.

Gabrielle, stay out of this.

"I wanted it. End of story."

"There you go again. It's always about you, you, you. You are such an arrogant, pig-headed, self-centred..." Xena's sputtered in frustration. She felt a ghostly hand on her shoulder, the love of her partner flowing through her and restoring her calm. *I'm sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me lately.*

I do. It's that thing in you. It's making you mad.

I thought I had better control over myself than that.

That's what I'm here for.

Yes, you are, Xena replied with a hint of affection.

Her eyes focused on the man opposite her, returning from her inner reflection. She again asked, "Why?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Ares!" Aphrodite stepped in. "Enough of this. Just answer her question."

"It's none of her business."

"Oh, yes it is, Ares, very much my business. I want to know why I'm gonna die for this."

He picked up a stick and proceeded to poke the fire with it, watching as the end caught alight. He pulled it out and lifted it up, studying the small flame flickering in front of his face. His eyes returned to the face that had haunted him for so many of his waking hours.

"Kal was talking about finding someone to use this weapon. I just beat him to it, that's all. I was saving it for someone worthy enough to wield it."

"Me?"

He hesitated. "Maybe."

"I got some warlord wannabe to get it for me a long, long time ago. He thought it would get him into my good favour by doing so. What none of us knew then was the extent of the power within the Chakram. What a weak-minded fool he was."

"Boy, was Dad ever pissed off over having to clean that up." Aphrodite's body shivered over the close call that caused. "Anyway, he thought he'd made sure no one would ever find it." Her eyes wandered over to her brother. "But someone just couldn't help himself when he found out you were coming home."

"Why didn't you try to give it to me earlier?"

"Xena, you were a kid - a strong-willed, clever kid - but still a kid nonetheless. I thought I'd let you grow up a little before leading you to it."

"And knowing what you knew then, you were going to give it to me?"

"I knew you could take it. After all, you were my Chosen, not some run-of-the-mill hick warlord who couldn't scratch his butt if he had a map to it. You were smart, you were strong and you were single-minded in your thirst for power. You were just like me."

"I am NOTHING like you. Nothing." Xena wasn't sure whether she was trying to convince the God of War or herself with that statement. A gentle hand scratched her back, wisps of thought floating through her brain in comfort.

"So this weapon was for me all along?"

"Well, no, not back then but I was hoping someday to find someone who would be worthy of it. I knew from the moment you strode into my Temple and demanded to see me that you were special. Someone who could grab hold of the world and mould it into my image of it. We could have had it all, Xena, but that damn Roman spoiled it."

"Why didn't you just take the Chakram yourself?"

Ares stared into the heart of the fire, thinking for a moment before answering. "We saw what that power did to a mortal. Could you imagine what would have happened if one of us carried it? As much as I would like all that power, Xena, I would not be able to control it. Not even Zeus would consider trying to take it. That's why he hid it."

"And we're going to the Temple because..."

"We destroyed the carrier but not the Chakram. Zeus is hoping that it is vulnerable at the Temple."

"And I'm the unwitting carrier of this? What made you think I'd be any more successful than

anyone else?"

"I wanted you to have it all, Xena. You were my greatest pupil. I've never seen such a strong will. If anyone could fight it, you could."

"I think you've over-estimated my abilities there, Ares."

Not at all, Xena. I agree with him. If anyone could control this, you could.

Please, Gabrielle. One argument at a time.

"Stop trying to be so modest, Xena. You're the best and you know it."

"I'm trying to be humble here. Stop appealing to my ego." Eyes darkened to near black looked up at the vulnerable god sitting opposite her. "This is a risky game your father is playing, Ares. We may very well be taking this thing to the one place it wants to go. Did you ever think of that?"

"Yeah, but the other possibility is not much better. He is relying on your strength of will to get it there, Xena. Can you do that?"

She took in everything the God of War was telling her, trying to form some sort of plan that could be useful in this situation. Most of the outcomes led to one conclusion, one which was not good for both her and Gabrielle. She could feel the anxiety from her partner and steered the conversation away from its logical conclusion. "So who has been causing havoc while I've been away. Anyone special?"

"Oh, someone has come to my attention. She's pretty special too, but not in your league."

"Do I know her?"

"You two have met, but I don't think you would remember her."

"What's her name, so I know to steer clear of her."

"Callisto. She's my new Chosen, but I'd drop her in an instant if you would come back to me. She likes the macabre, but you had that special fire."

Xena felt that stirring in her blood that had drawn her to Ares all those years ago. The entity magnified the attraction, and she felt that pull all over again, but without the god's power, the thought was fleeting and left only a sad reminder of what she had been.

"It's not gonna happen, Ares. Especially now. If we, by some miracle, get out of this alive, we are through. Don't go coming to me for any favours, Ares."

"But, Xena..."

"No, this ends it. Go back to your other bimbo, what's-her-name. Let her kill and maim for you. I'm done."

Aphrodite sat quietly while Xena ranted and raved, giving Ares an earful. She silently cheered on the taller woman, glad to see someone finally putting him in his place. The only one who had ever done that was Zeus, but that was because Ares feared him. She glanced over to her brother, who looked suitably humbled, and knew that he understood her perfectly. He had overstepped the mark once too often and she meant what she said. Now she could get on with her business with them.

"Now, if you don't mind, it's time for sleep. Everyone get some rest. It'll be a long day tomorrow." *End of discussion.*

* * * * *

Are you OK?

No. Damn it, Gabrielle! Why does he always affect me like that?

Because he's an arrogant, self-righteous son of a...

Hey! No foul language out of that sweet mouth, please!

Am I right?

She sighed. Yeah, you're right. I gotta relax.

Well...

But we also need some sleep. You get some rest and I'll wake you in a few candlemarks to take over.

Oh...

Hey... I would love to, but I'm snapping at everyone. If we don't get some rest, I'm gonna start taking off heads.

OK. But Xena could hear the hurt in her partner's voice. Oh, Hades! Her soul reached out to its other half and entwined itself around it in comfort. I love you, you know that, but rest is more important at the moment. I have a feeling that something is going to happen tomorrow, and it's not gonna be good.

Chapter 15

Xena sat quietly, leaning against a tree, looking pensively into the heart of the blazing campfire. Azure eyes glittered in the reflected flame, hiding a mind in turmoil. Gabrielle was shifting restlessly in her mind, unable to settle in reaction to her own churning emotions. Sparing a quick glance over to her resting companions, Xena sighed deeply and lifted her face to the sky.

That looks like an athlete... Her mind couldn't help but play the game.

Nah, it's you, the hero. The soft burr echoed in her mind, bringing a smile to her face.

Go back to sleep, Gabrielle.

I can't. You won't let me.

Sorry. Images invaded her mind, bringing a pleasant tingle to her body. *Stop that!*

A far off chuckle tickled her senses. Another vivid scene played in her head and she let it unfold, letting the passion sweep through and cleanse her clean.

Do you remember, Xena? The voice, low, deep and full of want, whispered in her brain.

Oh yeah...

* * * * *

She had just finished her training for the day and was heading back inside for a long, hot bath. The house appeared deserted, the other slaves apparently having their evening meal. Walking along the corridor leading to the quieter part of the building that housed her quarters, a small hand came out and grabbed Xena's arm, pulling her into a darkened alcove.

Before she was able to react, her hands were full of a small blonde who seemed to have eight hands of her own. She barely had a hold on Gabrielle as she climbed up her body, desperately trying to reach her goal. The extra weight sent her slamming against the wall at a precarious angle. The small woman had knocked the wind out of her and she was gasping for air.

"Gabrielle, one moment," she whispered.

"No, now!" Her voice brooked no argument, and she proceeded to take what she had been waiting for all day.

"Someone might hear."

"I don't care. Let them find someone of their own." Her lips went back to their search, looking for those places that would make Xena react. Gabrielle was still discovering her lover's body, mentally cataloguing everything like a precious treasure map.

Xena's mind was playing mental catch up as her body flooded with sensations, wild and exciting feelings that simply swept her away. Whimpers escaped her mouth without permission as wave after wave of pure unadulterated passion swamped her. This mere slip of a girl had her begging for mercy in near-full view of anyone who would pass by, making her forget her own name.

She was beyond caring at this point as quicksilver fingers found her and tortured her mercilessly. A voice hoarse with passion, whispered in her ear, "I love you, Xena, but I have to have you now. You have been on my mind all day and now I have to repay you in kind."

Xena was not about to argue with the outcome of this sudden tryst. She only hoped that Antillia didn't walk past at that particular moment, not that she would have or could have stopped. Gabrielle had won this particular battle without so much as a skirmish. She had no defence against this onslaught and had to simply surrender to her lover's greater emotional strength.

The maelstrom of passion subsided as quickly as it began, leaving its two participants panting from exertion. Xena slowly let down her partner, straightening garments strewn in a fit of physical madness. They took a moment or two to calm down, but neither could remove their grins for the rest of the day.

* * * * *

Thank you, Gabrielle. Xena could feel herself settle after the pleasant diversion.

You're welcome. Now let me get some sleep.

Xena breathed in the cooling night air, watching over her charges as the night sky slowly passed overhead.

* * * * *

Cyrene woke up the next morning, preparing for another day's work. She poked her head in her granddaughter's room to find it empty. Resting in its little nest was the egg, now broken in pieces. She quickly scanned the bed and the floor, looking for the little creature that had hatched, without success.

"Marina?" There was no answer.

Cyrene trudged down the stairs to the kitchen to start breakfast. A sound caught her attention and she opened the back door and looked outside.

"Marina, honey, what are you doing?" The child was searching through the food scraps. "Did you lose something?"

"No, grandma." She hid the scraps behind her back.

"What do you have in your hand?"

"Nothing." Bright-blue eyes looked up under dark lashes in innocence.

Aww, that is sooo sweet... "Well then, come inside before you catch your death." *Let her keep her secret for now.*

Marina skipped in smiling, thinking she had managed to fool her grandmother.

* * * * *

Gabrielle stirred up the fire and had the remnants of last night's meal heating up for breakfast.

"That had to be the worst night's sleep I have ever had!"

Well, d'uh! Xena mentally rolled her eyes at the goddess.

"Aphrodite, just live with it, OK?" Gabrielle had to admit that the deity was easily upset and was getting on her nerves. She didn't like the bed, she didn't like the food, the walking was too hard...

"And this isn't fun. This is just so... so... uncool." Her nose wrinkled up in disgust.

Gabrielle crossed over to the immortal, squatting down on her haunches, "Just think of this as a bad vacation. It'll be over soon enough and you can get back to your nice, comfy room upstairs." It was really strange to be looking down at someone from this height. And intimidating too, by the look in Aphrodite's eyes. *Heh...*

"Sorry, sweetpea." She really had no right to complain. After all, she wasn't the one with the nastiness inside her. Her hand caressed the knee in front of her, feeling the soft skin underneath it, and her mind immediately turned to the young blonde inside.

"Don't even go there." She looked up into pale blue eyes that read her every thought. Her brow creased in concern, upset that her intentions were so easily picked up.

"It could have been real good, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. The Goddess of Love and all, but I'm taken."

"Stuck on tall, dark and deadly, eh?"

"Oh yeah. You better believe it."

"Life just sucks."

A large hand came down on top of the goddess's arm. "But look what we had to go through to get to it."

"If you ever change your mind, all you gotta do is call."

"I know. But it's a forever kind of thing, Aphrodite."

"Yeah, I know." The goddess's tongue clicked in disgust.

"You know?"

"Yeah. The Fates foresaw it and I sort of put my stamp of approval on it, so that's that." She sighed at the loss. *Oh well...*

Gabrielle stood up and went over to kick Ares awake. "C'mon, time to get up."

"Yeah, yeah," he mumbled, trying to open sleep-soaked eyes.

* * * * *

Xena and Gabrielle switched places once more, allowing the older woman control in case of trouble. They quietly played a game of "What Am I?" while they walked, allowing brother and sister to chat behind them.

"Ar, will you get over it? It's done and you lost."

He walked along sulkily, not happy with losing the one thing that he truly wanted. Everything else was just a diversion. His mind was already trying to figure out how to get her back, but first he needed to get rid of that annoying blonde.

"Stop it! Leave them alone." Ares glared at his sister, upset that she knew what he was thinking.

"Of course I know what you're thinking. You think of nothing else."

You got that right... His eyes subconsciously shifted to the body walking in front of him, his mind lulled into sensual lassitude by the bold sway of Xena's walk. *Oh yeah...*

Xena could feel Ares' eyes boring a hole in her butt and was tempted to turn around and tell him to put his eyes back into his head.

Just ignore him.

But it's not your butt he's staring at.

No, but if I were him I'd be doing the same thing. No, I wouldn't, I'd be acting on it.

Why, Gabrielle, I didn't know you had such a preoccupation with sex.

Hehe, only with you Xena. Only with you.

* * * * *

Xena's senses went on alert before she even saw them, grabbing Gabrielle's attention. She glanced over to the two Gods in warning seconds before they were waylaid.

A band of about thirty men stood in their way, awaiting their leader who weaved his way through them on horseback. Xena looked him in the eye, mentally sizing him up. *Piece of cake...*

"Well, well, what do we have here then?" He took in the three of them, already looking past the fight to the enjoyment after. "Veerrryy nice." Aphrodite shivered at the undisguised look of lust on his face. As a mortal, this was now a very real threat that she hadn't had to face before.

"We don't want trouble here. We'll just move on." Xena tried to walk around them but the leader moved his horse to block her way.

"Not so fast there, warrior. I require some payment, a toll if you will, for you to pass."

"What sort of payment?" Xena shifted in readiness as she took in the line of men spreading out in front of her. They were expecting trouble.

"Just a little comfort and understanding from you two ladies should suffice. What do you think men? These two help to while away a few hours in exchange for our 'protection'?"

"Not for you." Xena's voice dropped to its lowest register, sending a warning to her opponents.

Cebraxis laughed, his men joining in the merriment. "Well then, warrior woman. I'll just have to settle for blondie over there." He turned to his men, "Kill them. Save the blonde for me."

The air erupted in a sound of wild yelling and crashing metal. Xena's sword slid from its sheath in silence, the sun glinting off the razor sharp weapon in deference to its wielder. She headed for Cebraxis, intent on bringing him down quickly. Glancing over her shoulder, she could see Ares draw his sword, taking on two of the advancing soldiers. Aphrodite was up against a far tree, seemingly frozen in her tracks. Another couple of Cebraxis's men were heading in her direction.

Without thinking, Xena grabbed the Chakram and tossed it towards the most immediate danger. "Aphrodite, don't just stand there. Fight!" the spinning disk bounced and ricocheted, finally finding its two targets and returning to her hand.

Xena knew she had made a fatal mistake the moment the weapon returned. Her battle lust was up. It latched onto her dark emotions and tore at them, like a lion feeding on its prey, multiplying her darkness so fast she could not stop it. It rolled over her and she could feel only the need to kill and destroy.

In the back of her mind she could hear Gabrielle screaming at her, but the voice slowly faded into the background until all she could hear was her own heartbeat, her vision veiled in crimson, as she went in search of blood.

Men came at her from all sides but it meant little to her. Her blade flew with terrifying speed, cutting through bone and muscle without much effort, her strength tripled by the force inside her. Blade in one hand, and Chakram in the other, she cut a swathe through the opposing forces towards her goal, who was slowly backing up his horse, and she advanced quickly on him.

Xena felt the force increase in her, her need for death becoming an unquenchable thirst. Her focus was on getting to the rider on horseback, but she desired the fury and the lust of the kill, demanding blood satisfaction to satiate its constant hunger. She drew out the battle, enjoying each slice of flesh and cry of pain her efforts elicited.

Blood flew in all directions, spraying her with the hot liquid. Licking away the moisture on bloody lips, the sensation struck her to her core, stirring those deep, dark emotions she hid well away. Her path was now clear to her next target and she steadily stalked towards him.

With nowhere left to go, Cebraxis attacked, swinging his sword down on her head. His downward momentum was stopped, the sword caught in a large hand and merely held there. A sensual smile graced her lips as she reached up and held his hand in hers, slowly tightening her grip until the sound of breaking bone echoed around the trees.

He screamed in pain but she merely held it, tightening her grip even more until the bones pierced the skin. She grabbed his shirt and threw him off his horse into the dirt. The fighting had stopped momentarily awaiting the outcome. Xena's heart pumped in slow pulses, the excitement building as the entity demanded its sacrifice.

Without much pretence, she raised her sword and brought it down swiftly, the sensation of cutting flesh and bone passing up her arm to her brain. She stood for a moment, a sexual shudder shaking her long frame. Oh yes, this was freedom at its rawest and most satisfying.

Xena turned to the rest of the battle. The remaining men stepped back in fear, seeing a ghostly aura appear in her eyes. She was lost.

"Damn," Aphrodite muttered.

"Come," Xena's voice held a hypnotic tone to it, drawing in the twenty remaining men left alive. "I'm now your leader."

"What about these two?"

"Leave them. We have more important targets now."

Gabrielle had never felt anything so terrifying as the orgy of violence that was flowing through her partner. She could sense everything; the dark intent, the cool cunning intellect and the almost sexual ecstasy of the kill. She now fully understood her partner and the constant day-to-day battle it took to keep this madness under control. How was she going to pull her back from the edge of this insanity?

Chapter 16

Ares watched Xena move off with her band of followers, secretly pleased that his plan still had a chance of coming to fruition. All he needed now was for Zeus to restore his powers before he lost complete control of her. The tall god moved over to his fallen sister and helped her to her feet.

"Well, that's it then. Zeus!" He yelled to the heavens, waiting for his father to answer the call.

"Ar, what are you doing?" Aphrodite had been surprised when the group of men just left, leaving both of them still alive.

"It's finished and we've lost her. No point in hanging around here. Zeus!" Ares wandered around in a circle as if that would make the King of the Gods magically appear at his feet. There was no answer from the sky above, not even a rumbling of thunder.

"Hey, get us out of here!" He was loathe to say the next word, but he wanted his godhood back. "Father!"

"I don't think he's going to answer us, brother. I think we're on our own."

Damn, this was not what he had hoped for. Every second he was without his power was one second more the entity had to get a firmer hold on what was his. He only hoped that the thing inside Xena got rid of what's-her-name in the bargain.

* * * * *

"Marina? Marina honey? Are you here?"

A small mop of midnight blue hair moved behind the bed as Cyrene watched from the doorway. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." This seemed to be the stock standard answer from the girl for the last day or so.

The older woman stepped over to the bed and lifted the empty egg. "Where's your little pet?"

"He's hiding."

"He?" The unruly mop bobbed up and down. "How do you know it's a he?"

"Because he told me so."

"He told you..." Cyrene was taken aback for a moment, then realised she was playing make believe. "So, has he a name?"

"Jax."

"Is that what you were doing in the scraps bin this morning? Getting food for Jax?"

Again, the small head bobbed in the affirmative.

"OK then, honey, you can play with him for a little while but be careful, he's only a baby. Come down for lunch soon and then you can go play with your new friends."

"OK, grandma."

Grandma... oh my.

* * * * *

Gabrielle had never felt so alone in all her life, and that included her time as a body slave. She could feel every horrific sensation running through her partner, but her own attempts at communicating went unheeded. For the moment, she was an unwilling passive observer of her lover's actions.

What Xena had done to that warlord turned her stomach. Gabrielle knew that her gentle partner was capable of such violence, but her negligent despatch of her enemy after crushing his hand bordered on cruel. She knew if she didn't stop this woman soon, the sadistic violence would escalate to epic proportions. No one would be safe - Marina, Cyrene and herself included.

Xena's mind clawed at the deepening quagmire of maliciousness that was threatening to take away her remaining resolve. She had managed to divert herself from the two gods, dangling a greater target further down the road as bait. Her only hope now was to come up with some sort of plan to stop the upcoming slaughter before it began.

A tiny corner of her mind was repulsed at the action she had taken, and the fact that she had reacted so erotically to the violence. She had always felt the excitement of the fight and the

satisfaction of the victory, but the utter seduction of the bloodletting she had felt sickened that tiny kernel of her that belonged to Gabrielle.

She desperately tried to find that tiny piece of herself untouched by the entity inside her; that tiny beacon of humanity that was her lifeline back to sanity. For now, she was unable to reach it because of the power the Chakram had over her, but she hoped that when the opportunity came she could grab onto it with both hands.

Somewhere out there was her partner, cast adrift and floating helplessly in her consciousness, watching the slow destruction of her lover's will. She fervently hoped that their love would survive this; that Gabrielle's feelings for her wouldn't die along with her soul. With that thought, her will slipped another notch into the slime. Frantically, she searched her memory for those thoughts of the one person who meant everything to her - her Gabrielle.

This woman had been an unexpected revelation in a situation that had been close to hopeless. She swept into her life like a tornado, upturning everything she had held dear in her life upside down, and giving her such great joy that she could never imagine her life without the small blonde ever again.

Pleasant images flooded her mind's eye, playing over and over again in her head. She felt herself calm, as she had always done in her lover's presence, and her equilibrium returned. Xena had found a way to halt the downward slide into chaos, floating in a dream-like state, emersed in her memories.

* * * * *

"Hey, dad. Down here!" Ares had been calling Zeus for the last half a candlemark without success.

"For the last time, he's not coming." *How thick can he be?*

"I don't see you doing anything constructive."

"Grab those packs and let's get going." Aphrodite had just about had enough of her brother, and decided some action was needed.

"Where are we going?"

"After them, of course."

"Are you nuts?? And what's gonna happen if we ever find them? You gonna fire your 'arrows of lurrve' at them? Big help that'll be."

"Stop whining. Let's just go." Aphrodite picked up her pack and bow and left, not looking back

to see if Ares followed. She heard a scuff of boots and felt his presence next to her.

"And how are you going to find them, oh wise one?"

Aphrodite turned to look at him, raising an elegant eyebrow in a mocking gesture. "Well, unlike you, I did something with my spare time. Artie was very helpful in that department."

"Oh, so that's where you learned all about women, eh?" He broke out in rawkous laughter, amused at his own joke, ignoring his sister's unamused glare.

"Actually, she was very helpful with that too, but no. She taught me all sorts of neat stuff like hunting and tracking."

"Well, then, what happened in that fight? You did nothing."

The goddess ducked her head. "Yeah, I know. At the first sign of trouble, I folded. Totally uncool."

"You got that right."

"Hey! You didn't do much better."

"I had two of them in the palm of my hand."

"And Xena had the other eight."

Ares didn't know how to respond to that. Out of the corner of his eye, he had watched her decimate her enemies, feeling that familiar rush of excitement when he saw her fight, wondering how much was the entity and how much was her raw talent. Gods, how he loved that woman!

"C'mon, let's see if we can pick up the trail."

* * * * *

The small army made slow progress towards its next target, a small village up ahead. Cebraxis had been content to just intimidate them to get supplies, but they knew there would be no negotiation this time, only total annihilation. Spirits were high amongst the followers, finally having the chance to kill at will.

They looked up to the tall woman seated on the prancing horse, her bearing had leader stamped all over it. Cool sapphire eyes surveyed the scene in front of her, scanning the horizon for any signs of life. The menace surrounding her shimmered in the noonday air, attracting the men around her. They could feel the need for a kill building, agitating them to the point of pushing and shoving those around them.

A knife fight had broken out at the back of the line, drawing Xena's attention. "Stop!" The low voice vibrated, stopping the combatants in mid-fight. "The next one to start a fight, I will rip out their beating heart. Got me?" *Oh yeah, they got her alright.*

* * * * *

Aphrodite and Ares were making good time, the goddess easily picking up the trail left by twenty men and a horse who were doing nothing to disguise their passing.

"So why are you so interested in saving them?" Ares knew his sister was responsible for blessing them, but he would have thought that her responsibility ended there. There was silence from his sister, her head bent to the ground looking for directions. She glanced out of the corner of her eye at her sibling.

"Oh no, you didn't! You didn't fall for her, did you?" *This will complicate things.* Getting rid of blondie was one thing, but hurting her sister was another.

She shrugged her shoulders. "No point now. It's not going to happen."

"Why not? Hey, this could work out great. You get what's-her-name, do your thing, and I end up with tall, dark and beautiful."

"I can't do that, and you know it."

"C'mon, 'Dite, you know you want her. Why not bend the rules just this once?"

"Ar, you just don't get it, do you? That sort of love never lasts. It has to be freely given. I can cause the infatuation but without true love, it'll eventually fall apart. You want that?"

"Hades, yes!"

"You are such a Neanderthal, you know that?"

"Hey, I'll get her any way that I can."

"Give it up, bro, she's just not interested. You are so old news."

"Well, without blondie there..."

"Gabrielle. Her name is Gabrielle. Stop calling her blondie."

"Without *Gabrielle*, she would come back to me, no problem. She'd be begging to come back."

"What parallel universe are you living in? She grew tired of you a long time ago."

"But I'm persistent. Chicks love that."

"Persistent as a rash you can't scratch, Ar. And chicks hate that. Besides, it's a sacred trust."

"Since when has that ever stopped you?"

"Not with these two."

"So, how far has this gone?" He paused for a moment and thought. "Oh 'Dite, you didn't. How could you? You love her that bad?"

She nodded sadly. *That bad.*

"Hrrmph." He was not going to give up. He had time on his hands - well, not while he was mortal, but once he was back on Mount Olympus he just had to wait until Xena became tired of blon... Gabrielle and he'd step back in, just like the old days.

* * * * *

Xena ordered her army to make camp, despite the fact that they were only a candlemark or two away from their target. She could have ridden in at sunset, but she wanted the village out and about so that she could enjoy the killing of each and every one of them. Burning them in their houses would be too easy, and would be far less than satisfying than seeing the horror on their faces, their lifeblood seeping from their dying bodies over her outstretched hands.

Her mind wandered past the immediate attack to the future. It was only a matter of time, with a growing army, to shift the slaughter to her own hometown, and ultimately Athens. The entity within the tall warrior would now systemically erase any evidence of Xena of Amphipolis - for now only she existed, the new Xena, the Destroyer of the Known World.

The entity fed on Xena's spirit, slowly sapping the life force out of her. The knowledge of what savagery she was capable of scared her, and she suspected that wouldn't be the end of it. Before this was finished, she was going to learn it all. She knew she had a deep-seated darkness, Ares had shown her that, but she feared how deep that darkness still had to go.

The loneliness was getting to her though, which was strange. She had pretty much been a loner most of her life, but since the arrival of one small blonde, she had craved the company nearly as much as breathing. She cast her mind adrift, looking for the other part of her soul, and found nothing. *Gabrielle, where are you?*

C'mon Xena. Marina is home and Gabrielle is counting on you. Stop lounging around. Are you

gonna let this thing get the better of you? The entity may have had control of her body but she wasn't finished yet. *Patience, Xena.*

Gabrielle was tired, the aggressiveness and anger bombarding her was wearing her down. She longed for the tender caress of Xena, the feel of her large arms around her in a warm embrace. At that particular moment, there was a gentle tickling at the end of her conscious thought. *Xena?* For the first time in quite a while, Gabrielle extended herself, vainly trying to press through the swirling chaos around her. Maybe there was a chance after all.

* * * * *

"Are we there yet?"

Aphrodite was about to turn around and punch her brother, who had been whining for the last candlemark. "For the last time, no we are NOT there yet. Stop asking!"

They had continued on in the twilight until Aphrodite could see the ground no longer. With a little effort, they were able to get a fire started after having watched Xena the day before. Cooking was beyond them so they settled for dried rations. As much as either of them would never admit it, they missed their two companions. Ares sighed heavily, looking deep into the fire.

"What?"

"I'm tired of all this. I just want to go home. One way or the other I want it over."

His sister reached across the distance, placing her hand on his arm, "Things will work out, don't you worry."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Xena will come through. She just so totally rocks, you know?"

"This might even be beyond her, 'Ditie."

She hit him. "What are you talking about? One minute warrior babe is so totally awesome and the next you're kicking her in the teeth? This is so not like you, Ar. Have some faith."

"Faith is for mortals, sis."

"And gods too, you dumb-ass. You are such a downer, you know that?" She so wanted to kick the living daylights out of her brother, who was dragging down her own high spirits with this talk. "Let's get some sleep before you say something else stupid."

"Yeah, right, Miss Love Goddess of the Woods."

"Too late."

* * * * *

The camp slowly stirred in the crisp morning air. Xena was in no hurry to attack the village, waiting for mid-morning when the inhabitants would be out going about their business. Weapons were sharpened and armour checked. The fervour built as the morning wore on.

The two immortals got an early start, wasting no time in picking up the trail and setting off in hot pursuit. They had arrived in time to see the army pack up and begin its move towards the hapless townspeople.

"So, what do we do now?" Ares whispered.

"You're the God of War. This is your department."

"It's so much easier when you have your powers. You just walk in, and bam! 'I'm the God of War, do as I say'. I don't think that's gonna work this time."

"Well, we gotta stop them somehow."

"You and me against twenty men and Xena, who counts for ten more? Even with my powers, that isn't good odds"

"Let's follow. Maybe we can come up with something on the way."

* * * * *

Gabrielle pushed herself to find her partner through the darkness. She was heartened by the small response earlier, knowing that somewhere Xena was trying to find her. If there was any chance, any chance at all to break through, she was going to take it. She was not going to lose the woman she loved because of lack of effort on her part.

Time was running out, Xena knew that. She needed to do something soon to salvage this situation before innocent people were killed. As she bent her intellect to getting herself out of this mess, a gentle warmth could be felt, afar off at present, but it was there. She knew that feeling intimately and greedily reached out for it, throwing caution to wind, mentally throwing herself off a cliff into the dark void, hoping against hope that a small hand was there to grab her before she fell.

Chapter 17

Gabrielle could feel the warmth getting stronger, moving towards her with some speed. Instinctively, she reached out to intercept whatever was coming at her, ecstatic to feel that it was her partner's consciousness. It was battered and torn, but still held the heart of her lover intact.

Oh Gods, Xena, where have you been?

Xena drew her in, forever grateful to have found her. *Hold me... just hold me.*

Xena took in her partner's comfort, the warmth seeping through her to soothe her cooling psyche. She was glad to find Gabrielle still intact, that her protection had worked after all. Unwittingly, having Gabrielle there stirred her preservation instincts, forcing her to act even when she felt the need to rest.

Time had no meaning at this point, each seeking comfort from the other and strengthening their bond. However, they were still being swamped by the erotically malevolent sensation, floating around them like some sort of primordial ooze.

* * * * *

"Ar, what are we going to do? The attack's begun."

Ares watched the one-sided fight; a slaughter really. These people had no defence against armed men bent on destruction and death. While one side of him thoroughly enjoyed the mayhem, there was a small kernel that begged for the battle not to be so one sided. What? The God of War can't have a conscience!

They watched from their hiding place, not knowing what to do. Any action on their part would probably draw attention to themselves, and ultimately lead to their deaths. They were mortal now and vulnerable.

Ares's eyes sought out and found his target, watching the tall woman move from target to target, slaughtering with consummate ease. Armed with sword and Chakram, she cut and sliced through bodies for sport. Her laughter rang through the air, sending a chill down the god's body.

This was no battle and there was no honour in this victory. He had to admit that his admiration for the woman slipped a notch at this negligent display of cowardice and evil. He took great pride in her need for a fair fight and overcoming the odds on her own terms.

"C'mon, let's see if we can get closer to her. Maybe an opportunity will present itself."

* * * * *

Xena found a small group of people hiding behind an overturned wagon and moved in on her prey. Slowly, and with a great amount of enjoyment, she took them on one by one, intent on leaving the old man and young woman till last. She wanted to hear them beg for mercy before her metal sank into their flesh.

The man put up some resistance and she batted his pitchfork out of the way before lunging with her sword, feeling the slide of flesh along her blade. The blood flowed along the steel, covering her hand in crimson. The entity absorbed the hot liquid like a sea sponge, gathering strength from the kill.

Ghostly eyes turned to their next victim, approaching the middle-aged woman with deadly grace. The mother offered no resistance, a strangled cry escaping her bloody lips as a dagger cut her open. She looked down, moments from death, to see her organs spill to the ground, leaving a large cavity inside her.

A low chuckle escaped the warrior's lips as she studied her handiwork. She stood in the ever-widening pool of blood, breathing deeply as if it were a delicately perfumed rose. To the entity, the smell of death was just that.

The old man cowered on the ground, his arm over his head in protection. Xena stood there and watched him, amused by his feeble action. "Old man," her voice was low and dangerous. He looked up into pale blue eyes, as cold as the nearby snow-covered mountain tops. He saw death in those eyes and closed his own as her sword came down on his head, leaving a bloody gash in its wake.

Now in control, the evil hacked and hacked, opening the wound even more, splintering bone to expose the organ underneath. The young woman watched in horror, her stomach losing its contents at the horrific sight. Those glacial eyes were now nearly devoid of colour.

* * * * *

Xena felt the sadness down to her soul. This was all her fault. In trying to outsmart Ares, she had outsmarted herself. Now she was left with the heinous acts unfolding in the outside world, the visions of the carnage taking place in her name playing over and over in her head. She would forever suffer in Hades for this, she knew it.

"Xena!" Gabrielle used a stern voice to distract her partner. "We have to do something. Listen, I will work with you in this. Whatever you need to do, do it now."

Xena watched in slow motion as her body stalked the lone figure lying in the dirt.

* * * * *

"Girl, come here." The voice was low and hypnotic, drawing the young woman to Xena like a lamb to the slaughter. She passed behind the blonde, her eyes skimming over the vibrant young body and thinking of other things besides destruction. A slow smile crossed those rose lips, spreading into a lascivious grin.

Xena led the young woman to a lone house, stepping inside and finding it empty. In the bedroom she approached the girl. "You want to live?" The quaking girl nodded. "Here's your chance. This had better be good."

A lone tear trickled down the pale cheek as shaking fingers reached for the ties on her dress.

* * * * *

"Nnnooooo!!!!" All Xena could see was her precious Gabrielle being taken by a mad woman. No, no mad woman - her. It was her. This poor slip of a girl, who had looked so much like her own bard, was going to a fate worse than death and she had to stop it.

"Then now is the time Xena. This is your body - claim it back! I will give you whatever you need to do it."

The warrior bent her mind to taking back what was hers, inch by precious inch. She fought her way through the darkness towards her conscious state, Gabrielle a step behind, lending her own strength to the cause. *No, this will NOT happen. I will not allow it.*

She felt herself hesitate as the young woman dropped her dress, shivering from the coolness of the room and the heated stare of those cold blue eyes. Xena could feel a bead of sweat break out on her forehead as a battle of wills took place for control of her body, ownership shifting as strength rose and fell.

* * * * *

"What does she think she is doing?" Ares was puzzled as Xena dragged off the blonde into a nearby house.

"What do you think she is doing, Ar? Giving her cooking tips? Let's go, this may be our chance."

Aphrodite and Ares snuck around the battle, entering the house from behind. The goddess picked up a large rock as she entered, hoping to get a chance to throw it before she fell. She nearly ran into her brother, who seemed too preoccupied with seeing the naked woman to notice that Xena

was unaware of their presence.

The internal battle waged on, one side then the other gaining precious ground on the battlefield that was her body. Xena could sense the outside world and the impending danger.

Xena!

Yeah, I see it Gabrielle. If I can hold still for just a few more seconds...

Before her courage failed her, Aphrodite used her rock, bringing it down on the warrior's head from behind, knocking her unconscious.

"Quick before she wakes up. Find something to tie her up with." While Ares saw to securing Xena, Aphrodite collected the frightened girl and re-dressed her, sitting her down before she collapsed.

* * * * *

Xena grabbed her chance with both hands. As she slowly re-gained consciousness, her heart soared with the feeling of being free, to be in control of her actions once more. Aphrodite's rock had severed the entity's connection to her. All she had to do now was to convince her captors that she was back.

"Hey guys, am I ever glad to see you." They eyed her warily, looking for some trick to set her free. "It's me, Xena."

"We are taking you to the Temple, so don't fight it." Aphrodite studied her carefully.

"Good, I won't. C'mon, Aphrodite, it's really me. You want to talk to Gabrielle?"

You better talk to her. I don't think she trusts me.

And what makes you think I'll do any better? There was silence and a gentle tickling. You knew she was in love with me?

Yeah, I knew. I can't blame her though. She has very good taste.

The young blonde blushed under the compliment. *You have absolutely nothing to worry about.*

I heard that conversation. I'm glad you feel that way. By the way, you have nothing to worry about either. He doesn't stand a chance against you.

How are you feeling?

Better, now that I'm back in control. Let's see if we can stop this madness.

Xena's voice shifted to a familiar burr, bringing a smile to the young goddess's face. "Hey there, we are back in control. Really. Xena wants to continue the charade so she can stop the army, OK?"

"What do you want us to do?"

"Take the girl out of here and meet us on the far side of the clearing."

After their companions had left, Xena prepared herself for warlord mode.

Are you up to this?

Probably not, but we have to do this. I only hope that the army doesn't turn on me. If they do, be prepared for a battle.

Do what you have to do, Xena. I trust you. What a feeling it was to have someone trust you implicitly. It bolstered her overtaxed emotions for the trial ahead. Whoever had said that loves makes you weak, had never truly been in love. It was the most amazing feeling in the world, lending power to her resolve to make things right.

She drew herself up, covering herself in an air of menace, swaggering out the door with a satisfied grin on her face. She found the horse wandering at the edge of the village and mounting it, trotted through the village square.

"Halt! Enough!" Xena's bass voice echoed around the open space, bouncing off empty huts. Arms stopped in mid-swing, eyes flicking to their leader in question. The few remaining survivors looked over in despair at the one who held their lives in her large hands.

"This slaughter is over. Go home!" She waited, her reflexes on hair trigger in case someone reacted badly. An arrow came flying in her direction and she barely shifted out of the way, the arrowhead grazing her cheek. She looked over to the culprit and unsheathed her sword. The stallion pranced over to the far side of the square and she looked down at the man, giving him her best intimidating stare.

He stood his ground and lifted his sword, discarding the bow. *Gabrielle, I'm sorry about this...*

Her long leg lifted over the pommel and she slid to the ground gracefully. "You questioning my decision?" Her voice dropped an octave, already marking him a dead man.

"Yes, I am. We all want this done." He looked around for support, finding feet shifting nervously in the dust. They were awaiting the outcome of the fight before committing themselves to him.

"Well, I can see that I'm gonna have to change your mind." A sexy half-smile graced her lips, causing her opponent to step back. She showed no fear in this battle, only a quiet confidence that put doubt in the mind of her enemy.

Ares watched from the nearby scrub. This was the Xena he knew, the woman who fought her battles as only she could - with her superior skills and cunning intellect. Her worth came up a notch again, the past Xena from a candlemark ago already forgotten. He still had hope for his plan, seeing that she had re-gained control over the entity, now all he needed was his godhood.

Xena slowly circled her adversary, swinging her sword in tight arcs in a show of her skill. He shifted with her, trying to watch her body for any sudden movement. She feinted a couple of times but he remained firm, twitching in response but not acting.

Her smile broadened, having finally found a fighter who would give her a good fight. This was when she was at her best - a life and death struggle that tested her skills to the limit. She rarely had the chance to exercise those kinds of skills these days and looked forward to the contest.

Xena executed a few testing parries, gauging the competence of the other fighter. He deflected her sword with ease. This was no hick fighter; he had been a soldier. She shifted her shoulders and set her mind to winning this battle.

The other men surrounded the two of them, enclosing them in a tight circle of sweating bodies. The fight now became even more dangerous.

Aphrodite's mind closed in on a plan. "You, girl, get your townspeople and head into the forest. Hide until they have left, you got me?" The woman put her hand on the goddess's arm and looked warmly into those eyes, silently thanking her. "You're welcome." She whispered.

"Ar, you go get those horses. I think we're gonna need a quick getaway." She grabbed her bow and nocked an arrow, standing guard over Xena in case things deteriorated in the fight. Fervently, she hoped that her courage wouldn't fail her this time.

Gabrielle stayed silent, letting her partner go about her business. What a different feeling she was getting from Xena. There was the excitement from the fight, but gone, for the moment, was the dark undercurrent that had been present for so long. They were free of it for now.

The two combatants circled one another in the small space, pushing and shoving from the spectators a serious distraction. Her opponent rushed her, trying to force her against the throng behind her, whom he hoped would shove her back and onto his sword. Her long legs unfolded and she pushed off, flipping herself over his head and releasing her battle cry in passing.

The wiry man was too busy watching her go over his head to see where his sword was going, ending up buried in one of his friends. Silence broke over the crowd, and they backed up to a suitable distance. She let out a low chuckle twirling her sword in her hand. "You changed your mind yet?" A low growl erupted from her attacker. "No?"

She began a serious counter-attack, swinging her weapon with grace and skill. He steadily

backed up under her attack, deflecting each stroke with ever increasing lack of control. Pressing her advantage, she increased the strength and speed of her strokes, forcing him to back up to the limits of the ring.

Out of nowhere a dagger appeared in his other hand. Slashing at her mid-section, he inflicted a cut of his own. She backed up, giving him some space, and paced around looking at the sea of antagonistic faces. Angry blue eyes swivelled to their target. *That's it!*

Her demeanour changed in a heartbeat. She headed straight for the man with the blade, batting it away like it was a stick. Her hand shot out, circling around his throat and lifting him. Muscle and tendon stood out in vivid relief as she held him suspended, her eyes scanning the muted crowd as they stared in awe.

She brought his face up close to her own and breathed, "I said no more killing." She paused. "Perhaps one more." With that final word, she snapped his neck, tossing his broken body to the dirt. Sword in hand, she faced down each and every one of those who witnessed her action. "Anyone else?"

The crowd dissipated, milling around in disbelief. There was a cry and everyone went on alert. "The villagers are gone!" "Find them!" She cried above the din, "I said, no more killing. Let them be!" But their blood was up and her voice was lost in all the noise.

"Xena!" At the mention of her name she looked up, seeing Aphrodite in the shadows beckoning her over. As she approached, the goddess pointed to the horses. She changed direction, lengthening her strides and flipping in mid-air to land on the horse's back.

"Let's go."

The small party moved quickly, leaving the chaos behind. Xena looked over her shoulder, seeing one of the soldiers pointing in her direction. She shifted her attention to the front, trying to get some distance between them and the army. It was now a race to the Temple.

Chapter 18

Gabrielle could feel a quiet depression settle over her partner. *Xena, are you OK?* For a moment she thought the older woman wouldn't answer.

No.

What's wrong? There was a pause. Tell me.

I'm gonna lose you, aren't I?

Lose me? What are you talking about?

Xena tried to order her thoughts, but all she could think about was the blackness of her heart. She felt the warmth surround her, infusing her with a love so pure she felt like crying.

Tell me. That familiar burr whispered softly in her brain.

How can you love me after what I did?

That wasn't you, Xena. You know that.

But was it? I know I'm capable of dark things, Gabrielle. What if this thing inside me is just magnifying my own deep dark tendencies? I'm so afraid of losing you. Xena felt the warmth intensify, as if her lover had given her a squeeze.

Her partner was battling her conscience over what had happened. She knew in her heart that Xena was a good woman, and when in control of her darkness she was able to achieve great things. Could she still love her, knowing what resided in her?

I know this is hard for you right now, but believe me when I say that I will never leave you. I have seen you at your very worst and I still love you.

But that woman could have been you. I nearly ra...

No! You listen to me. You stopped yourself before it happened. I know in my heart that you would never hurt me that way. You have a noble spirit, my love. Remember that. It's that spirit that controls your darkness, and I will always be here to remind you of that.

Xena remained silent, not sure whether to believe her or not. She truly wanted to believe it all, but her guilt put up a strong fight.

Stop all this self-recrimination, Xena. Just think of your love for me and let it heal those wounds. We still have a way to go and we need to prepare.

Xena sighed deeply. All this arguing was getting her nowhere. She was just going to have to accept it all on faith. She pushed aside her own doubts, and set her mind towards one goal - living through this ordeal to grow old with her little blonde by her side.

* * * * *

Xena looked around the countryside, slowly thinning out as the air became colder. She spotted a small decorated stone on the roadside. Once passed, she noticed an immediate change in the darkness. It slowly throbbed to life again, pulsing in waves against them.

"Aphrodite." A platinum blonde head turned her way. "I think you're gonna have to tie me up. Now."

"Why?"

"I just saw a small outcrop of rock on the roadside. I think it's a Temple marker, because it's starting to move in me again. Better not take any chances." She held out her hands, waiting for the goddess to secure them to the pommel. "I think it wants to go home." She looked to the deity in quiet understanding. "We're at the crossroads, Aphrodite, the next day could well go one way or the other. While we're in control, it has to go where we take it. Gabrielle and I will hold on as long as we can, but I feel it will try another grab for this body before we reach our objective."

"What now?"

"There's a little light left. Push on for another candlemark, then make camp. If I'm still in control by then, I'll let Gabrielle make a hot meal. I think we're gonna need it."

Aphrodite nodded and was about to move away when a tired voice called back.

"If something happens to us..."

Xena!

Gabrielle, I have to do this. "If something happens, can you keep an eye on my family for us?"

The young immortal nodded.

"Thank you. I... I'm sorry you got dragged into this. I know it's been hard for you, but we're both very proud of you."

A full grin graced Aphrodite's ageless face, bringing out her dimples clearly. The smile extended to her eyes, glinting in the dying light. She was speechless.

"Yeah, well. As I said, just in case... Now, let's get going. With some luck, it'll be all over tomorrow."

* * * * *

They pushed steadily on for a while longer, constantly checking behind them for the following army. Xena led the way so that Ares could keep her in his sights. The closer they got to the Temple, the lower Xena's head hung, the weight of her burden getting heavier and more cumbersome.

"Here." Xena called a halt after finding a suitable camping site.

Each went about their business. Ares secured Xena to a tree while Aphrodite quickly scouted around for any signs of food for the pot. By the time she came back empty-handed, Ares had managed to get a fire going and a pot of water boiling.

The goddess crouched in front of the seated warrior. "Xena?"

Weary blue eyes looked up. "Yeah?"

"Is Gabby there?"

That soft burr that she had come to love answered her. "I'm here, Aphrodite."

"You up to making dinner?"

"Sure. What do you want me to do?"

"Xena, is it safe to untie you?"

"Better not. Gabrielle will have to instruct you."

Ooh boy, this ought to be good... Her cooking was even worse than her hunting.

"Aphrodite, go to our pack and pull out the sack with the dried vegetables. Put them in the boiling water."

The goddess went through the steps for making a vegetable broth, Gabrielle pointing out the various herbs and spices she used and following her instructions to the letter.

She gave a portion to the tall warrior. "Hey! That is really good!"

She tasted her handiwork and a smile crossed her face. "That is just so... so... tubular!" Her first cooked meal. *It was just soooo cool.* "You know, sometimes this mortal stuff isn't so bad."

"When it works, yeah. Other times are just downright ugly." *Like tomorrow.* "I think to be on the safe side, it might be an idea to remove the Chakram from me." She looked to Ares. "Use a stick and lift it off. Don't touch it, just in case."

He lifted the weapon carefully and hung it on an overhanging branch. He looked over to the tall woman, seeing a look of quiet acceptance at what was to come. He didn't like seeing her this way, slowly dragging herself to her death without so much as a whimper. He wanted that fire that usually burned so brightly within her; that never-say-die attitude that drew him to her. He hunkered down in front of her and looked into those darkened eyes. "Why aren't you fighting this, Xena?"

"I'm doing what I can, Ares."

"Oh come on! I saw you lift a man off the ground with one arm just a few candlemarks ago. Now look at you. Sitting there totally defeated."

"Yeah? Well, come inside, it's a real laugh. It feels like you're supporting an entire building on your shoulders, Ares. It tends to weigh you down a bit. So, if I look a bit worn out, I'm sorry it's not up to your normal heroic standards."

"Ar. Leave her be. She has to keep focused and you're not helping."

"Aphrodite, you and Ares get some sleep. Gabrielle and I will take shifts to keep awake."

"You don't want us to keep guard?"

"If I break free, you're not going to stop me, so get some sleep." Aphrodite felt nervous about the thought of Xena breaking free and running amok. The dark-haired woman could see her apprehension. "Hey, it'll be fine. Tomorrow will be the end of it."

The goddess looked over and felt sad. Indeed, one way or another tomorrow will be the end, and the best outcome for the world was decidedly the worst outcome for these two women. This was a no-win situation. To save one meant giving up the other.

* * * * *

Xena?

Hmmm.

You want to talk?

No.

Gabrielle could feel the coolness emanating from her partner, the entity once again pressing against them, constricting the tiny cocoon they had constructed around themselves. The pressure had been building steadily during the day since breaking free from it in the village. She knew the closer they got to the Temple, the more it would grow, testing their boundaries and looking for a way in.

Xena's depression was steadily growing, being fed by the constant pressure of the entity. This time, it was looking to destroy her before taking her body, knowing that the other way left itself open to retaliation by her strong will. It would destroy all opposition before claiming the ultimate prize.

The night passed uneventfully, with neither woman getting much sleep. By morning, Xena had stopped talking altogether. Gabrielle knew that she had taken the brunt of the attack as the evil actively sought her out as the stronger of the two of them. She was struggling herself under the constant battering, and wondered how her partner stood up to it.

C'mon Xena, let's get going. Not far to go.

Xena's body responded, but not a word came from the woman herself. The Chakram rested at the warrior's side, weighing like a lead weight, dragging her to the ground. Gabrielle kept talking, not expecting to get an answer, but it kept her own mind occupied and focused on getting them there.

The utter anger and rage that swirled around them was steadily growing with every step. All those sensations she had experienced in the village were now present all the time. Her innocence was shredded with the ever-present wash, and with it brought doubt. Doubt about Xena, about herself, about their love and their strength. It had latched onto her fears and attacked them, using a battering ram to knock down the wall she had put around herself.

* * * * *

"Ar, Xena doesn't look so good."

"Time's running out."

"How much longer?" He pointed to the spire, just visible through the low cloud.

"Should only be a candlemark more, I think."

In the silence, they could hear a far-off noise of men moving fast.

"C'mon." Ares kicked his horse and sent them off into a canter. He picked up Xena's horse's reins and pulled her along, the woman not responding to him.

The sun had been visible for the ride but as they approached the Temple, dark clouds rolled in and covered the area in shadow.

It knows. What is this thing?

Ares had to physically lift the tall woman off the horse and carry her to the front door.

"Sis, check around back and see if there's a way in." The goddess nodded and disappeared.

He placed Xena on the steps and studied the heavy door. He ran his hands around the edges looking for a latch but could find nothing. He heard a whirr and an arrow embedded itself in the door, not a hand's width away from skewering his fingers. He looked around and found a handful of men coming at him, the scouts from the army.

He unsheathed his sword and looked at the fallen warrior. He would get no help from her. He was on his own.

Two men rushed him at once, working in concert to get past his defences. As a god, he had no fear in battle, but mortality had its risks now. They tested his skill, giving him a chance to use his impressive array of moves, but still he was the God of War, and no human was going to take his life, especially today.

Another arrow flew by, nicking his arm. He looked down in shock, feeling pain for the first time,

his muscles tensing in reaction. His opponents took the opportunity to go on the offensive, swinging their swords at him in rapid-fire succession, pushing his defences to the limit. Sweat broke out on his brow as he settled down into a comfortable rhythm, deflecting strike after strike aimed at his head.

Aphrodite searched around the back of the Temple. She had found a back entrance but it was barricaded and would need a lot of work to get through it. She made her way back to the front entrance and saw the fight going on. She fletched an arrow and shot at the bowyer shooting at Ares, hitting him in the leg.

She looked over to the steps and saw her brother in deep trouble. He had engaged two fighters and a third was sneaking up from behind. Without thought, she nocked another arrow and fired, hitting the soldier squarely in the back. As he fell, she bowed her head, a tear rolling silently down her cheek.

Ares glanced behind him, seeing the dead man. He pushed away his two opponents and looked for his sister, seeing her kneeling in the dirt. *Gods, 'Ditie! Why did you have to do that?* He knew this would devastate her. Despite all their arguing and banter, he was very protective of her innocence in death. After all, she was the Goddess of Love.

Ares narrowed his focus, determination now spurring on his actions. He increased his speed and strength, driving his enemies back, giving him the chance to launch his own attack. He swirled his sword in a figure eight, spreading a metallic net in front of himself before thrusting his sword methodically at his victims, forcing them to defend.

One went down, falling over broken stonework and the God of War quickly despatched him, burying his sword in his gut. He felt the steel slide in as skin and flesh gave way under the smooth, pointed steel. A familiar stirring erupted within him and he drew his weapon out, watching dark blood drip off the end.

His dark eyes turned to his other adversary, a slow smile spreading across his bearded face. Confidence flowed through him as he slowly pushed his opponent back until he met the wall. With a quick feint, he extended his arm, sending his sword deep into his enemy's chest.

"Ditie, over here! Aphrodite! Sis, get you butt over here!"

She slowly responded to his call, her emotions still in turmoil. *What have I done?* She felt the utter desolation of having taken a life. She had never really understood that carrying a weapon could come at a price. She looked up into deep brown eyes, seeing understanding and sympathy there.

"Thank you, sis." He reached up and palmed her cheek.

She managed a small smile in return, but only felt marginally better. *Put it away for later, 'Ditie, now is not the time.*

The call of the Chakram spurred the warrior's body into action. She stood, slowly walking to the entrance and activating a hidden switch to open the door. It slowly swung open, a smell of death released into the air after centuries of being locked away.

The two gods looked over from their conversation, seeing that the warrior had moved and was entering the Temple. At that moment, the courtyard filled with the remaining men who had followed them. "Inside, now!" Ares grabbed his sister and shoved her through the door, slamming it shut behind them as a volley of arrows embedded themselves in the thick wood. He found a large plank of wood and slid it in place, barricading the door. They were trapped.

Chapter 19

Aphrodite looked around this building that had held so much fear for her kind. This was the Temple of the Chakram. As old as time itself, and it held two powers, diametrically opposite and both as equally destructive, and yet together so perfectly balanced. She approached the altar reverently, gingerly stepping over the strewn bones of dead warriors who had come to claim the prize.

In the silence of the ageless stone, she studied the table. A geometrical design had been imprinted on the top, a circle divided in two by a curved centre line. Both were identical, one dark and one light, but facing in opposite directions so that they fit into a perfect whole. In each sector was a round indentation. She looked to the Chakram sitting on Xena's hip and knew what belonged there. But both recesses were empty. Without the Chakram of Light, returning the Chakram of Darkness here was not going to save these women. There was only one other option.

Ares wandered around the room, eventually finding the canister his father wanted him to destroy recessed in the far wall. There was nothing fancy about the jar, a plain ceramic piece just sitting there, looking like it held oil or perhaps herbs, but he knew it held far more. At this point it held life and death.

He turned to face the two women standing in the hall, contemplating his next move. Aphrodite was engrossed with the altar and Xena was standing passively near the far wall. All he had ever wanted was this woman, his right arm in the mortal world, claiming land in the name of the God of War. Was he prepared to risk all in the hope of gaining everything?

Aphrodite looked up at her brother, seeing him deep in thought. She glanced to the far wall behind him and saw the canister. "Ar, what are you doing?" "Just thinking, sis."

"What are you waiting for?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. Destroy the jar, bro. You know you have to."

"Why should I? She's mine, 'Ditie."

She sighed. Once her brother got something into his head... "Zeus is going to be so pissed at you if you don't."

"But with her by my side, who cares?"

"Err, one problem, bro. You're gonna need your powers and, d'uh, he has them."

"Oh." *Damn, she was right.* He would be stuck as a mortal. Could he control her as a mortal? Probably not. "And you're happy about losing blondie then?"

She bristled at his refusal to call Gabrielle by her name. "Of course not, but this is the way it's gotta be. Respect their wishes." It was breaking her heart, but this was one of those mortal ugly times that Xena talked about. *You guys can have it because it's too much heartache.*

There was a heavy banging on the solid door. "C'mon Ar. Do it now, before it's too late."

The tall god sauntered over to the warrior and looked her in the eye. There seemed to be no sign of life within those pale blue depths, only an emptiness. He studied her long form, taking in her muscular sleekness, and sighed in regret. His hand lifted and caressed her face, unable to stop the tender emotion from showing through. *What a waste!*

The outer door was starting to splinter under the fierce attack from the battering ram. "Now, Ares!" Aphrodite could wait no longer. He seemed to be ignoring her. She shot the jar out with an arrow, watching as faint wisps of smoke swirled around and dissipated from the shards of pottery.

"Zeus!"

In a heartbeat, the King of the Gods appeared, his presence filling the oppressive stillness of the room. Moments later Athena, Artemis and Apollo followed, taking up residence around the large chamber. Zeus took in Aphrodite's position next to the canister and found his son over near Xena. His brow creased in disappointment.

He moved over to Aphrodite, "Well done, daughter." In a moment he restored her godhood, her form covered in stardust as the power flowed through her once more. All the niggling aches and pains from outdoor living disappeared and she felt revitalized.

While she was happy to be the Goddess of Love once again, she spared a moment to contemplate the last few days. It had been an adventure where she had lived like she had never lived before, experiencing a roller coaster of emotions that she would not have had as a god. For that alone, she would be forever grateful to these two women, who guided and protected her in her moment of mortality.

Zeus moved over to his son. "Ares." The young god couldn't look his father in the eye, knowing

he had let him down. "My son, until you show unselfishness again, you will remain..." With a wave of his hand, Ares was gone. "... there!" They would be looking for a new God of War.

Aphrodite's eyes widened at the harsh punishment meted out by Zeus. Her brother had done some stupid things all in the name of love, and now he was going to pay.

"Artemis, please see to the army outside." The Huntress left, sweeping away the splintered door, sending energy bolts out the building towards the scattering fighters.

"Now, let's do this." The remaining gods moved around their victim in preparation.

* * * * *

Xena no longer responded to the young woman's gentle entreaties as the evil swelled and rolled over her like a tidal wave. Gabrielle knew she now had to take an active part. She had stood idly by while Xena controlled the defence of her own soul, but this was no longer possible and it was now up to her.

I warned you, Xena. I'm coming to get you and I'm pissed! She let the anger grow in her to feed her emotions and give fire to her actions. She was angry with Xena for taking the chakram, she was angry with the evil for reducing her partner to this state, she was angry with herself for not stepping in sooner and, above all, she was angry with Ares for starting all this trouble in the first place.

Darkness bombarded her from all sides, trying to break through to her to claim one more soul in its victory. She could feel the misery and desolation she had felt before through Xena, and it battered her defences with great force. The older woman had taken the brunt of this attack and she knew she wouldn't have lasted long against such a prolonged assault by herself. She now understood only too well the huge heart and great determination that lived within her lover. Xena was by far stronger physically and mentally than she was, but Gabrielle also knew that she was vulnerable in matters of the heart.

She thought for a moment on how she could get Xena back. Her enemy used strong weapons - violence, death, misery and the glorification of war - pushing Xena's basic instincts into overdrive. Well, there was one primal instinct that Gabrielle could claim as her own - that basic animal drive that there was no substitute for, and she had had a couple of years' practice at it.

She had once told Xena that she was emotionally unable to fight, but her partner had replied that there were times when there was only you, so you do it. *She was right. This is one of those times. Now Gabrielle, take that fire and go and get her!*

She rallied her courage and mentally pushed her way through the gathering dark, looking for her one goal. If taking back her lover meant debasing herself, then so be it. Her sensibilities were well worth the sacrifice to gain back the other half of her soul.

The power within was making a final push to totally possess the older woman. She had been steadily losing ground since the journey began, despite the reprieve to ditch the army. Here, in the Temple, was where this evil was at home; this was where it was strongest and it was taking Xena along with it.

Gabrielle applied herself to the task at hand, bringing forth an image of both of them into Xena's brain. Using her body as a tool, Gabrielle was going to seduce her partner in the basest of ways. This was unfamiliar territory for her, but she had anger, guile, imagination, and finally love, on her side and she was going to use everything she possessed to win this particular battle. To her, there was only one outcome - to win at all costs.

Slowly she rotated her hips in a gentle sway, beginning a dance of seduction in front of the seated woman, but Xena's eyes were vacant, apparently not interested in what she was offering. She could see that just being there was not going to be enough; she had to physically take back what was hers. Wasn't getting Xena back worth the sacrifice?

She mentally closed her eyes, drawing explicit images from her memory, feeding off them to get lost in the raw feelings her lover could instill in her. Eliminating the overwhelming emotion she felt, Gabrielle concentrated on the sheer intensity of the passion this woman could draw from her, where her body would crave her touch and accept nothing less than all she had to give.

She became more animated, hips gyrating in a slow rhythm as pieces of clothing were slowly and sensuously removed. Her own hands roamed over her skin, teasing the woman in front of her by driving herself close to the point of completion and then blatantly inviting her to look. Xena didn't move, but continued to sit as the blonde moved closer to the chair. Gabrielle could feel her partner's heated stare run down her body, stopping several times to take in what she was offering.

Gabrielle sat herself in the older woman's lap, unable to stop herself from touching what she so desperately wanted, bringing the dark head in for a long, passionate kiss. She aggressively sought out and captured Xena's tongue, pouring into it all the want and desire she held inside for this woman. The ramrod posture slowly relaxed and Xena's hands came up and roamed over the naked body that was sitting on top of her and grinding herself into her lap.

Gabrielle continued her possession of her lover's mouth, not giving the invading presence a chance to regain control. Her hands moved in slow circles, each pass becoming more demanding as her passion rose. Clips, buckles and ties gave way under her agile fingers, eager to seek the skin underneath. Lips and tongue burned a path down her partner and back up again, claiming territory as she went.

She returned to Xena's mouth, concentrating her efforts there, and she could feel the older woman slowly respond to her heated advances, firm fingers kneading her skin until it was almost painful. But her aggression was suddenly ripped away from her when the older woman violently took the initiative.

Kisses became nips, and nips became bites, as Xena's superior strength and sexual drive increased. Gabrielle knew this was not her Xena, the one who lived so deep within her; this was

the Chakram's work, using her partner as a vessel to punish her for her impudence in trying to take away what it had claimed. It was now full-scale war and her partner's body and soul was the prize.

Gabrielle relaxed and tried to feel the pleasure her lover was so aggressively giving her. She closed her eyes and brought forth images of those times together that had brought her great joy, to ride out the pain and look for the pleasure in such an act.

Her Xena would never have treated her this way - with such cruelty and disdain - she knew that implicitly. The cornerstone of their relationship was love and affection, not sexual promiscuity and violence. There had been moments when they abandoned themselves to lustful endeavour, but even then they never lost sight of the genuine, all encompassing love that held their relationship together.

At a moment of hesitation, Gabrielle pounced, pushing over the chair they were both sitting on. Lying on top of the taller woman, she took what was hers, actively seeking out those points that would bring Xena great pleasure. She drove her libido up without preamble and with great vigour, drawing out cries from the woman underneath her. She gave everything that she was - her body, her soul, her very life - in the pursuit of what she knew she owned. *She is mine and you cannot have her!*

For a moment in her mind she heard a deep chuckle, its resonance setting her on edge. She repeated herself, *SHE IS MINE!*

She increased her assault on the older woman's body, claiming every corner and sweeping away the darkness with her own brand of fire. *C'mon Xena, I know you're in there. Come to me...*

Gabrielle was everywhere, her lips, her tongue, her fingers, her heart, all demanding everything that Xena was. A harsh, strangled moan escaped those perfect lips, crying out her release to the surrounding darkness. The evil faltered under the flood of emotion this woman let flow over her partner. Selfless love, pure as the day it was conceived, bathed the warrior in an ethereal light, and it was blinding to the darkness.

Harsh fingers on her back began to lose their strength, dropping to the floor in defeat. Gabrielle steadied and slowed her assault, easing back to gentle caresses, awaiting the return of her one true love. Once she had Xena's attention, she pulled back slightly, looking into clearing blue pools.

"I love you, Xena. Remember what we had. It was so beautiful, and it could be again. Just take my hand, sweetheart. Come with me and leave this all behind."

Gabrielle stood, ignoring her nakedness, and extended her hand for Xena to take. She saw her hesitate as the entity tried one last grasp for her partner's spirit. She grabbed her chin, bringing her warrior's vision directly to her eyes and she poured all the love and tenderness she could muster into one look.

"Let's end this and go home. We have a family who needs us."

Hesitantly, a shaking hand raised up to meet her own. She pulled her up and into an intimate embrace, to reinforce the tentative bridge she had built to her partner's soul.

"C'mon, I want a warm bed and you in that gladiator costume of yours... and perhaps two or three days without interruption."

Oh, yeah... That thought came through clear as a bell. *Oh, yeah...*

* * * * *

Xena moved to the table, seemingly oblivious to the movement around her, and placed the Chakram on the altar. The circle glowed and a second Chakram appeared, seated in the opposing recess. The supernatural glow from the two discs lit up the room, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. The glow faded, leaving in its wake a second Chakram, identical to its twin, the azure gems glinting in the dying light.

The malevolent heaviness in the air did not dissipate with the arrival of the second Chakram, leaving the gods no choice but to destroy it before it reached its full potential for destruction. Zeus watched Xena, a ghostly aura emanating from her pale blue eyes. He had hoped that it wouldn't come to this, but the second Chakram had not returned the balance. It was now too late.

Circled around Xena, the small group of gods made preparations to destroy the two women who had given their best to get the Chakram here. Sparks began to fly from figure to figure as the intensity grew, circling around the lone figure in the middle like a giant chakram of its own.

Their attention was riveted to the tall woman, who stood leaning over the altar, lifting the Chakram of Darkness up in one large fist. Her free hand slowly came up, resting on the stone surface. Vibrant blue eyes opened and cleared, looking to Zeus in sad understanding. He watched the hand move and hover over the Chakram of Light, twitching lightly as it slowly descended to a hair's breath away from the metal ring.

In a voice hoarse with strain, Xena looked to Aphrodite, "If we don't survive, tell Marina I'm so sorry."

Xena's voice changed slightly as Gabrielle spoke, "We have both agreed to this. It has to end here. Watch over her, please."

Xena's hand opened and grabbed the ring and then held both Chakrams aloft. A few moments passed silently before long strings of electrical discharge ran along the new weapon, arcing through the body holding it and encircling its opposite.

The room pulsed with energy, even greater than that of those immortals who were witnessing the exchange. With shaking hands, Xena brought the two circles together. To those present, for a

moment it looked as if there were two people within the Chakrams' field. Xena and Gabrielle acted as one to bring together the ultimate good and evil in a desperate attempt to end the danger once and for all.

The two women stood, one within the other, bathed in their eternal love and awaiting the end of their lives. They were secure in the knowledge that even this evil could not separate them; that they would truly live on after their mortal bodies had given out.

Zeus motioned the other gods to step back and wait. The two Chakrams lifted from Xena's hands, suspended in the dusty air by its own power. The two discs twisted and turned around one another in a ritual dance for domination. The weapons spun together, gathering momentum until they were just a blur.

Not a sound could be heard in this ancient place, save the whirring of the spinning circles, as attention was focused on the outcome of this sudden turn of events. Zeus kept his power at the ready in case things turned nasty, hoping that it would not be needed. These two women had surpassed his greatest expectations and it gave him great hope for the survival of humanity.

Chapter 20

A ghostly scream echoed around the walls, a high-pitched cry that pierced the thin air, making those present cringe at the intensity. A dark vapour bled from the warrior's orifices, blending overhead into a small cloud floating silently overhead. Within the cycle of a breath, it had found its next victim, moving swiftly through the air to gain access the way it had escaped.

Everyone was focused on the spinning Chakrams and did not notice the subtle movement from one body to another, driven out and forced to seek refuge in another host. Its connection to the Chakram was now broken and it was free to roam as it wanted, picking and choosing hosts at will.

Two spirits resided in the large body of the woman holding the Chakrams, one wrapped around the other in a loving embrace, awaiting the outcome of their existence. By mutual consent, whatever befell them, they would accept... together. This was how it was and how it would be till the end of time.

They both felt at peace as they watched Xena extend her hand towards the spinning object, unafraid. Long, slender fingers closed in the blink of an eye, grabbing the circle out of thin air. Nothing happened... despite all the signs and portents. They had survived.

Xena brought the Chakram down to her eyes. It had changed. Gone were the azure gems that were liberally scattered over its surface. The new Chakram now had a bar through the middle, giving it the shape of the ancient Chinese symbol of yin and yang, Light and Dark, two halves of one whole. *A little like us.* They both studied it through blue eyes, thinking the same thought.

How appropriate.

The gods watched in fascination as a legend was born. The two Chakrams, long separated by the mists of time, were now one and heralding a new era of human history. In the background stood Aphrodite, unwilling to participate in the destruction of her friends, a silent witness to the decree of Zeus.

She felt strange, feeling an anger she had never experienced before. It was a simmering anger that seemed to expand with every passing moment. She felt herself helpless as she directed her rage towards her father, the god who had sent her brother away without so much as a goodbye.

Xena looked over Zeus's shoulder to the young goddess, gracing her with a smile. The joy of the moment evaporated at the look on the young immortal's face. The ghostly glow alerted her and she barely had the chance to pull Zeus out of the way before a ball of godly fire skimmed over them.

The other deities stared in disbelief. Their younger sister attacking the King of the Gods was unthinkable.

"It's not Aphrodite! Take cover!" Xena knew that look only too well. It had resided in her long enough for her to recognize its source. "The entity has escaped." She looked to Zeus her eyes expressing the sad news she was loathe to utter.

His heart broke. She was the baby of the family and, though sometimes a bit scatterbrained, had always been a joy to him. Destroying Xena was one thing, but destroying one of their own was another. He sighed deeply and spoke. "She must be stopped at all costs. Do what you must."

Xena's hand came up, resting on his arm, eyes meeting in a common bond - the loss of family and friend. Xena could feel Gabrielle shudder inside, echoing her own feelings for the young goddess. There had to be a way to salvage this situation. She looked around the Temple, desperately looking for a solution to this impossible predicament.

The darkness of the building lit up with the energy balls flying around. Huge, orange flames hit the crumbling stone, setting recessed torches alight. Flickering flame cast shadows across the floor, lighting the godly battle in an eerie half-light, dotted with the glow of fiery missiles.

The Love Goddess stood unprotected, mockingly presenting herself as a target in defiance of their power. Her energy slowly depleted, each ball taking longer than its previous one to make. The entity felt a weakness it had never experienced before, its dark energy diluting in the goddess's body. She swayed with the loss of power, waiting moments for the parasite to recharge her. The attack momentarily halted at Zeus's order.

Xena stood up, Chakram in hand, and threw it through her long fingers, flicking the weapon at the point of release and allowing it to hit the far wall. The silence was broken by the sound of the ricocheting disc, bouncing from wall to wall, slowly moving closer to the blonde goddess and forcing her to step back.

The weapon continued to dance around her, spinning a metal web in a circle, moving in tighter and tighter until she had nowhere to move.

Arcing lightning bolts held the young goddess imprisoned. Zeus held her there, bending his will and full power to keep her still. Xena extended her hand, capturing the spinning weapon out of the air without conscious thought.

Aphrodite stood immobile within the energy field, thin tendrils of light flickering and twisting like a large net, her pale eyes watching the other gods circling around her prison. The young goddess paced around her cage, throwing a few testing fireballs but finding no weakness in the barrier.

Xena approached the lightning field and stared at her opponent, seeing an answering glow for a moment before fading back to her friend. Aphrodite swayed and staggered for a moment before gathering her equilibrium.

"Let me go! NOW!" The voice smouldered with menace, its timbre not recognisable as Aphrodite's.

Xena didn't answer but continued to watch the Goddess of Love. "Let me in."
Are you nuts??? Gabrielle screamed so loud her head rang. Xena gave the tall god a tiny wink and stood waiting for him to allow her to enter.

What do you think you're doing? We just got rid of that thing.

Gabrielle, trust me on this. Please, just do it for me.

Xena, so help me, don't make me come after you again.

Everything will be alright. I have a plan.

You and your plans.

Yeah, yeah. Argue with me later.

Taking a deep breath, she entered, feeling the energy crackle over her skin as she passed effortlessly through the electrical barrier.

Aphrodite paced around like a caged lion. "I don't understand."

"No, I suppose you don't."

The loss of energy was causing pain to the evil residing within the blonde. It could not understand why this was happening. No being had been able to resist it, save perhaps the human facing it now.

It had desired to use this immortal body, but now that appeared impossible. Somehow, it was poison to it and uninhabitable. Its only other choice was to return to its former host. Not ideal, not with the dual spirits inhabiting it, but not impossible either. In time, it would win. It always did.

Wisps of darkness drifted between the two bodies, moving silently into its former environment.

Gabrielle, come here into my embrace.

Not now, Xena.

Yes now, Gabrielle. Think of when we took the Chakram of Light. Look for that special moment when our love was everything. It filled our every thought and left us breathless. Do you remember?

How could she forget? It was, as Xena had said, breathtaking. It was the culmination of everything they had meant to each other, settling over them like a warm blanket of eternal love. Gabrielle could feel that sensation again, washing over her. She let herself drown in the feeling, happy to die in the arms of the one who would always be there for her.

Xena could feel those glorious feelings flow from her little blonde, letting it feed her own warmth. She curled herself around Gabrielle, letting it all combine into one large pool of pure sensation. She let the barrier down, allowing the darkness to roll in and consume them.

The entity relished the thought of feeding on two new souls, one the blackness of pitch, not prepared for the weapon there to meet it. It screeched in pain at the touch of such light, purer than its twin, and tried to withdraw. This body was now poison as well.

Xena reached out to capture the hate, the anger and the evil and bring it into her embrace, holding tightly as it vainly struggled against their strength. It had been all so easy and she had not seen it. Now this simple truth would set them all free.

The ancient evil desperately sought out Xena's basic drives, looking for leverage to release itself, only to be met by a small blonde who blocked its path. *She is mine...* whispered wherever it roamed, ... *just as I am hers.*

The darkness slowly faded, losing precious strength until it was a mere shadow of itself, replaced by the blinding light of selfless love.

The two of them had been content just to rest in each other's arms, but the outside world was awaiting the outcome of the battle. Xena extended her senses, feeling only a gentle thrumming from the entity, now lifeless and immobile within both of them. *Let's go home...*

Xena looked to Zeus and broke out into a smile. "It's over." He was not convinced, however. "What do you want me to do? Backflips?"

Xena stepped over and helped Aphrodite up off the floor.

"Wha... What happened?"

"The evil tried to have you for lunch."

"Ewwww. This is sooo gross." She busily brushed her hands on her pants, trying to get the evil off herself in mock disgust.

"Yeah, tell me about it."

The young goddess placed her hand on the warrior's forearm in concern. "Sorry."

"No, don't be. I was the logical target."

Xena's voice changed as Gabrielle spoke. She looked into those blue eyes, and spoke to her ageless smitten friend. "We're both here, Aphrodite. It's dead."

The Goddess of Love looked over to her father, silently pleading him to let them out. "I believe them. Gabrielle could only speak when Xena was in control."

He withdrew his power, the other gods standing in readiness at any sign of trouble. Zeus established a larger barrier around the Temple. No one was leaving until he was sure it was dead. He watched the tall warrior carefully, but a look of enquiry crossed his face. He was dying to know what had happened but was waiting patiently for Xena to tell him.

Oh, please, just tell him and get it over with!

You have no sense of adventure, Gabrielle.

Not with the King of the Gods ready to incinerate us, Xena. Play nice...

"It was love." Zeus's eyes widened. "That's why it couldn't stay in Aphrodite. After all, she is the embodiment of love. When it came into me, Gabrielle and I were ready."

"I don't understand."

"It wasn't the Chakram of Light as such that drove it out. At the point that the light entered my body, Gabrielle and I felt something so... sooo..." Xena couldn't find the words, but the quiet glow in her eyes and the gentle smile told Zeus everything. "I could see that in Aphrodite it was weak. She was losing strength rapidly and swaying on her feet. It was just a matter of presenting it with another option."

"That was a pretty big risk."

"Perhaps, but one worth taking." Xena removed the Chakram from her belt, looking at it for a

moment before presenting it to Zeus. She had no claim to this weapon and waited for him to take it back.

"No, you keep it. This is now your legacy, Xena." He could see the quizzical look from the tall woman. "You and Gabrielle have shown great courage and sacrifice in saving the world. This is now your destiny, Defender of Mankind."

"Oh, no, no, no, no..."

"Xena, you can fight it all you like, but the Fates have foreseen this. You, your bard and your descendents are bound to the Chakram. There is a prophecy that goes with this weapon. It's not well known and very old, but in essence it states that whosoever can unite Light and Dark will be bound to defend and protect it. For if it is lost to those not of the Defender's blood, then the world will be plunged into chaos until the Chakram is restored to those of the rightful bloodline. So, it's yours whether you like it or not." He couldn't help but smile at the flustered look on the warrior's face.

"You knew about this and you put us through all that?"

"I did not discover this news until my son had already put events into motion. I wasn't sure if you were the ones of the prophecy. I had to make sure we could stop you if we had to. Your actions in battle should tell you this was meant to happen."

He could see the gathering storm clouds on the woman's face and even though he was a god, he did not want to be around if she decided to try out her new weapon.

"Now, how about we help Gabrielle back into her body, eh?"

"Aphrodite? Please bring back Gabrielle's body." The young goddess did as she was asked and seconds later the still figure of the blonde appeared, just as it had been left days before. A frown crossed that immortal brow as she studied the young girl's body. She closed her eyes for a moment and opened them in surprise, discovering something she had not foreseen.

Zeus drew power into the air to start the process of separating the two souls and sending them spinning back to their rightful places. For a moment, there was resistance as the two were loathe to break apart, but reluctantly the spirits bowed to the greater power and returned to where they belonged.

With the wave of an imperious hand, the pale green orb of Gabrielle descended, absorbing through skin and muscle to take up residence in the young woman's chest. Xena knelt down beside her partner, tenderly holding a hand, awaiting the arrival of her little blonde. *My bard... he he. You go, Gabrielle!*

Pale lashes slowly moved, revealing the pale green eyes underneath. Deep breaths slowly expanded a chest that had been still for way too long. A lost, slightly hoarse voice called out, "Xena?"

"I'm here, Gabrielle. Right where you left me." Her partner's eyes tracked to her, softening with love. "Hey."

"Hey."

"Let me help you up." She gently guided her to her feet, placing a supporting arm around her as trembling legs gave little support. Gabrielle looked up into the tall woman's face, seeing lines of exhaustion and stress embedded there. They stood together for a moment, still not believing that it was all over and they had come through it, while not unscathed, relatively intact.

Both bore the internal scars from their ordeal, touched by the darkness that would forever be with them, but tempered by the great joy and uplifting optimism the Chakram of Light had given them. Balanced, like the Chakram that Xena now wore on her hip.

Zeus approached, thoughtful, and asked, "Xena, even with Gabrielle's help, how were you able to hold out so long against the power of the Chakram?"

A smile touched Xena's lips before she raised her right hand. In the palm rested a flap of leather, covering her palm and fingers. In illustration, she grabbed the Chakram, showing those present that in fact the disc had not touched her skin, the leather acting as a barrier to any contact.

Zeus let out a belly laugh that echoed around the Temple, causing the other gods to look around in alarm, then confusion. No one had ever been witness to the King of the Gods in full-fledged amusement. His laughter was infectious and others joined in, perhaps from relief that the immediate danger was past more than anything else.

He finally regained his dignity and asked, "How did you know?"

"I didn't. I just knew not to trust your son."

"Well done." He chuckled once more. "Well done, indeed." His laughter bounced off the walls as his image slowly dissipated.

Xena looked around for Gabrielle, noticing that she had been dragged off to a quiet corner by Aphrodite. She watched anxiously as her partner became agitated at something the goddess said to her, and awaited her return to find out what that was.

Xena's emotions were in turmoil. She had come so close to losing it all - her life, her sanity, her beloved Gabrielle and her very soul. She watched the object of her affection approach. "What was that all about?" She was curious as to what the goddess had said that upset her.

"Er, nothing. I'll tell you later when it's quiet." Xena's emotions went on alert. If her partner was waiting for a quiet moment, then the news was not going to be good. "Did you know it was a trap?"

"Well, knowing Ares, there would have been some price to pay for whatever he offered. I just took precautions, that's all."

"But Xena, why all this charade?"

"Because, Gabrielle, if it wasn't me, he would have found someone else to use for his scheme. The Chakram in anyone else's hands would have been disastrous; it was only a matter of time. Remember, there were those other men on the island, and they would have eventually found it."

"I may not have touched it, but it still had a strong hold on me. If it weren't for you there with me, I would have been lost. You saved me, Gabrielle, and I am eternally grateful." She placed a series of tiny kisses on the open palm. "But it was foolish what you did. If one of us had died, the other..." Xena physically shuddered at the thought of Gabrielle suffering the same fate as her, had they failed.

Gabrielle grabbed her partner's hand, turning it over to look at the piece of leather. Somehow it looked familiar. "Oh no, you didn't."

"Well, I had no choice, Gabrielle. It was that or cut up my own leathers."

"But the gladiator outfit, Xena. Why did it have to be that?"

"It's alright. You might like the improvement." "I will? Where did you take it from?" "You'll just have to wait and see." With that, Xena gave her a saucy wink.

Aphrodite approached the two women, her breasts now unrestrained and bouncing around in her pink diaphanous gown. "So are you two ready to go home?"

"Yeah, I think so." Xena took a moment to gather her thoughts. "Thank you. You have been a good friend." She could see the young goddess preen under the compliment.

Gabrielle reached over and pulled Aphrodite into a warm hug, Xena watching in amusement at the young goddess's surprise before she accepted and returned the familiarity with some of her own. What a lonely life it must be to be a god, Xena mused. Surrounded only by family, with no friends or confidants. Perhaps...

"Ok, you two, off you go now." With a wave of her hand, Aphrodite sent them off in a shimmer.

* * * * *

Epilogue

They materialized in a bedroom. This was not the home that Xena knew. She looked around to

find a fire burning brightly in the hearth, a large tub nearby filled with hot water, food and drink on a table that would last them a few days and a large, overstuffed bed in the far corner. Xena glanced over at Gabrielle, who seemed as perplexed as she was. She was about to call out, when a disembodied voice hovering overhead spoke, "Enjoy."

"What is going on here?"

"One good turn deserves another, Xena."

"Aphrodite, please..."

"Now let's see if I got this right, 'C'mon, I want a warm bed and you in that gladiator costume of yours... and perhaps two or three days without interruption'." Xena's bag materialised on the bed.

"How did you know that?"

"Hey, I got my connections. I keep track of my favourite gals, Xena."

Xena could feel the blush rise up her cheeks. That particular statement came at a very vulnerable moment for both of them. And one she had been ashamed of. Gabrielle saw Xena's head dip. She grabbed her partner's chin and forced eye contact. "It was not your fault, do you hear me? Let it be."

"I'm so sorry. Despite everything, it was still me. I could have really hurt you."

"But you didn't, so there must have been a kernel of you in there protecting me, even then. I am not blaming you for this, so you shouldn't either. Let's go forward from here."

"That's my girl, Gabby. Now just give me a call when you're ready to go home. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Aphrodite's laughter rang around the room, fading away as the deity finally left them alone.

Xena opened her bag and found the folded leather, shaking it out to show Gabrielle the hole. She raised a suggestive eyebrow, "Shall we?"

THE END.

[Aurelia's Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)
