# ~ Blood Bond ~

# The Second Pint

or His... ahem... HERstory bites and draws blood by  $\underline{\textbf{D}}$ 

(a.k.a. Bacchae Bunny)

**Disclaimer:** The recognizable characters in this tale belong to Rob Tapert and Co., RenPics, Studios USA, MCA/Universal and anyone else who has an investment in Xena: Warrior Princess. I am just borrowing them for use in this story. No profit is being made from this and no copyright infringement is intended. This is all just for fun and to keep me busy and out of trouble.

**Beta (and partner in mayhem) Translation:** Still not ours, although after a year, they should be. And besides, we treated them much better. They are much happier with us, honest. They followed us home... can we keep'm, huh? Huh?

**Thanks:** To Phil - who won't let me list her as a co-author and without whom the story wouldn't be anywhere as interesting and it certainly wouldn't be nearly as long. She did all the research which I then twisted to suit my purpose. She also did all the beta reading which required hours and hours of time picking up all the letters I dropped along the way, of which there were many. I have to live up to the PITA DIVA reputation somehow.

Also thanks to Les and SueG for keeping the clock ticking and reminding me that the deadline was LOOMING and for their encouraging words along the way.

And thanks to Steph, who suggested the premise which we managed to take to Pluto and back before returning it to the Academy.

**Beta (and partner in mayhem) Translation:** Well, dang... there goes my anonymity.

Co-author... uh uh. I think I wrote one line every 100 pages or so (and provided suggestions for a name or two along the way). I admit I did help add a little humor. Be warned there is one line in there (not one of mine either, dang it) that is absolutely 'spew worthy' and no, I'm not telling you where. However, I will tell you that you can get a cheap replacement keyboard at Radio Shack... tell them you know me. I get quantity discounts now.

Beta... yep, I picked up all those dropped letters but she put them back in the right places. And I did voice checks on everyone but one like, fab blonde... D doesn't need like any help channeling that one like, bitchin' character.

Researcher... oh yeah. I have 147 "favorite places" links listed that we used for the story. I admit to sending her off on tangents to work in certain punchlines and character cameos (which I think ended up working out great). She also was kind enough to indulge me and hit some history highlights I thought y'all might enjoy. The overall idea was to try to get this sucker to 602 pages but alas, we fell a little shy of that goal. Okay, so that was MY goal. I say shoot high... why not? It's not like I was writing this thing. <.g.> Anyway, we fell a bit short because....

**Special Thanks:** To the readers of the Valiant Series - I appreciate your patience and indulgence while I

wrote this. Randi and Gwen were glad for the extra honeymoon time. I \*have\* already started on the next Valiant story and hope to have it out for your reading pleasure posthaste.

**Beta (and partner in mayhem) Translation:** ... she threatened to tell everyone who has been waiting on the next Valiant story exactly how to get to my house. YIKES!

**Author's Note:** This monstrosity is directly the result of a phone call that started out with the simple phrase, "I can't write a story about vampires or bacchae... I \*am\* one!" Now a year, 400 some-odd pages and \$3,000 worth of phone calls later, this is the end result of that conversation.

**Beta (and partner in mayhem) note:** Still a vampire, still not a writer... my job here is complete. Thanks to Steph for the invitation... this was quite a ride. But, don't ask me again... she will beat me senseless. <.bg.> No comments from the peanut gallery are necessary, thank you very much.

Oh, one more thing... please read the story. I would like to know that the \$3,000 in phone bills and the fact that I ate a cold dinner at least 3 times a week, due to the timing of said phone calls, was not in vein. HA! Little bacchae joke there.... Okay, very little bacchae joke there.

Beta (and partner in mayhem) note #2 (the really, really important one): Thanks D... you gave me my season 7(and 8 and pretty much 9 too). You ROCK!

# **Prologue**

The man built the fire up well, knowing it would need to last him several candlemarks once he started the ritual. He checked the tattered parchment in his hands carefully one last time, nodding in satisfaction as he identified each object lying in a circle around the fire.

Finally, convinced that he had everything he needed, the shaman pulled the buckskin from his body and stepped into the nearby creek for a ritual cleansing. He dipped a finger in the paints he had prepared and gently drew the symbols of the war god on his chest. Stripes on his face, arms and thighs completed the look and he put on a clean breechcloth and began his chanting.

Darkness fell as the ritual continued, bringing with it a rumble of thunder and fierce lightning. The shaman's chanting grew louder and each object around the small circle he danced in began to emit an eerie light. Then without warning, the glow disappeared, the shaman was thrown from the circle and somewhere not too far distant, a bolt of lightning struck, leaving behind a mark... and something that would change everything for some and something for everyone.

#### Chapter I

Gabrielle felt the rending of her soul as the sun set and Xena slipped away from her. Breathing became problematic as the pain overwhelmed her and she forced herself to focus on each breath she took. So intent was she on maintaining a semblance of control that she didn't detect his presence until the small black pot was

snatched from her grasp and its contents were floating in the Fountain of Strength.

Gabrielle sat stunned for long seconds... long enough for Ares to mumble something incomprehensible to her. The war god looked up expectantly, frowning when he realized that this wasn't going strictly according to plan. And that was all he had time to understand because he suddenly found himself with an armful of heartbroken, furious bard.

"ARES!!" Gabrielle screamed as she started pummeling him with her fists. "What in Tartarus are you doing??? That was all I had left of her! Damn you, Ares! Damn you!!" He grabbed at her flailing arms.

"It should have worked," he muttered loud enough for her to hear. "It should have brought her back." Those words simply sparked her ire again and she pushed him away from her, swinging wildly. He was so taken aback by her aggressiveness that Gabrielle actually managed to land a shot or two before Ares grabbed her wrists in one large hand and held on tightly. Only then could he make out her forlorn whisper.

"She chose to leave me. She chose to give up our life together for a lie. And you've taken all I had left of her." He didn't see her draw back her arm, but the impact of her fist on his face was... magnificent. And quite painful, surprisingly. Frighteningly, it reminded of the time he had spent as a mortal and he was not at all anxious to relive that particular experience ever again.

"Look blondie, I only thought to do us both a favor, but I can see you'd never be able to appreciate it. It's a long trip back to Greece. Maybe you'll be able to show a little respect by the time you get home and we can talk about this rationally. Until then, see ya."

He disappeared in a glow of blue light and Gabrielle took a last swing at the air where he had been standing. "ARES!!" she screamed again, but he was gone. She dropped to the ground until her hand fell on the small pot. Then she scrambled to her feet and began to feverishly scoop the ashes from the pool of water.

"As angry as I am with you right now, Xena, you have to know I never meant for something like this to happen. I promised to take you home and I meant that. I've tried not to make promises to you I didn't intend to keep. Too bad you can't say the same." She was quiet then for a few minutes as she concentrated on gathering every single bit of ash she could collect from the fountain with only the light of the full moon to guide her efforts.

When she was satisfied she had done the very best she could, she straightened with a groan and lidded the pot. She looked around for her gear and, with a sigh, she wrapped the pot closed carefully so none of the ashes would spill and placed Xena's remains in the bottom of her bag. Then she began her descent off the mountain in the darkness.

Gabrielle didn't go very far. She mostly wanted to get away from the spot where she'd lost Xena. Even the thought of that hurt and she focused on controlling her breathing, absently thankful for the time they'd spent together meditating. She noted a small outcropping and made her way over to it, setting her bag down and shaking out her blanket before lying down and closing her eyes. Sheer physical exhaustion took over and she went to sleep with Ares voice haunting her dreams... *It should have brought her back*.

A lone tear escaped her closed lid, even as she slept on.

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With daylight, Gabrielle arose and took up her burdens once more. She slowly and steadily made her way down Mt. Fuji, until she reached Higuchi. It was just lunchtime when she arrived and she was approached by a merchant who bowed to her before offering her a bowl of rice. She tried politely to decline, then realized her refusal would offend the man and accepted his gift with a nod when he rebuffed her payment.

She slowly became aware that everyone in the village was bowing as she passed, regarding her with a mixture of fear, awe and sympathy. It made her want to break down into tears. Instead, she bit her lip and searched out Hoketsu.

He did not speak, but took her to the bathing room, sensing she was not ready to talk about what had happened on the mountain. The fact that she was alone spoke volumes more than words ever could. He waited til she nodded her approval of the arrangements, then bowed his way out the door. Gabrielle stripped and slid into the warm pool, allowing the tears to flow at last.

Meanwhile, at the docks, word had passed about the incredible defeat the small blonde warrior had visited on Yodoshi and the inconceivable price she had paid for her victory. The Captain of one of the vessels in residence stepped onto the dock and began looking for Hoketsu. The younger man bowed as the short, grayhaired captain approached him. Hoketsu had the utmost respect for Katerina von Lihp, even though the woman had the strangest habit of dressing like a shepherd instead of the Germanic sea captain she was. Still, she had proven herself a friend to Hoketsu and the people of Higuchi, so they overlooked her idiosyncrasies.

"Captain Lihp, it is a pleasure. How may the people of Higuchi serve you?"

"Ah, Hoketsu, my friend. Is it true that Yodoshi has been defeated by a small woman warrior?"

"Yes, yes, but at great cost to herself... to her soul."

The older woman scratched her face. "Perhaps I will offer her a way home. I'm sure she will not want to stay here."

"She is bathing, but I will bring her to you if she is willing, when she is done."

"Excellent. I will see to preparing the boat. The tide goes out at sunset and we would do well to go with it."

With a nod, Hoketsu continued on to the small market area and Captain Lihp returned to her vessel.

When he reached the shop he was looking for, Hoketsu entered and bowed toward the proprietor. The older man bowed back then asked with a smile. "Hoketsu, what can I do for you?"

"Morimoto, do you have anything to fit the Little Dragon Warrior? Her clothing was destroyed in the battle with Yodoshi. I wish to replace it before she leaves us."

"She is leaving then?"

"I expect she will. There is no real reason for her to remain and Captain Lihp is going to offer her passage C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

back toward Greece. I think she will accept it."

Morimoto nodded his head thoughtfully. "I believe I can find something for her. She is much the size of the women here. Let me look. She will have my very best."

Hoketsu nodded and Morimoto went into the back area of his shop. Within minutes he returned and held up a package. "Several moons ago, I was compelled to make this," he said quietly, "though I didn't understand why at the time. Now I do. My gift to her."

Hoketsu nodded and accepted the package without opening it. Morimoto was the finest tailor he knew, so he believed that Gabrielle would appreciate the beauty of whatever artistry he had created.

As he began to make his way back to the bath house, Hoketsu was stopped by nearly every citizen of Higuchi, all eager to share their thanks with the bard. He was forced to ask for help in carrying all the gifts offered to her and he and Yama had to stop at his home to drop things off first. Then he turned to the young woman.

"Yama, will you take this to Gabrielle? She needs new clothing, but I do not wish to intrude upon the peace of her bath."

"I would be honored, Hoketsu." She bowed and walked the short distance to the bath house. When she arrived at the door, she stopped and listened. When she didn't hear anything, she knocked timidly and waited for permission to enter.

Gabrielle raised her head and opened her eyes to glare at the door when the knock came. She sighed soundlessly and beckoned, "Come."

Yama stepped into the warm room at the whispered command. "For you, Little Dragon." Yama set the package on the small bench that held the ragged remains of her Samurai costume and her meager belongings. The long sword, katana and chakram stood out conspicuously. "Morimoto sent it for you."

Gabrielle wanted to refuse, but she was too tired and too heart sore to really care. Instead, she nodded and closed her eyes again. Yama smiled gently and bowed herself out, closing her eyes at the anguish she had seen in the bard's own.

Gabrielle sat in the tub a bit longer before finally taking the cloth and the cake of soap and scrubbing herself clean, wishing with all her heart she could do the same with the memories. When she was done, she rose from the water and covered herself with the towel, walking over to inspect the package wrapped in rice paper.

She untied the hemp knot and the paper fell away to reveal... it was another samurai outfit, but this one was done in an indigo that reminded her of... Her breath caught and she closed her eyes against the pain. Gabrielle slipped into the trousers, belting them comfortably before picking up the tunic. She stared amazed at the dragon pattern on the back, an exact duplicate of the one she now bore. It was silver and gold, red and green and she absently marveled at the intricate detail involved in its creation before donning it and settling her weapons.

She folded the towel neatly and stepped into her sandals before she exited the bath house and headed for the docks.

Hoketsu saw Gabrielle leave and moved to walk with her. She glanced in his direction and gave him a quizzical look, but did not say anything.

"I have arranged a way for you back to the mainland, if you desire to return. I did not think you would want to remain here any longer than necessary." Gabrielle nodded her acceptance of his words and motioned for him to lead the way.

When they reached Captain Lihp's boat, Hoketsu crossed the gangway and beckoned Gabrielle to join him on the deck. She walked over with cat-like ease, landing on the teak planking with a little hop. The Captain moved away from her first mate and came over to greet them.

"Welcome aboard. Hoketsu indicated you would like passage out of Japa. I would be happy to take you anywhere you would like to go." Gabrielle looked around at the spic-and-span ship and at the not-so-motley crew and nodded. "Are you in a hurry to get back to Greece or would you like to go with us? I have several ports of call I can stop at if you're not in a rush."

Gabrielle nodded again and both the Captain and Hoketsu began to wonder if her voice had been stolen on the mountain top. However, Lihp was nothing if not a determined woman, so she continued. "Excellent. Shanghai will be our first stop then." She didn't see the speculative gleam that entered the dull green eyes. "Now come," she persisted. "Let me show you your cabin."

Gabrielle turned to Hoketsu and hugged him. He hugged back gently, knowing that beneath the solidness of her body lay a fragility that was close to shattering. "Thank you," he whispered before she released him and stepped back to follow the Captain below decks. He waited a moment longer, then turned and stepped back down the gangplank to the docks. When his feet touched solid ground again, Hoketsu turned and looked back at the ship a final time, offering a prayer to his gods for the safety of Gabrielle's soul.

Lihp went down a single set of stairs and stopped in front of one of the few doors in the passageway. Then she turned to Gabrielle with serious intent.

"We don't carry many passengers, so your berth is not large. We do carry them often enough that this space is set aside for that purpose and it is clean. That is about the most that can be said for it. You have the freedom of the ship and if you need anything, you have but to ask."

Gabrielle nodded her understanding and the Captain opened the door, stepping back so she could pass thru. She looked around. Katerina hadn't lied - the space was extremely small, but it was clean and would suit her needs. Gabrielle gave her a simple nod of approval.

"Excellent! The good people of Higuchi wanted to be sure you were provided for on your journey, so they left you some provisions. Most of the things are here in your cabin. The rest is below decks in the storage area until you are ready to leave us." She waited for a response, but when none was forthcoming, she sighed silently and continued. "Now if you will excuse me, we will get underway."

Gabrielle nodded again and turned her back in dismissal, stepping over to open the small porthole to allow the fresh air in. She heard the door closed and the Captain's footsteps grow fainter before her shoulders sagged

and she slumped onto the small platform cot.

No one heard her silent tears.

The next three weeks passed without much change in routine for either the ship's crew or its passenger. Gabrielle had not spoken a word since she'd set foot on the ship and the crew had learned rather quickly to steer clear of her. She spent candlemarks every day working with both the katana and her sais, though the chakram never left her hip. Her body grew lean and hard even as her eyes became more lifeless and dull.

The remainder of her waking candlemarks, Gabrielle spent staring out to sea or meditating. The longer the voyage became, the more often she turned to meditation. She found it soothed what was threatening to become an overwhelming rage. Her urge to strike out at everyone and everything sometimes sent a red wash through her veins. She found that meditating kept it manageable.

Strangely, the meditating and practice did wonders for her seasickness as well. Though she was not particularly happy to be on a ship again and despite the fact that her appetite was minimal, she experienced only mild discomfort this trip compared to previous ones.

Finally, on the morning of the twenty-second day, the lookout called out, "Land ho!" and it wasn't long before the boat was in the shipping lanes pulling in to the Shanghai port. Gabrielle went below decks to pack her few belongings. Except for the samurai clothing and some fresh fruit that she'd shared among the crew, she had touched nothing from Higuchi. She felt the boat slip into a berth and gave an unconscious sigh of relief.

As she made her way topside, she was hailed by the Captain. "Little Dragon, wait. Please."

Gabrielle stopped, digging into her bag. She found what she was looking for and handed Katerina her small purse. Lihp recoiled as though it were a snake.

"NO!" she said vehemently. "Your money will not work with us, Little Dragon. The people of Higuchi owed you a debt and this is how they chose to make payment."

Green eyes studied hers and Katerina fought to contain her shudder at the deadness of them. Eventually Gabrielle nodded her agreement and placed the purse back in her bag. The Captain nodded back and exhaled in relief.

"Good! Good! Now what shall we do with your other things, hä?" Gabrielle's brow crinkled in confusion and Katerina hastened to explain. "The gifts we stowed in the hold."

Gabrielle shook her head and shrugged. Then she reached out and clasped Katerina's arm briefly before turning and heading down the gangplank.

Captain Lihp watched her out of sight before muttering to herself. "The gods watch over you, Gabrielle of Poteideia. We will see you in Greece." Then she turned back to her boat and the business at hand.

notice of little of it, not realizing that people moved out of her way. She didn't notice the whispers as her samurai dress was noted by the populace. Her senses were aware, but they were focused for danger, not for whispered comments and the space of respect.

She stepped off the main path, looking for a quiet inn with a bath. The first thing that actually got her attention was the sweet smell of opium and she hesitated in front of the door for a long moment. Gabrielle remembered well Xena's stories from her first experience in Chin, though she'd never shared much from that part of her life. Xena had shared the reason for her reluctance to use any sort of narcotic to dull her pain.

Now Gabrielle found herself seriously contemplating the need to lose herself as she had lost Xena. To fill the void Xena's death had caused with mellow joy, even if only for a little while. She put her hand on the door and pushed it open slightly, allowing the wafting sweet scent of the opium to escape. Then she let is close as her shoulders dropped and she turned to journey farther up the road.

"No. I will keep the memories and the pain. It's all I have left."

Gabrielle found what she was looking for on the outskirts of the town. The Labrys hanging near the door reminded her of the Amazons and she knew that she would be safe for the night. It occurred to her in passing that she would need to check on her sisters if she lived that long. She would make it back to Greece... she had promised Xena long ago to take her back to her brother. But Gabrielle had no definite plans beyond getting Xena's remains to Amphipolis. After that....

With a sigh, she pushed open the door, welcoming the relative quiet after the marketplace. She stepped to the bar and dug in her purse, withdrawing a gold coin. She slapped in on the bar in front of the proprietress and raised a brow. She gave silent thanks for Xena's training when the woman started speaking rapid-fire Chinese.

"For that... dinner, bath, bed, breakfast and supplies for the road." Gabrielle nodded agreement and took the mug of ale placed before her. "Everyone calls me Ling," the woman introduced herself. "Come and I will show you to your room."

Gabrielle hefted her bag and lifted the mug. Then she followed Ling down the small hallway. She opened a door and Gabrielle noted it was a clean, sparse room. She nodded her satisfaction and set down her things. Ling crossed the hall and opened another door. Inside was a huge pool, much like the one Gabrielle had used in Higuchi. Except this one had other women in it. They all turned to look and Gabrielle bore the stares stoically.

Ling turned to her and asked, "You want to bathe now? I will wash the outfit, samurai... no extra charge."

Gabrielle stepped into the room and stripped out of her clothing, this time acutely aware of the whispers behind her. A collective gasp fell from the lips of those gathered when her bare back was exposed. When she turned around, she noted that all the women had moved to the far end of the pool. Shrugging to herself, she moved towards the pool.

Ling handed her a cloth and a towel. "They moved to show respect, Little Dragon. Women warriors are very rare here and samurai not at all." She offered a cake of soap.

Gabrielle's eyes had widened at Ling's use of her nickname, but she took the soap and began bathing the days at sea away from her body. When she was done, she rose and wrapped the towel around herself and left the room. Not a word had been spoken while she'd been in there and the low murmur of voices now sounded like so many angry bees.

Dinner was rice and vegetables and a flagon of wine that Gabrielle found sitting on the low table when she stepped into her room. She ate, pleasantly surprised by the mixture of flavors. Then she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

It was late when she awakened and only then because Ling was knocking. Gabrielle pulled the sheet around her and wiped the sleep from her eyes as she rose. She scrubbed her hand through her hair and then opened the door.

Ling offered her a tray and a package. Gabrielle could tell from the feel it was her clothing and she bowed slightly in thanks. Then she shut the door and began to prepare herself for travel.

Ling had given her a small map and Gabrielle had decided to follow the Yangtze River while she searched for Eve. She knew it could take a while for her to find Eve, but figured when she started hearing Eli's message, the messenger would not be too far away.

It was shortly after midday when Gabrielle was stopped by a small group of men demanding payment for walking along the road. The Gabrielle of old, being a skilled bard and negotiator, would have tried talking her way out of the situation. The new Gabrielle didn't hesitate and in the blink of an eye held her katana in one hand and the chakram in the other.

The men laughed amazed at the boldness of the woman standing before them. Not knowing she understood them perfectly and not just the crude gestures they had demanded payment with, one man commented to the other just what he was going to do to teach the impudent woman a lesson.

His words weren't out of his mouth before his head hit the ground. His body remained upright a beat or two longer before it collapsed. In the silence that followed, the five remaining men gauged the situation and the lone woman warrior. Deciding she could not beat them as a whole, they attacked enthusiastically, trying to bury her under the onslaught.

Gabrielle shifted the katana forward and across, glorying in the sweet, coppery smell of blood as it sprayed over her mostly bare skin and licking it's tangy saltiness from her lips. She had resumed her red velvet number when she'd left the inn and now she was glad she had... for several different reasons.

With her left hand she swung the chakram in a wide arc, catching the third man across the throat. He gurgled his last breath.

The three remaining men looked at Gabrielle as though she were a demon possessed and tried to back away. Gabrielle felt the bloodlust sing through her veins and grinned. "Problem, boys? One woman a little too much for you?" said in a whisper that sent skitters across their collective spines.

They didn't understand her words, but her intent was clear. Before they could decide between fight or flight, Gabrielle descended upon them, unleashing the pain and fury she felt. It didn't take long and in the end, six

Chinamen laid dead and the blood-covered warrior wiped her weapons before continuing her journey.

When evening came, Gabrielle found herself searching for a place to make camp. She'd encountered two other sets of highwaymen and each encounter ended the same. She wanted to feel sadness for the unnecessary deaths, but all she could manage was a sense of fulfillment. Strangely, she wasn't particularly hungry, though she'd missed lunch.

Shrugging her shoulders, she found a quiet spot off the beaten path near a still pool. She checked the water and when she was satisfied it wasn't stagnant, she stripped her clothes off and stepped in to wash.

It took her a few minutes to wash the blood away, but she did so rather nonchalantly, then took up her red velvet outfit and scrubbed it clean. She rose from the water and shivered a little in the light breeze. She took a shift from her bag and slid into it, then laid her clothing on the nearby brush to dry. Gabrielle started a small fire, appreciating the warmth more than the light. She heated water for tea and wrapped herself in her sleeping furs, never even realizing when she passed from wakefulness into sleep.

The next few days started a pattern that would continue for the next few moons. Gabrielle rose early and ate, then moved on down the river path. Some days, she would encounter brigands and she found herself oddly full after decimating each roving band. Other days she would spend in the small towns or villages she ran across, helping where she could... building a barn, taking care of the sick, cleaning up after a raid. Simple things that reminded her she was still alive and there were always people in need of help.

Slowly, the days passed into weeks and the weeks became one moon and then two. Finally, after nearly three moons of travel across the land of Chin, Gabrielle was certain Eve was not in the country. She had reached the mountains with no hint of the message or the messenger.

Studying the map, Gabrielle realized that India was on the other side of the mountain range and she decided she was tired of Chin. So she prepared herself and her gear for a trip over the mountains and into India.

It was an arduous journey, but Gabrielle welcomed the challenge. It took all her focus and that was especially good when her bloodlust returned in full measure. She hardly had time to wonder at the cause of it, much less its satisfaction. Soon, the cold and lust overwhelmed her and when she stepped into a world that seemed to be a figment of her madness, she surrendered to it.

When she first opened her eyes, Gabrielle was almost sure she'd crossed into the Elysian Fields. Instead of the cold, whipping wind and stinging bite of snow she expected, the temperature was mild and the climate moderate. Blinking, she realized that she was indoors on a soft bed. She sat up and noticed for the first time that she was clean and naked. It didn't really concern her, but it did make her curious, so Gabrielle gathered the sheet around her and padded to the window. She opened it and stared out into... green eyes blinked several times. The grass was lush and green and the flowers bursting with fragrance and color. Well-dressed people walked along a market area filled with all manner of interesting things.

Gabrielle's forehead crinkled in confusion. She didn't recall the Fields having a marketplace. A knock on her

door interrupted her contemplation.

A curly head poked in after the second knock and for a moment Gabrielle thought it was Ephiny. She shook her head trying to clear the confusion while motioning for the woman to come in.

"Hello, young one," the cheerful voice greeted. "Welcome to Shangri La."

Gabrielle's brow furrowed again. The name seemed so familiar, but she couldn't place it. Was it a myth she had heard? A story on the road? She shrugged mentally. It would occur to her eventually. It usually did. Gabrielle turned her attention back to the woman.

"... Manassa, so you let me know if I can help you, all right dear?" Without waiting for an answer, Manassa continued. "Here is your clothing. It's been cleaned and repaired." Gabrielle reached for her purse. "Oh, no charge, dear. We can settle your bill later. Are you hungry?"

Gabrielle thought about that, then nodded.

"Good, I'll let you get dressed, then we'll see about feeding you." The woman was gone before Gabrielle had a chance to register her leaving.

The next few days passed in something of a blur for Gabrielle. The people had made her very welcome, expecting nothing more from her than what she offered. There was a lassitude, a peace that pervaded all life here and Gabrielle found a part of herself wishing she could stay and enjoy it. The larger part of her was growing antsier, trying to control an urge she still didn't understand.

On the morning of the ninth day after her arrival in the small village, Gabrielle packed up her kit. She knew she had to leave before the burning in her blood manifest itself physically. Manassa looked at her with great sadness.

"I hope you find your peace, young warrior," she said softly as she accepted a small amount of money from Gabrielle. They'd argued about this... Gabrielle with silent, harsh motions and Manassa with quiet, simple words. They had reached an accord they could both live with and now Gabrielle was anxious to leave the small village before she visited her rage upon the innocent people living there.

Gabrielle nodded an acknowledgement of her words and unexpectedly leaned forward to brush her lips on Manassa's cheek. Then she stepped out the door without a backward look and headed for the Southern mountain range and India that lay beyond.

Once again, the severe cold overcame every thought and focus she had and Gabrielle's last thought before she succumbed was that she would never get to tell Eve about Xena's death.

When she awakened this time, it was to the familiar scent of curry and a firm straw mattress beneath her body. She sat up and looked around, hoping to find a clue of where she was, wondering if her previous

experience had been the imaginings of a madwoman.

Her stirrings alerted the young man who was tending to her and he nodded to the young woman who was in the room with him before handing her a cup and bidding her to drink. Then he spoke softly in Hindu words Gabrielle recognized from her travels twenty-six full cycles previously.

"Rest, Dragon Warrior. The messenger has been summoned."

Gabrielle relaxed, hoping that the hard part of her journey was almost done. She'd fallen into a light doze and didn't rouse when Eve stepped into the room. Tears filled Eve's eyes, noting the pallor and almost skeletal leanness, knowing that Gabrielle's solitary state could only mean one thing. Eve nodded her thanks to the young man and he took it for the dismissal it was. Then Eve settled into a chair by Gabrielle's bedside and waited for her to awaken again.

# Chapter II

Slowly, slower than she expected, Gabrielle felt herself rising toward the light again and was at once eager and fearful to awaken. She was fairly certain that Eve was the person in the room with her and now that she actually had to tell her about her mother, Gabrielle felt the tears that had been dry for three moons begin to flow.

Eve sensed Gabrielle's distress and moved to kneel by the bed. She didn't speak, but merely held the hand of someone who could have been another mother to her if Fate had treated them all just a little differently. She wondered if Gabrielle would consider her a friend.

Things had always been slightly strained and awkward between them though they had tried to work through it due to their love for Xena. Now it was that love that would pull them together or push them apart forever.

Gabrielle felt Eve take her hand and the gentle kindness in the gesture made the tears flow even faster. She curled into herself and Eve's eyes welled with sympathetic tears. Without thought, she scooped the small woman into her arms and held her tightly until Gabrielle had stopped trembling.

Eve kissed the blonde hair lightly before setting Gabrielle next to her and taking the calloused hands in her own smoother ones. She recognized the weapons patterns and closed her eyes. *Only one thing would have prompted her to choose a sword, after all this time*, Eve thought seriously.

"Gabrielle," she said softly, not understanding the flinch that passed through the other woman's body at the sound of her name. Gabrielle's eyes closed as she tried to regain her equilibrium. "Gabrielle, I know you came here to tell me Mother is dead... didn't you? It's the only reason I can think of you would be here alone."

Gabrielle nodded her head, for a long moment unable to look into the blue eyes that reminded her of just how much she'd lost.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Eve paused, reading the agony so clearly in the dead green eyes that finally met her own. "I know... I know you loved her, Gabrielle, more than anything, just as she loved you." Gabrielle's shudder was visible, but Eve continued. "If things had been different, we would have been a family. I loved her, because she was my mother and I knew she loved me in return. And I'll miss her, but more for

what could have been than what was."

Gabrielle understood what Eve was saying. It was almost what she'd expected, given the limited amount of time mother and daughter had had together before Eve had journeyed eastward. They had bonded and even become friends, but her grief was not the overwhelming loss of a soulmate that Gabrielle was living with.

Gabrielle was quiet for so long that Eve felt compelled to speak. "Gabrielle, I can't begin to understand how you feel, but I am here if you need to talk. For now, though, I'd like you to drink this and get some rest." She handed a cup to Gabrielle. "We can continue our discussion later."

Gabrielle complied without protest and it was then that it occurred to Eve what was so odd... beyond the obvious. Gabrielle had yet to say a word.

Eve waited patiently while Gabrielle finished the draught the healer had left for her, then sat beside her until she felt the small warrior slip into a deep sleep. Then she rose and went to her own room, closing the door before calling on Gabrielle's goddess friend.

"Aphrodite, goddess of love and friend to my mother and Gabrielle, I beseech you to grant me an audience."

"Yo, babe! Whassup?"

Eve turned from the window and looked at the goddess now standing in a ring of rose petals in her barelythere pink outfit. Dite grinned and shook her curly mane.

"Hey, Eve! Long time, no talk to. You still doing the one God gig?"

"Hi, Aphrodite! Yeah, I am, so thanks for coming."

"Too bad!" The goddess flopped on Eve's bed, frowning in supreme discomfort. "Ew! Grody!" She snapped her fingers and was instantly on her own comfortable divan. "Ah, much better," she sighed. "Now what's up that you call for me instead of Eli?" her tone serious.

"I asked you to come because of Gabrielle. She once told me that you were her friend."

Now Eve had Dite's full attention. "I'd like to think I still am."

Eve took a seat on the couch beside the goddess and looked directly into her eyes. "Good. Then you can tell me what happened to my mother and why Gabrielle no longer speaks."

Aphrodite's eyes grew wide. "Whaddya mean what happened to...." Her voice trailed off and her gaze went inward. "That would explain Ares...." she muttered to herself, then reached for Eve's hand. "C'mon, babe. We've got things to do."

"Uh... but... Aphr...." But that was all she got out as the pair disappeared in a shimmer of sparkles.

Her last visit to Olympus had been such an unmitigated disaster, Eve wasn't real comfortable when she figured out where they were. Approdite caught that clue pretty quick.

"Chill, babe." There was sadness in her gaze before she focused on Eve. "We aren't going to the audience hall. None of us have been there since...."

Eve laid a gentle hand on Dite's arm and looked at her compassionately. "Aphrodite, I am sorry. What happened...."

"What happened to them was totally their fault. Ares and I tried to warn them... tried to stop them, but they so wouldn't listen. They paid for their arrogance to the max. Maybe one day they'll get it." Eve looked at her in confusion, but Dite continued. "This is my scrying bowl," motioning towards the object. "We can see what rocked her world for ourselves." She looked at Eve. "Do you know when this happened?"

Eve shook her head. "No, but it has to have been a couple moons or so. She is nothing but muscle and bone. And her hands are rough as though she's been fighting for a while."

"Well, it for sure didn't happen around here or I would have seen it. Let me hook this gnarly thing to the worldwide god web. This will let us scan for her anywhere, anytime."

Dite did some adjusting and jiggling, looking back and forth between the back of the scrying bowl and the wall where the picture was being reflected. "Eve, keep an eye on the picture will you, babe? I don't have to do this often and I never remember...." The love goddess ducked her around the back, mumbling to herself.

"Hold it!" Eve shouted, causing Aphrodite to smack into the wall. She lifted up her head to glare at Eve. "Sorry, but that is perfect."

Dite eased away from the bowl, rubbing her head gingerly as she moved to take a seat on the large bed. She waved a hand and a tray appeared and she poured them each a goblet of wine. "Now, how far back do you think we should go?"

"Um, Aphrodite, shouldn't we start at the here and now first?"

"Oh, like duh!" She looked around, then snatched the small box of the bedside stand. She pointed it at the scrying bowl, but nothing happened. Dite peered at it closely, then aimed again. "This is so uncool! Never let a man play with the toys, babe, especially a god. They never work right after that." She rapped it against her hand, pleased when the picture shifted to Gabrielle, then appalled when she saw exactly what shape her friend was in. "Oh, my... Gabrielle?"

Tears flooded Aphrodite's eyes and she raised a hand to cover her mouth. "Oh Gabrielle," she said softly. "Let's see what we can do." She looked at Eve, "Two moons, you said?"

Eve nodded. "At least, I think. What happened to her takes time."

"All right, that would make it...." She pointed the box and Eve watched a blur of images fly by in reverse. The images stopped. "... about here." Dite clicked the box but nothing happened. She clicked it twice more, but still nothing. Frustrated she gave it a good smack and the images stared to play forward in slow motion.

"Um, Aphrodite, I don't wanna question your methods, but why not just wave or snap or something?

Wouldn't it be easier?"

"Yes, but the instructions to using the wwgw say to use the box, so I do." She shook it and the picture resumed normal speed. Then she almost wished it hadn't. Gabrielle was surrounded by highwaymen and yet she cut them down as callously as though they had been so much brush wood. Dite cleared her throat. "Maybe we should look for her and Xena together."

The images once more moved backwards rapidly and Dite missed the final interlude on Mt. Fuji. Instead, she caught them at the teahouse, just as Xena was teaching Gabrielle the pinch.

"Stop," Eve said quietly. "This is important."

So they watched, experiencing Gabrielle's horror first hand. When they got to Xena's headless body, Eve whispered, "No more, please," and stunned, Dite complied. She shut off the scrying bowl and the worldwide god web marked her place, a factor which would become crucial as time went on.

Eve had tears streaming down her face when she looked at Aphrodite. "My God... how horrible. No wonder Gabrielle was nearly destroyed by this. I barely knew my mother and I feel like my guts are being ripped out. They were everything to each other."

"That was way uncool of Xena," Aphrodite commented flippantly, wiping the tears from her eyes. "There is gonna be some radical payment for this screw-up," she muttered. "Let's get back to Gabrielle. I have something that may help until I can find a solution to this totally fubared situation." They disappeared, leaving only a trail of rose petals in their wake.

Gabrielle woke to the soft feel of fingers gently combing through her hair and for a long moment lost herself in memories the feeling stirred in her. Then she realized that the touch was wrong and reality crashed on top of her once more. She opened her eyes and saw tears in the blue eyes regarding her.

"How ya doing, kiddo?" Aphrodite asked softly. She stopped stroking as Gabrielle sat up, but kept her hand on the muscular arm. It took all she had not to flinch at the obvious changes Xena's death had wrought in her friend. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle. I just found out, or I'd have been here sooner."

Gabrielle didn't answer and she didn't cry, but she did throw her arms around the goddess's neck and hug her for all she was worth. Dite spared a moment's thought to be thankful for her immortality... the strength of the hug would have been painful otherwise.

Gabrielle clung to her for quite some time and neither woman noticed when Eve slipped out the door to give them some privacy. Finally, they separated and Aphrodite put two fingers under Gabrielle's chin, raising the green eyes to meet her own. This time she did flinch and closed her eyes briefly when the depth of Gabrielle's pain met her gaze.

"I have a totally radical present for ya," the goddess said lightly, but Gabrielle could feel the effort Dite was putting in to maintain her facade. She reached up a trembling hand to Dite's face and smiled forlornly. Two tears spilled from Aphrodite's eyes and fell unnoticed to the bed. The goddess reached out her hand and a ring appeared in it. She presented it to Gabrielle.

"I've seen a little of what brought you here. I'd like you to wear this. It's my talisman... it will mark you as my chosen and offer you protection as you travel." She watched Gabrielle's face closely and Gabrielle slowly took the ring from her fingers. She looked a question at Dite and the goddess answered. "You never needed it before now."

Gabrielle shook her head and tried to hand it back. Aphrodite's hands folded Gabrielle's closed over the ring. "Please. You have to let me help. This is wrong and I need time to find the answers!"

The bard had never seen Dite so adamant or so distraught. She gazed into the goddess's eyes for a very long time before finding the answer she was seeking. Then she nodded her acquiescence.

Aphrodite smiled. "Thank you, girlfriend. Now, would you like a radical lift back to Greece or...?"

She broke off and it took Gabrielle a moment shift gears and realize the Dite had reverted to form to deal with things on a less serious level. She more than most understood Aphrodite hid the depth of her feelings and intelligence behind the airhead blonde mentality. Gabrielle shook her head and Aphrodite nodded in understanding.

"Cool! I've got some research to do, so you chill with Eve or whatever and I'll see you in Greece shortly, k?"

Gabrielle just nodded again, almost sure she'd understood what Dite had said. Time would tell.

"Keep the ring on babe! See ya!" And the goddess disappeared in a shower of petals.

Gabrielle picked one up and rubbed it between her fingers, shaking her head with a smile. She slid the ring onto her middle finger, then shifted, scowling when something hard pressed into the soft flesh of her leg. A knock on her door made her look up and then she returned her attention to the cot, searching around with her hands to find what was poking her.

Her hands hit the objects just as the door opened and she closed her fist around them and glanced up at Eve who's stuck her head in hesitantly. They stared at each other a long time before Eve broke the tableau and walked over to Gabrielle's side. She didn't take a seat on the bed, but rather knelt on the floor at Gabrielle's feet.

She studied the hands in her lap, then gazed into Gabrielle's eyes. "I know what happened," she said softly. "Some of it anyway. But I'd like to hear the whole story from you. Do you think you could...?"

Gabrielle studied her, clenching her fists in memory before looking down and opening them, realizing what had been aggravating her. *Aphrodite's tears*, she mused, staring at the two large diamonds now resting in her palm. She looked back at Eve, whose face bore a patient, understanding countenance. *She deserves to know the whole truth*, Gabrielle decided. She nodded her head.

Eve sat up on her knees and brushed her lips across Gabrielle's cheek. "Thank you. I'll leave you to get dressed and then perhaps you'll join me for dinner?" She waited for Gabrielle's nod. "The bathing room is next door if you'd rather have a warm bath first." She saw a tiny sparkle enter Gabrielle's eyes. "I'll come get you in half a candlemark or so then, all right?"

"Thank you, Eve." There was no sound, but they were the first words Gabrielle's lips had formed since just after Xena's death. It was a tiny, tiny step, but it was a step in the right direction.

**Blood Bond** 17/02/2011

Gabrielle spent almost a full moon with Eve. It was far longer than she'd planned to stay, but she found the retelling of Xena's story so draining that Eve would only allow her to whisper short bits of the tale before sending her off to rest and recuperate.

Gabrielle spent much of her off time with Eve meditating or drilling. She tried to keep to a schedule that wouldn't disturb the others in the compound, but many were the nights that Eve would wake in the middle of the night to find Gabrielle in the courtyard moving her katana with deadly accuracy.

After eleven straight nights of this, Eve decided to take action. Knowing Gabrielle was sleeping little and eating less, Eve decided to go with her own strength's and make sure that Gabrielle finally got the rest she so desperately needed.

That morning, Gabrielle had reached the part in her story where she'd found Xena's headless body and she'd left the room abruptly with hot, angry tears coursing down her face. Eve made no immediate move to find her, reliving the awful sight that had plagued her since seeing it with Aphrodite. She could only imagine how magnified Gabrielle's feelings were, having actually lived through the trauma.

Instead, Eve went to her chamber and sought answers through prayer and meditation. Eli manifested himself to her and for several candlemarks they talked, until Eve was prepared to take the necessary action to help Gabrielle. Eli blessed her and bade her to rest, which she did, until darkness fell. Then she took up the sword Eli had left for her and moved into the courtyard to await Gabrielle's arrival.

Gabrielle did not disappoint. Just as the moon reached its zenith, she stepped from the shadows of her doorway and into the middle of the soft grass. The katana made the merest whisper of sound as it left its sheath and Gabrielle immediately flew into a furious frenzy of moves.

Eve watched from the shadows and waited patiently, choosing carefully the precise moment to enter the fray. Gabrielle didn't even blink when her imaginary foe coalesced into a live human being before her eyes. She simply stepped up her intensity and a feral light entered her eyes.

Eve shuddered when she saw the familiar but forgotten expression enter Gabrielle's eyes and she knew then that this battle was all too real. Eve tapped into a side of herself that hadn't seen the light of day in a very long time and felt the part of her that was Livia responding to the challenge Gabrielle put forth.

The battle went on for several candlemarks and it was only because of Eve's better physical condition that she finally managed to knock Gabrielle to the ground unconscious. She rested herself for quite a bit before moving her sweat-soaked hair from her eyes and rising to stand on wobbly legs.

Unexpectedly, Eli appeared before her and knelt down to lift Gabrielle into his arms. Eve picked up the katana and followed him to Gabrielle's room.

Gabrielle slept for two days while Eve watched and waited. When she woke on the morning of the third day, it was like she'd turned a corner. She ate decently and though she still did not speak, except to relate more of Xena's story in whispers to Eve, she walked the gardens a bit before returning to sleep some more.

Eve did get a bit more sparring out of her, but quickly realized that she'd been very lucky Gabrielle had been

exhausted that first night. Gabrielle's skill had surpassed her own and the only reason she didn't end up bleeding or dead was because Gabriele turned killing blows aside. She did end up with some nice bruises though.

At the end of her third quarter moon, her story was told and Gabrielle was ready to move on. She was still single-minded in her determination to get Xena's remains to Amphipolis, but she was now thankful for the time spent with Eve. The awkwardness was gone and they had forged a friendship that they would both cherish despite the distance between them.

Gabrielle packed her bag and slung it over her shoulder, then headed out to find Eve. Eve was waiting for her at the compound's kitchen.

"Thank you for being here, Gabrielle and for sharing that story with me. I know it wasn't easy, but I think we both needed to hear it." The bard didn't answer and Eve continued. "C'mon," she said, picking up a large bag. "I've got something for you."

Gabrielle followed Eve out the door and to the stables. There sat a horse that reminded her so much of Handsome it nearly made her cry. She turned shocked green eyes to Eve. The Messenger shrugged.

"He wandered in just before you did. He wouldn't leave and he wouldn't let anyone ride him either. After our fight the other day, he kept watch over you. I think he came here looking for you."

Gabrielle stepped over to the horse who greeted her almost familiarly. She crossed back over to Eve and held out her arms, stepping into Eve's embrace simultaneously. "Thank you," Gabrielle whispered into the taller woman's ear. "For everything."

"Be safe, Gabrielle. I love you."

Gabrielle's answer was another brief hug, then she moved back to the horse and mounted him. She clucked her tongue and tightened her legs and Handsome started out of the compound. Gabrielle paused at the entranced and turned and gave Eve a wave. Then she left down the road without another backwards glance.

Aphrodite meanwhile, returned to Olympus to find some answers. The first thing she did was watch the whole tragic story from beginning to end. Then she learned what had brought Xena and Gabrielle to Japa and she went back and did some research on Akemi. What she found infuriated her and she made a quick trip to visit her Asian counterparts.

Dite explained her dilemma and they discovered that Xena really wasn't in their underworld. They did decide that Akemi would need to be punished for her duplicity and Dite was satisfied that justice would be served to the extent it could be. She wasn't sure Gabrielle would agree though, especially since Xena seemed to have completely disappeared.

The love goddess popped back to Olympus and started on a god hunt. She went searching for Hades first.

"HADES!!" She waited a beat, then bellowed again. "Uncle Hades!!" She popped into Hades domain, but he was nowhere to be found. She scratched her hands through her hair and opened her mouth, but was stopped by a soft voice behind her.

"He's not here, Dite. He spends his time in Rome as Pluto now. You know that."

"Hey, Persephone. What are you doing here?"

Persephone shrugged. "I come back from time to time just to make sure things here are all right. We can't really go back to Olympus, at least not for a while, but this will always be more home to me than Rome. Hades judges Greek and Roman souls from Rome now and he's not real happy with the added workload."

"Do you think he could spare a moment for me? I have a problem."

"Dite, we'd be glad to have you come stay in Rome. We miss having you around."

Aphrodite smiled sadly. "I miss you guys too, but someone needs to stay here to keep an eye on things. Besides, I really hate Rome. I do manage to get there occasionally; I just can't stay very long. It's not home."

"Oh, girlfriend that is so very true."

Dite giggled when she heard the words flow from her rather proper cousin's mouth. "Careful there, 'Seph. They'll accuse you of totally radical blondish tendencies." They laughed together.

"C'mon, Dite. Let's go see Hades."

"You mean Pluto?"

"Yeah, whatever."

The chamber echoed their laughter as the disappeared in a swirl of sparks and petals.

"Psst... Ha... um, I mean, Pluto. Could I see you privately for a moment?" Persephone questioned softly. The god of the underworld nodded and rose.

"Judgment will continue in one candlemark," he said and moved back into his private living area. He took his wife into his arms and kissed her before the cooing and chuckling of Aphrodite made them separate, blushing.

"Hello, Aphrodite."

"Hello, Uncle. You two are just so cute together. A real walking ad for the love connection."

"Ahem, yes. Well, as glad as I am to see you here, I'm sure you didn't come to discuss our love life. What can I do for you?"

Aphrodite became serious instantly. "Uncle, have you seen Xena?"

"Have I seen Xena what?" Hades asked blankly. "She hasn't come through for judgment, if that's what you're asking."

Dite sighed and her shoulders slumped slightly. "K, thanks. Guess I'll have to keep looking."

"Looking?" Hades stopped when Persephone put a hand on his arm.

"I'll explain it to you later." She turned to Dite. "Can you stay for a while?"

"I wish I could. Let me figure out what happened here and I'll come back for a longer visit. If you hear anything, let me know, will ya?" She disappeared before they could say a word.

She checked with Odin next, who though no friend of Xena, promised to let Dite know if the warrior passed through his realm. She even dropped down to Egypt and had a talk with Isis. Finally, covering all the bases she could think of, Dite returned to Olympus and went to talk to Ares.

Gabrielle continued her trek westward, moving slowly across the deserts and plains of Kashmir, Mesopotamia, Persia and Assyria, headed for the Mediterranean Sea.

She'd found the ring Aphrodite had given her was actually awkward to adjust to with her weapons, so she took it off and put it into her bag next to Xena's ashes.

Almost immediately, she felt a change in her demeanor, but she attributed her heightened senses and wariness to being alone on the road. Her first encounter with thugs left her heart racing and her blood pounding. And it left seven decimated men lying at her feet.

After several more experiences that left her bloodlust burning higher than the last, she found a quiet inn where she could rest and try to recoup her lost equilibrium. Gabrielle spent almost a whole day meditating before she remembered the ring and dug it out of her bag. She slid it onto her finger and literally felt her blood calm and settle. She sat down and resumed her meditation and was able to focus to the point that she was centered again.

Gabrielle ruefully acknowledged to herself that she was going to have to adjust her fighting technique to include wearing the ring. Whatever protection it provided, it was going to keep her from losing herself and her mind before she got home.

Days turned into moons before Gabrielle reached the Mediterranean Sea. She'd made the decision to cross to Greece on boat. She wasn't looking forward to it, but it was the quickest way to get there. And more than anything, Gabrielle was ready to go home.

"ARES! Ares!! Where are you?" Dite stood in the middle of one of his remaining Greek temples and stamped her foot in impatience. She figured her brother would have at least some of the answers she needed.

He popped in with less than his usual theatrical entrance. "What is it Dite? I was in the middle of a skirmish on the Roman border." He tried to act angry, but she could see the tiredness and profound sadness behind his question.

She took his hand. "C'mon, bro. We need to talk."

Aphrodite popped them into her boudoir on Olympus and set out a tray of goodies and a flagon of wine. "You wanna level with me Ares? I know you had something to do with Xena's disappearance. Do you know where she is?"

His shoulders sagged, but he didn't answer immediately. She curled up beside him and took his hands. Then she looked him in the eye and softened her voice.

"C'mon, bro. Level with me. I know that being both a Greek and Roman god is exhausting. I have to do it too, remember? In that way the rest of family got off easy. The Twilight came to Greece and Xena 'killed' them so the one God concept could take root. They went to Rome and we, well, too bad no one but us understands the real truth of that, huh?"

That got a small smile out of him. "Yeah."

"So level with me, huh? There aren't many of us left in Greece and we need to stick together. Especially you and me." She bumped shoulder with him. "We learned that the hard way, didn't we?"

Ares shuddered at the memories that question invoked. He cleared his throat. "Oh yeah. Not one of the more pleasant experiences in my long life."

Dite smiled. "You were a cute farmer."

He tried to glare at her, really he did, but the smile on her face and the twinkle in her eyes was irresistible. "Hmph!" was all he said, but he poured them each a glass of wine and Dite placed the tray on the nearby table.

"Get comfortable, sis. This is a little hard to explain."

## Chapter III

"Does someone want to explain to me why \*I\* am considered the ditzy one?" Aphrodite muttered to herself when Ares was done speaking. She scrubbed her hands over her face and turned to look at him.

"So you don't know where she is? Or when she is? Or if she is alive or dead?"

"Um, no?" Ares hurried on with his explanation when Aphrodite sighed loudly. "Look, I just wanted to bring her back to life. It should have worked. No muss, no fuss."

"And you thought they would owed you something, right? A favor you could collect later?"

"Well...."

Ares didn't even get to start explaining when he felt the smack rock the back of his head. "C'mon, bro. That is way uncool and so not true and you know it. Xena would never have paid a debt like that." Dite looked at

him as the truth dawned. "But Gabrielle might have, huh?" She raised her hand to strike him again, but stopped at his warning glare. "That is dirty, Ares."

He shrugged. "It would have been fine if it had worked. It should have brought her right to us. Instead... I don't know what I did wrong."

"Ares!"

"I have spent these last moons going over and over everything that happened. It should have worked."

"ARES!!"

Ares snapped his jaws together so quickly he almost bit his tongue. "It doesn't matter right now. What matters is Gabrielle."

"Gabrielle. Gabrielle. What \*is\* it with her?"

Serious blue eyes seared into his deep brown ones. "Tread lightly, Ares. She's a good person and she is my friend."

He raised his hands in surrender. "All right. All right. I won't mess with the irritating blonde. Look, I got things to do. I'll catch up with you later, okay?" Ares disappeared before Aphrodite could answer.

"Grrrr... he makes me so totally nuts sometimes." She waved her hand and the food and wine disappeared. The she picked up the wire-rimmed glasses she'd developed an affinity for and slid them on her face while searching for her little remote box.

"All right, Gabrielle," she mumbled, clicking on the worldwide god web. "Let's see how long you'll have to suffer alone, my friend."

Gabrielle reached the sea and was able to arrange passage on a small merchant ship headed to Greece. She still didn't speak much, but the men on board quickly learned that she was not to be trifled with.

Every morning she spent time in meditation and drills and in the afternoon she would take a turn at the wheel, or in the crow's nest. By the fifth day, they were making good time and the captain was pleased with their progress. In the late afternoon, however, their luck took a turn for the worse.

Gabrielle had been sitting in the crow's nest, when a thin, dark line at the horizon captured her attention. She wouldn't have given it much thought, except the stirring in her gut made her uneasy and she shimmied down the mast to find the captain.

Archus took one look at the band of clouds and cursed. "All hands, man your stations. She's gonna be blowin' rough tonight. Raise the sails and angle us away from its path. I don't wanna be caught in the middle of this 'un."

Archus turned to Gabrielle. "Best if you get below decks, warrior. This be a sailor's battle."

A smile almost reached Gabrielle's eyes as she looked down at her hands. Then she walked to the mainsail and began helping the men hoist it in an effort to outrun the coming storm. The captain shook his head and turned to steer them away from the dark clouds.

Candlemarks passed and darkness fell and still the crew rushed feverishly to keep the ship afloat. The storm had moved in quicker than expected and they'd had to scramble to get things tied down. The waves were rolling the ship sickeningly from side to side, enough to make it necessary to work tied to ropes. It meant each person could only work a very small area of the ship, but there was far less likelihood of anyone falling overboard either.

All night they fought and struggled and with the daybreak came exhaustion and a calm that was almost unnerving. There was no sun, no rain, no wind and no waves and for a little while, everyone was grateful for the chance to rest. It wasn't long though, before it made the crew restless and the captain was the first to stir, with Gabrielle right behind him. The eeriness was making her jaw ache and her hair stand on end and all she wanted at that moment was a bit of a breeze and the sight of home.

The captain kept looking at the water beneath the ship and back up at the sky, searching for answers. Then the man who'd taken his turn in the crow's nest hollered down to them and they looked out to see what was causing him such concern. The captain's eyes widened and he shook his head in disbelief. Then he ran to get his maps and charts from his cabin.

He spread them out, his large hands tracing the paths and patterns on the parchment. "This isn't possible."

"What isn't?" Gabrielle whispered behind him. Archus turned and looked at her, seeing her strength of mind and will in the green eyes now boring into his. He made his decision and nodded to himself.

"Our position." Archus watched her brow furrow and hastened to explain. "Look... this was where we left Assyria headed for Greece," he said, pointing to the first map. "But the storm blew us off course. I expected that. It was a nasty storm."

Gabrielle nodded her understanding and waited for him to continue.

"What I didn't expect was to get blown to here," Archus added, indicating a spot on another chart. "If I am reading the land indicators right, we are close to Pompeii." Gabrielle's eyes widened and Archus bobbed his head. "Exactly. There is no way we should have come this far that quickly. And something peculiar is happening with the tide... we are being drawn towards land... almost dragged there."

Gabrielle turned her eyes toward the water, then chanced a look at the land that was coming closer. "Oh my gods," she whispered to herself, then tugged on the Captain's sleeve. "Look!"

Her whisper was more unnerving than a shout would have been and Archus glanced up to follow the direction her arm was pointing. His eyes grew large and he looked down at Gabrielle. "Is that...?"

She nodded. "Vesuvius," she whispered again, her eyes never leaving the horizon. Even from this distance, they could see the fire spewing and spitting toward the sky, filling the air around with the darkness of ash and smoke.

"Raise the sails, lads and man the oars. We've got to make time away from here now." Even as he spoke, day became like night and the air was stifling with ash and the scent of sulfur. Without warning, the ship was

pushed away from the landmass and Gabrielle began searching for the cause, knowing what she would find.

Her voice was rough from lack of use and she took Archus by surprise when she screamed. "Pull in the oars!!" He looked at her, then past her to see exactly what caused the almost silent warrior to issue such a forceful command.

"Merda dell'OH!! he muttered, staring for a long moment at the fifteen foot wall of water rapidly approaching the ship. Gabrielle's shove caused him to come out of his trance and moved him towards the stairwell to repeat the order. Archus motioned to his first mate, but before the man could move towards the mainsail, Gabrielle had unhooked the chakram from her waist and hurled it at the lines, slicing them all neatly and causing the sails to drop.

"Tie everythin' off and hang on down there, boys! This 'un's gonna be nasty."

The four people left topside tied themselves to the ship and the first mate began praying to Neptune. Gabrielle closed her eyes and whispered her own prayer to Aphrodite. It was enough to pull the goddess away from her frenzied research

"Oh, this is so radically uncool... it's creepy. She died... they both did. So when did...? How...?" Aphrodite continued to mumble to herself. She'd been skimming Gabrielle's lifeline, looking for her death. It wasn't something the goddess normally did, especially about a friend. But she felt the need to know how long Gabrielle would have to suffer alone and she didn't like the way things looked.

In all honesty, she'd expected to see Gabrielle's lifeline end shortly after her return to Greece. For all the talk of the 'greater good', Aphrodite understood better than most that Xena and Gabrielle were each other's greater good. Without her soulmate, Gabrielle would be merely existing and Dite wouldn't wish that on anyone, especially someone as sensitive as Gabrielle. What she found however, was that Gabrielle's lifeline extended far past a normal lifetime.

Gabrielle was an immortal.

So now Aphrodite's mission, in addition to her usual love gigs, was to find out exactly what had caused the change and when it had happened. She started with their crucifixion and ascension into the heaven of Eli's god. It made the most logical sense. She was in the middle of her review of that time when a whispered plea from Gabrielle caught her attention.

Dite changed the view on her scrying bowl, bringing Gabrielle and the present sharply into focus. "Gnarly wave, man!" was her initial response. Then she saw the tiny boat being lifted in the wall's not-so-tender embrace and realized what Gabrielle's prayer was about. "Oh, that totally sucks!"

Closing her eyes, Aphrodite sent a wave of comfort to the bard that cascaded through Gabrielle's veins like warm wine. Dite felt the change in Gabrielle and smiled, then turned her attention back to her research, keeping one eye on the tiny ship.

She wondered if Gabrielle would one day turn this adventure into a story.

Gabrielle felt herself surrounded by love and she unconsciously relaxed, even as the wall of water grew ominously closer. Suddenly, it lifted them up and pushed the small ship forward with great velocity and strength.

Ash was inches thick on the deck and coated the four people still standing topside. Gabrielle found herself wishing for a way to rid herself of the itchy, smelly mess, then rescinding that wish as the wave began to cascade over the ship.

She heard men screaming in terror and closed her eyes, willing it to be over quickly. *I'm sorry, Xena,* she said in her mind, but *I'm not gonna make it to Amphipolis. I did try though. I'm so tired, Xena. I just want a little bit of peace for us, but that's never really been our destiny, has it? I love you.* 

Those were her final thoughts, before the pressure of the water forced her into unconsciousness.

When Gabrielle opened her eyes, the first thing she saw wasn't the Elysian Fields or Tartarus or heaven or hell and it certainly wasn't Xena's face looking back at her. The pain of her reality both physical and emotional hit her so hard she almost crumpled to her knees. Her first sight was of a sludge covered ship and a captain who was seemingly unconscious. There was no sign of the first mate or the steersman.

The boat was gently rocking, aimlessly drifting in what she hoped was the right direction. Slowly Gabrielle loosened herself from the bonds that had secured her to the mizzenmast. Her body ached as though it had been beaten and the stench from the sulfuric ash was indescribable.

She trudged through the sludge, loosening the ropes tied around Archus and easing him to the deck. She patted his face, pleased when his eyelids began to flutter.

"Oh my gods... I feel like a chariot ran over me, repeatedly," the captain mumbled as he rolled over and sat up. He looked around and smiled at Gabrielle. Then his face fell when he realized they were alone on the deck. "C'mon, warrior, lemme go see what's left of the crew and get ourselves to Greece. I'm in the mood for dry land, a hot bath, an ale and a woman."

Gabrielle nodded and walked back to the mainsail and began sorting through the lines. It was going to take a bit of work to run the ropes again, but the chakram had seemed the most expedient way of dealing with the problem at the time. She sighed soundlessly. Given how far the storm had blown them off course and the fact that they were now in the middle of only-gods-knew-where, she figured they had plenty of time to clean, fix and repair and still be done well before they arrived in Greece. A lot would depend on how far the tsunami had pushed them, but she didn't expect to see land anytime soon.

Her shoulders slumped. She really was tired, right down to her very soul. Gabrielle had been selfishly hoping that the storm would be then end for her. Was it wrong to feel that way, she pondered. She decided it probably was and she really didn't care. Being unselfish was what had gotten her in this predicament in the first damn place.

The crew came bounding up the stairwell, glad to be alive and out of the hold and Gabrielle smiled in sympathy. She could well remember the times she'd been thrilled to set foot on deck, breathing in the fresh, salty air with relish.

Without much ado, the men fell to work with a will, each one anxious to reach Greece and dry land.

Nightfall enabled the captain to study the stars and his charts and he did so enthusiastically. He was glad to note that the wave had done little physical damage and had actually pushed them as good ways back towards Greece.

He noticed Gabrielle come up beside him and he motioned to her. "Ah warrior. The gods were kind to us. If the winds continue to be favorable, we should see the shores of Greece in less than a quarter moon."

Gabrielle nodded and turned her attention to the vast darkness of the sky and sea.

Aphrodite was biting her nails, frantically searching through Gabrielle's history on the worldwide god web. Her research had shown her that they had not actually died on the cross. They were already immortal by that point and their physical bodies were using that time to regenerate. Dite debated briefly on whether she would tell Gabrielle on just how Eli's god had manipulated them into doing his dirty work.

In fairness, he had offered them absolution for their sins. But it seemed a moot point, especially since Xena rejected that forgiveness in lieu of sacrificing herself yet again on Mt. Fuji.

Not that it mattered at this juncture. The questions now were when had Gabrielle become immortal and what about Xena? If she shared Gabrielle's immortality, then she was alive out there... somewhere. Aphrodite went back to her research. She was fairly sure that at least part of this news was going to be an unwelcome surprise.

She pulled off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, then scrubbed her hands through her hair. "This is soooo not cool." Then she clicked the remote box and watched the screen fly backwards through time, looking for the moment when Gabrielle crossed into immortality.

Katerina von Lihp guided her ship into the dock with easy skill and blew out a sigh of relief. They had been almost a year at sea coming around Africa to get to Greece and she was glad to see what had become home for her. She and the crew immediately began unloading the hold.

"Hey, Cap'n... what 'bout all this stuff?" The mate indicated the crates still neatly stacked and sealed boxes that had traveled with them from Higuchi.

Katerina scratched her head thoughtfully. "Leave them for now. I will see if I can find out where they need to go. Go enjoy some time ashore. I know where to find you when I need you."

The Captain left a small contingent of guards on the ship, then made her way to the nearest temple of love. She really didn't know who else to turn to and hoped the goddess might have some answers for her.

**Blood Bond** 17/02/2011

Aphrodite wasn't surprised to find worshippers in her temple. She was one of the few remaining active gods in Greece and love was the strongest force in the world, after all. What caught her attention was the mention of Gabrielle's name and her new moniker, Little Dragon Warrior.

She listened to the plea of this sea captain who had befriended Gabrielle and who showed such concern for her. Then she decided a break from her research was in order and popped down to have a chat with Captain Lihp.

"Yo, babe! Whassup?"

The Captain spun on her heels in surprise, not expecting such a personal greeting from the goddess. She swallowed hard a couple times before she could speak.

"I beg pardon, Aphrodite, but I have a dilemma you might be able to help me with."

"Oh yeah? Wha... I mean, what's that?"

"You know of the Little Dragon Warrior, the bard named Gabrielle, hä?" Katerina saw the truth in the blue eyes facing her. "I have a favor to ask."

"Lay it on me, babe," Aphrodite said.

Katerina told Aphrodite the bit of Gabrielle's story she knew from her own point of view, winding up with the things still locked in the hold of her ship. "I didn't know what else to do with her things. I thought perhaps you...."

Aphrodite looked at the Captain seriously for a long moment. "Why did you come to me? Why not some other god?"

Katerina shrugged. "I do not know. You seemed like the best choice."

Aphrodite chuckled. 'Of course I am the best choice, babe. Love is totally a good choice. It just takes some people a lifetime to figure it out." She chuckled again. "Tell ya what... I'll make a place for it and pop it in, 'k? I'll hang onto it until Gabrielle is ready for it."

"Thank you, Aphrodite."

"Ya done good, Captain Lihp. Totally gnarly job."

Katerina wasn't exactly sure how to take that, so she nodded and smiled and headed out to have a bit of fun.

Aphrodite was as good as her word and with a wave of her hand the crates were moved into a storage area of the temple. She briefly considered moving them directly to Olympus, then decided Gabrielle might not appreciate the assumption. She tapped her nails on her teeth, then disappeared in a cascade of flower petals.

Gabrielle was happy to see land again, though surprisingly it wasn't seasickness that made her ready to walk

on flat earth. She glanced again at the ring Aphrodite had given her and wondered if that was the reason behind her lack of seasickness.

Gabrielle shrugged. Whatever the reason, she was glad for it. It had made this part of her voyage at least bearable. She shuddered when she thought about how intolerable the trip would have been if she'd been physically ill on top of everything else.

Now they were pulling into port and Gabrielle sighed. She had finally reached the last leg of her journey and she was anxious to be done with it. The crew lowered the gangway into place and waited for permission to disembark. Archus turned to Gabrielle.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "Without your help, I'm not sure we'd have survived."

She smiled at him and squeezed his arm, then stepped off the ship and headed north without a backwards glance.

Katerina spotted her as Gabrielle set foot on solid ground and raced to catch her before she disappeared in the crowd. "Little Dragon!" she called, hoping to be heard above the din of the marketplace.

Gabrielle looked around, knowing no one here knew of that particular title. When she spotted Captain Lihp, she stopped and waited for the other woman to approach.

Katerina was appalled at the harsh changes the year of travel had wrought in the younger woman. There was still no light in her eyes and her body was all hard muscle and bone. Her hair was still short, though carelessly cut, as though it was kept short because it was easier to manage and not for the way it looked. Gabrielle's skin was a deep bronze and she bore a few more scars than she'd worn in Higuchi.

"I am glad to see you, Little Dragon. I have something that belongs to you." Gabrielle held up a hand, but the Captain continued speaking. "Not the crates and boxes. I have stored those with a friend until you want them."

She extended the arm she'd held behind her and Gabrielle could not contain the sharp gasp that rose from her lips, nor the stab of pain that accompanied it. Hesitantly, she reached forward to take the object from Katerina. Xena's sword. It would make the final journey with her.

"Thank you," she whispered, but the words and the tone spoke volumes to the Captain. She nodded to Gabrielle.

"Gods speed you on your journey, warrior." Then she disappeared into the crowd, leaving Gabrielle alone with her private grief.

Gabrielle began making her way towards Amphipolis at a fast, steady place. So near her goal, she was ready to be done with it. So each day she was up before the sun and she walked with very few breaks until the sun had set. Nights were used for sparring and meditation and the rare bit of sleep she could get before waking in a cold sweat. Time was supposed to make it better... make it hurt less, but still all she felt was emptiness.

Occasionally she encountered the odd roving band of thugs, but after decimating the first few of them, they began to steer clear of her. She wondered if they had some sort of relay system to let others know of her and smirked. Then it occurred to her that they should have had one of those full cycles ago. It would have saved her and Xena a lot of trouble. Her smile faded at that thought.

Days passed and after nearly a moon of steady travel, she entered the outskirts of what had once been the thriving town of Amphipolis. Gabrielle shuddered a little, remembering the last time they had been there. Not much was left. The inn was in ruins and empty shacks that had once been living households now toppled in on themselves in decrepitude. Gabrielle followed the road past the inn, to where the family crypt stood silent sentinel.

She took a deep breath and opened her pouch, removing her flint and striker. She found several small torches at the entrance and lit one carefully. She moved around the room lighting the others, before coming to stand next to Lyceus.

"Hello, Lyceus," came her whispered voice. "You probably don't remember me, but this is Gabrielle. I've come to keep a promise to your sister." She waited a moment, until she felt like she had his blessing to continue, then moved to where Solan's ashes had been placed.

"Hi, Solan. It's your turn to look after your mom, since I can't do it anymore, okay? Make sure she eats her vegetables." She wiped the dust off his urn and moved to Cyrene. "I'm sorry, Mom. I did my best, but it wasn't enough. Take care of her, Cyrene. She'll need you to keep an eye on her."

Gabrielle wiped the tears from her face before moving to an empty slab. She laid the sword across the top then gently placed the chakram on its hilt. She set her bag down and removed the pot, tenderly unwrapping it from its cloth covering. Gabrielle set it in the middle of the slab and took a step back.

"Goodbye, Xena. I don't think we will meet as soulmates again. I haven't felt you since that day and I think that is our punishment. This wasn't your destiny and your choice to stay with Akemi has thrown our karmic cycles out of kilter. Perhaps one day, we will cross paths, but I don't think the gods will be that kind. Good rest, my love... you've earned it."

The rending of her soul as she surrendered to the inescapable made her keen in agony. She welcomed the darkness when it came.

Gabrielle was curled into a tiny ball beside Xena's remains when Aphrodite found her.

"Oh, Gabrielle."

The goddess reached out a hand to touch her, then recoiled at the pain that emanated from the bard in waves. Dite steeled herself, then scooped Gabrielle into her arms.

"C'mon, girlfriend. We gotta talk."

Gabrielle came back to herself slowly, fully expecting the emptiness of an afterlife alone. It really didn't matter where she ended up. It couldn't be worse than the tortures she'd already lived through.

She blinked her eyes open, trying to focus enough to understand where she was. Her first impression was pink. She was surrounded by pink. Her brow furrowed, trying to recall this much pink in any afterlife she'd seen.

Gabrielle raised a hand to rub her forehead and noted that she was clean and encased in some familiar pink pajamas. "Aphrodite?" in a bare whisper.

Sparkles and rose petals fell on the bed as Dite popped into being beside her. "Hiya, sweet pea." She combed gentle hands through the short blonde hair. "How ya doin'?" Her blue eyes filled with tears at the aching emptiness she saw reflected in the dull green eyes facing her.

Gabrielle fell into Aphrodite's open arms and her slight frame shook with silent sobs. Aphrodite felt tears of sympathy slide down her own face while Gabrielle clung to her. How long they stayed in this embrace, Gabrielle couldn't have said. But finally her crying slowed and she eased back.

"Sorry," she said softly, wiping her eyes.

"Why, sweetie?" Aphrodite rubbed the muscular arm, doing her best to offer comfort. She wasn't sure how Gabrielle was going to take the news she had to give her and she had already been through so much.

"I should be out of tears by now," came the answer, accompanied by a watery smile.

"Oh babe... your heart is a lot like mine. You'll always have tears to shed. Some happy, some sad, some angry, some relieved. It's the way of love."

Gabrielle pulled away and her eyes became cold and distant. Even her whisper went flat. "Well, no offense, Aphrodite, but they way of love doesn't work for me anymore. The price is too high." She slipped from the bed and went to stand at the window. "I appreciate your bringing me here, but I need to go."

"Go where?" Dite asked softly, stepping up behind Gabrielle, but not touching her.

"It doesn't matter now. I've done what I set out to do."

"Then will you do me a favor? Please?"

Gabrielle turned, intrigued by the request. "If I can, sure."

"Stay and talk to me a little while. I get lonely here with just me and Ares and when I'm in Rome, I have so much work to do that I rarely get to visit with the other gods. I'd just like a little girl talk between friends."

Gabrielle nodded. "I'm not sure how much talking I will do, but I can sure listen while you tell on about things. And you can start with that 'other gods' comment. I thought they were killed in the twilight."

"No, that is what Eli's radical new god wanted everyone to think, so he could get a better foothold here in Greece. Most of the family has like, moved on under different names in Rome, though a few of us still work both gigs. Let me tell ya, sister, it ain't easy either. Why just the other day...."

Aphrodite talked until Gabrielle fell asleep again and she tucked the bard into bed. 'Tomorrow, Little One, we have to have some serious conversation." And she twinkled out of the bedroom, leaving Gabrielle soundly sleeping without dreams for the first time in over a year.

"Rest well, my friend. Tomorrow is soon enough for this news."

When Gabrielle woke the second time, she wasn't surprised to see pink. She was surprised to note she was almost hungry and she noticed a trencher of food on a table near the bed. Propped next to the still warm loaf of bread was a note.

Come see me in the scrying room before you leave. We have something to talk about.

The note wasn't signed, but the little hearts and curlicues would have been a dead giveaway regardless. Gabrielle took a portion of the bread and spread some of the soft cheese on it, then took a bite. It was good and she took a second.

She finished the bread and changed her clothes, then wandered out the hall towards the only sound she heard. Strangely, it sounded as though Dite was talking to herself, but Gabrielle shrugged. She'd find out soon enough.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, Aphrodite jumped and tittered nervously. "Oh, hi Gab!" a little too brightly. She pulled the glasses of her face and chewed on an earpiece. "Um, why don't you have a seat? You're lookin' totally fab today. Love the tat. Did ya sleep well? How was your breakfast? Andbythewayyou'reanimmortal."

Gabrielle sank into the chair Aphrodite pushed at her, trying to dissimilate the conversation the goddess had just thrown at her. She shook her head. "Good morning, Aphrodite. Would you repeat everything you just said very slowly, please? I'm pretty sure I missed something important."

Aphrodite dropped the glasses on her desk and rubbed her face. Then she sat down and took Gabrielle's hands in her own.

"Okay, look. You're an immortal...." She didn't get to say any more. Gabrielle jerked her hands free and stormed out of the room.

Aphrodite scratched her head and blew out a breath. "Well, that went well," she commented to herself, before popping out to find the woman she called friend.

## Chapter IV

Aphrodite stood in the archway, just watching Gabrielle. The bard sat hunched over on a bench in the rose garden, hands loosely clasped between her knees. Finally, the goddess walked over to Gabrielle and sat down next to her. She didn't speak or touch Gabrielle, but waited for her to make the first move.

Dite lost track of the time they sat together silent and unmoving before Gabrielle took a deep breath. And it was only because she was listening that she heard the bare whisper when Gabrielle finally spoke.

"Aphrodite, we have been friends for a lot of full cycles and never have I seen you be deliberately cruel... until now." Gabrielle lifted her face to the sky and Dite tried not to take offense when she saw the depth of pain Gabrielle still carried. She knew the reaction came from the shock as much as grief, but the words still cut deeply.

"Gabrielle," Dite said softly. "Have I ever lied to you?"

Gabrielle dropped her head and closed her eyes. Aphrodite reached up and took her chin, gently turning the bard's face towards her own. "Gabrielle," she repeated. "Have I ever lied to you? Especially when it was this important?"

Gabrielle raised a hand and wiped the tears from her face, then shook her head and opened her eyes. "No," she whispered and cleared her throat. "No," she said again more firmly and just a little louder. "But Aphrodite, I'm not immortal. I can't be. I... I died." She closed her eyes and swallowed hard before meeting Dite's sympathetic blue eyes. "Xena had a better shot at immortality..." she swallowed, "And we know that didn't happen."

"But it did." A simple statement that fell into a wellspring of silence.

"What are you saying?" Gabrielle grasped Aphrodite arms so hard that the goddess winced, knowing it would have left bruises had she been human.

She eased one arm from Gabrielle's grip, allowing Gabrielle to retain a firm hold on her other wrist and hand. She noted that Gabrielle was shaking and stood up. Aphrodite gazed into the tear-filled green eyes, seeing a spark of hope for the first time in over a year and she smiled.

"C'mon, babe. I got a totally wicked story to share."

They settled into the scrying room, which was actually part of Aphrodite's chambers and Dite eased Gabrielle down onto the bed. She snapped her fingers and instantly Gabrielle found herself neatly encased in more pink silk and tucked into the big bed holding a cup of something that smelled rich and sweet.

The goddess could tell Gabrielle was still in shock and motioned to her with a little wave. "Try it. It'll make you feel radically better. I gotta hook this in to the big screen for ya."

Gabrielle took a sniff of the beverage, then took a tiny sip. A brief smile crossed her face and she took a larger swallow. Aphrodite caught the change in her expression and smiled in return. "Great stuff, huh? Nothing comforts like good hot chocolate. Ah, there we go. Now," she wiggled into place beside Gabrielle and lifted her own cup to her lips. "I'm gonna give ya the highlights. Ya know, show ya what happened and explain a few things. Then we can talk and I'll try to answer any questions you've still got, k?"

Gabrielle nodded, then watched a much younger version of herself dance into view. She felt the seductive rhythm of the music and her mind went back to that cool fall Festival. She remembered clearly now the moment she'd been bitten, though it was nothing but a blur at the time.

"You remember this, right?" Aphrodite looked at Gabrielle when she'd paused the god web. The blonde head nodded. "Okay, do you remember drinking the blood from the chalice?"

Gabrielle turned her gaze inward and she started shaking as her memory cleared. Aphrodite took the cup from her hands and started the scrying bowl again.

"Xena knocked the chalice from your hands, but only after you'd had your first drink. It was so intoxicating you were actually taking your second swallow when the chakram knocked the cup away from your lips."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and Dite stopped the picture once more. "Yes," she whispered.

Aphrodite took Gabrielle's hands in her own and gently chafed them. "And even though you and Xena weren't lovers yet, you wanted to share that feeling and when she commanded you...." Aphrodite trailed off then continued. "How many times once you were lovers did you draw blood?"

Abruptly Gabrielle jerked away and stalked from the bed. "Gabrielle," Dite said softly from her place on the bed. "I wasn't spying on you. It's taken me moons of research to put all this together."

Gabrielle hugged her arms around herself. "It wasn't often. And never deliberate. It wasn't something we talked about." She turned back to Aphrodite. "But that wouldn't have made Xena immortal. She didn't drink from the chalice."

"No, but she did eat ambrosia shortly thereafter and that pretty much sealed the deal for her. Your bite gave her the burning and the ambrosia did the rest."

It was quiet for a while after that, as Gabrielle pondered the truth of Aphrodite's words. Finally she turned and went back to the bed, sitting down gingerly. Her head ached from the thoughts running through it, her throat hurt from the now unaccustomed conversation and her eyes burned from both shed and unshed tears. Aphrodite looked at her sympathetically.

"I'm sorry, Gab. If there was an easier way to get you through this, you know I would."

"I know," Gabrielle whispered. "It's just a little overwhelming and so many things still don't make sense. Especially since I haven't felt Xena's presence...."

"I know, babe, believe me. Here," handing the hot chocolate back to the bard. "I added marshmallows. I think you're due all the comfort you can get at this point."

Gabrielle's eyebrow rose, wondering what a marshmallow was, then seeing the tiny white islands floating in her cup. She tasted one and gave Aphrodite a small smile. "Perks of being a goddess, huh?"

Dite chuckled. "One of them, yeah. You feeling any better? Ready to move on?"

Gabrielle rubbed her face with her hands. "I don't know if I'll ever be ready for this, but there are things I need to know. So let's do it."

Aphrodite nodded and slipped the glasses back on her face, consulting the notes she had written. "I guess your first question is about your lack of bacchae behavior, huh?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Well, that'd be one of them, yeah."

Dite looked at her notes again. "Well, babe... what can I tell ya? Love conquers all." She sighed at Gabrielle's blank look. "The strength of the love you and Xena shared eliminated a lot of the need for blood. Your passion was focused in other directions." Appropriate smiled at the blush that suffused the bard's features.

"Be glad, babe. The bond you two have is totally, radically, one hundred percent the real deal and so rare that most spend their entire lives never having seen it... much less lived it."

"And now you're asking me to spend eternity without it??" Gabrielle clasped an arm to her chest trying to ease the pain to breathe. "Gods... it would have been better to have never had it."

"No sweet pea. Gimme a chance here, 'kay? Your story will have a happy ending, promise." Gabrielle had to smile just the tiniest bit at Aphrodite's vehemence. She'd never promised the bard anything without delivering. Gabrielle nodded her agreement and the goddess sighed in relief.

"Okay, where was I?" She ran a finger down the page. "Oh yeah... your focused passion. Anyway, there was still plenty of fighting to satisfy any lingering bloodlust." She looked at Gabrielle seriously. "Didn't you ever noticed that the fighting was always more violent and intense when you two were at odds? There was a while there... girlfriend, even I had to look to find the love."

She waved her hands. "Anyway, it doesn't matter now. We have the present to worry about. You with me so far?"

"I think so. Our soul bond took care of a lot of the lust and our fighting took care of the rest."

"Basically, yeah."

"Okay, I can accept that, I guess. But it doesn't explain why we died... why Xena is dead."

"Here, finish your hot chocolate and let me tuck you back into bed. This is gonna take a little while and we may as well be, like, comfortable."

Aphrodite settled Gabrielle into the big bed and fussed about pouring up more chocolate. Gabrielle absently wondered why she was making such a physical effort instead of merely snapping her fingers. For her part, Aphrodite puttered until she ran out of things to do. Then she took a deep breath. This was the hard part.

"The first time you died after you became immortal was when you took Hope into the pit. Do you remember what happened?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes. Her memories of that time were blurred and she focused on the tightly. "I remember running," she whispered, "looking into Xena's eyes... taking Hope over the edge of the pit and then... searing pain. I hit a ledge, I think. I.... Ares said he...."

"Ares would have said anything to convince Xena to return to him, you know that. Let me show you what really happened." Aphrodite turned back to the worldwide god web and started the picture just as the bard and Hope toppled into the steaming fissure.

Gabrielle forced her eyes to watch, though she cringed to hear herself scream. About halfway down, she did hit a ledge and her bones shattered with a nauseating crunch. Hope was swallowed up by the flame and they both disappeared and for several days, Gabrielle remained unmoving on the ledge.

Finally, healed enough to move, she forced herself to climb from the pit. She hadn't had enough time to recover her strength though and when she reached the edge, she fell out onto the floor near the altar.

A band of gypsies found her there and took her to the nearest hospice, where she spent almost another seven days unconscious. When she came around the second time, she immediately left to find her agonized soulmate.

"You okay?" Aphrodite asked kindly. Gabrielle held her fist to her mouth and the goddess wasn't sure it if it was to keep from screaming or throwing up. Gabrielle nodded once curtly.

"Yeah. I was just remembering...." she got out before bolting for the bathing room. Aphrodite sighed and popped in behind her. She ran a cool cloth on Gabrielle's neck and held her when she was done.

"You wanna hear the rest, or you wanna wait 'til later? It's not gonna get any easier 'til we're done."

Bloodshot green eyes looked at Aphrodite. "Let's get it over with." Gabrielle rinsed her mouth and Dite gave her some mint to settle her stomach. Then they moved back to the bedroom and the goddess moved the timeframe on the screen.

"The next death I have for you both is your crucifixion on the Ides of March. This was a fubar all the way around."

"How so? Heaven wouldn't have been a bad place to spend eternity."

"Yeah, if you could stayed there, but that's not why Eli's god brought you there and he had no intention of letting you stay. He was using your souls to fight his battle while your bodies healed. Unfortunately, Eli pulled you souls back into your bodies before they were ready and you KNOW the flasco that caused." She gave Gabrielle a meaningful look.

Gabrielle gave her a rueful chuckle. "Uh, yeah. I think that was the start of our 'make war, not love' stage. We fought everything and everyone, including and especially each other." She snickered softly. "When we finally made up though...." Her face flushed bright red at the memories.

"Mmm hmm... no kidding. I \*felt\* that reunion. Talk about rocking the world!" She grinned at Gabrielle. "You two were just so good together... and you will be again." Gabrielle sobered.

"How, Aphrodite? How can you say that? Xena is dead and even her spirit is gone. She promised me she would always be there for me... that even death wouldn't separate us, but I have not seen her or felt her presence since that day."

"Whoa! Hold on! Slow down just a little there, hot shot! I'll explain it to you if you'll give me a minute."

Gabrielle scrubbed her face with her hands. "I'm sorry. I...."

Aphrodite embraced the bard, kissing the top of her blonde head lightly. 'No worries, babe. I really do

Blood Bond

17/02/2011 understand."

Gabrielle gently returned the hug. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Now remember... in every instance so far, you and Xena have had a body to return to. It has simply been a matter of letting the body regenerate and once it was restored, your soul returned."

"Right...." Gabrielle trailed off, trying to follow Aphrodite's train of thought.

"When Xena had you burn her body, it was with the intention of restoring it on Mt. Fuji. But it just made it impossible for her spirit to rejoin her body when you missed the sunset. Because there is no body to renew, there is no place for the spirit to live in."

"Okay, so her spirit just disappeared?? I'm not seeing that happy ending you promised me Aphrodite!"

"Shh... shh... calm down, babe. I'm getting to that." She stroked her hands through Gabrielle's hair, willing her to peace. "Now, calm down and just listen, 'kay? This is where things get kinda screwy." She took a deep breath.

"What Ares did, or tried to do, was to call her back... restore her body and spirit. But it obviously didn't work... for a couple reasons, I think."

"You think?"

"Well, yeah," Aphrodite answered defensively. "Nothing like this has ever happened before and I'm not totally sure what incantation he spoke." She held up her hands. "Wait and let me finish, 'kay?" Gabrielle nodded and settled back down. Dite got up to pace.

The goddess pulled her glasses off and set them down, running her hands through her hair in frustration. "From what I can figure out, it didn't work for two main reasons... first, our power in Japa is negligible. He didn't have the strength to pull it off. The second reason would be that he wasn't totally prepared to perform the ritual correctly. Considering his frame of mind that day, I'm surprised he actually made it to you."

"Can you fix it?"

Aphrodite shook her head. "It's fixable, but I can't do it by myself. But we might be able to together... you and me."

Gabrielle flung back the cover and stood on wobbly legs. "Let's go."

Aphrodite shook her head again and Gabrielle wanted to stomp her feet in sheer frustration. "No. Not yet. You are not strong enough and I need to do a little more research. So you get back in that bed and go to sleep like a good girl and let Dite finish up the work I have to do, 'kay? Then we'll see about getting that totally radical warrior babe back in your arms where she belongs."

Gabrielle stared at the goddess for what seemed like candlemarks before acknowledging the wisdom of this course of action. Ares had been unprepared to do whatever it was he had done and Xena had ended up who-knew-where with their bond broken. Besides, she was exhausted in her very soul and was ready to collapse.

Gabriele emitted a small sigh and closed her eyes. "All right, Aphrodite," she said softly as she crawled back into bed. "Thank you."

Dite looked surprised. "For what, sweet pea?"

"Caring," came the mumbled answer before Gabrielle's breathing deepened into sleep.

"No worries, babe. I always have." She smoothed Gabrielle's hair away from her face and let her touch linger on the bard's soft skin before disappearing, leaving only a trace of rose petals behind.

It could have been candlemarks; it could have been days. Gabrielle couldn't tell how much time had passed when she awoke from her sleep. But for the first time since Xena's death, she felt hope. She was still trying to process the information Aphrodite had given her, but what stood out in her mind was the fact that Xena's spirit was still alive and looking for a way to come home.

She pushed the covers back and wandered out of the room, following the muttering to another room in Aphrodite's chamber. The goddess sat at a huge desk, hidden by scrolls. The floor was littered with discarded notes and even as she stood there, a wad of parchment came flying over the top of the pile.

"She shoots! She...."

"... misses!" Gabrielle answered, as the paper ball hit the tip of the overflowing basket and fell to the floor. Dite's blonde curls popped up from the top of her desk.

"Oh, hiya, cutie. How'd ya sleep?"

"Very well. Morpheus was kind."

"Yeah, I asked him to be. He's a good god." Gabrielle didn't reply, though she looked skeptical, remembering her first run-in with the god of dreams. "Anyway, ya look way better and I think I have everything like, figured out." She lifted up several scrolls, rummaging through them. "Soon's I find my notes. I know they're in here. I just had... ah hah!"

"C'mon, Gab. We can go over this stuff in the hot tub. I so need to soak after all this. I haven't worked this hard in like, ages."

Gabrielle didn't get a chance to respond before she found herself up to her neck in warm bubbles. She closed her eyes, relishing the comfort. It was only when Aphrodite popped in right next to her that her green orbs opened reluctantly.

"Ooooh," she groaned as she settled back into the water and closed her eyes. "This is just what the goddess ordered. I feel better already." Dite stayed that way for a few minutes before sitting up and reaching for her notes.

"Okay. I got good news and I got bad news."

Gabrielle ran her wet hands through her hair, then covered her eyes. "Of course you do. Give me the bad news first."

Aphrodite chewed her lip. "Well, the bad news is I don't know where Xena is."

"Then how can we return her? We still don't have a body and now you're telling me we don't have a spirit either!"

"Take a chill pill, babe. I think I've found the solution to your little problem."

"YOU THINK?!? Whaddya mean you THINK??"

"Hey, I'm doing my best here Gab! Cut me some slack, all right? I wasn't the one who got you into this mess!"

Gabrielle's head dropped. "I'm sorry, Aphrodite. I know you're doing me a huge favor and here I am being a bitch. Go ahead."

The goddess took Gabrielle's chin in her hand and lifted Gabrielle's face until their eyes met. "No worries, 'kay?" She smiled, hoping to get one in return. She wasn't disappointed.

"You're a good friend, Aphrodite."

"That's probably the nicest real compliment I've ever gotten."

"It is also the truth." Gabrielle paused. "So what's the plan?"

"Well, we have Xena's ashes. You have immortal blood. I found a ritual that will allow you to use your blood to re-form her body. The fact that you're soul bound to one another should call her soul to you and once her body has regenerated, you'll be a rockin' couple again."

"So when can we do this?"

"I think we need to go to Macedonia. We don't want Ares finding out about this and totally screwing it up."

"You really think he would?"

"Gab, I think he's a little... um...."

"Obsessive?"

"Well, um... blind, maybe... where she is concerned."

Gabriele snorted. "Okay. Why Macedonia?"

"Couple reasons. Ares won't look for us there for one thing. And Hephie had a radical hideaway there for another."

Gabrielle chewed her nails. "Okay, when can we go?"

Aphrodite smile sympathetically. "Anxious, huh?" Gabrielle just nodded. "Lemme finish my bath and get a bite of something to eat and we'll go." She pointed a bubbly finger at the bard. "You have to eat too. This is gonna take a lot out of va."

They had stopped briefly at Xena's family crypt and Aphrodite had offered to go in to fetch Xena's ashes and weapons alone. Gabrielle had shaken her head and smiled.

"Thank you, Aphrodite, but it's my responsibility. Wait here. I'll be right back." And she ducked inside before the goddess could answer. She sat down, pondering the fortitude of her immortal friend.

Gabrielle lit the torch, looking around with new eyes. Hope had replaced despair and she moved with a light step towards where Xena remains had been placed. Reverently she lifted the ashes, re-wrapping them before placing them in the bottom of her bag. She picked up the sword and chakram, looking around her once more.

"If this works... \*when\* this works, we will come back and clean up here. You're all family and you deserve better than to be forgotten. So wish us luck, okay?" The bard felt her optimism returning and it was with a light heart and a lighter step that she exited the crypt.

"All righty, Aphrodite. Let's do this."

Aphrodite chuckled, hearing herself reflected in Gabrielle's speech. Then she waved her hand and the two of them disappeared.

Hephaestus' hideaway was, well... a little creepy in Gabrielle's opinion. They'd had to walk from the hidden entrance and there had been a maze of hallways and corridors to traverse before they'd reached their destination. Aphrodite had been careful to mark each passageway and booby trap so they wouldn't have difficulties getting back out. She didn't figure Xena would be in the mood to play games then.

"I asked Hephie about making a shortcut, but it was a total no go," Dite said as they walked through the maze. "He said the whole point was some radical privacy," Aphrodite blushed, "which was a really good thing sometimes. Ahem, anyway... we do have to be careful though. There are some wicked triggers in here that could trap even a god."

Aphrodite chewed her nail for a minute before facing Gabrielle. "I don't think Hephie was being completely honest with me about this place though."

Gabrielle turned to face the goddess, careful to keep her eyes on the route they were taking. "How so?"

"Well, a lot of the surprises will lock you \*in\* here, not just keep ya out, ya know. The Eye makes it impossible to pop in and out, which is why were walking through this grody part. And Hephie didn't start building this place 'til AFTER that whole thing with Dahok. You know."

Gabrielle most certainly did know and she paled at the memories that name elicited.

"So anyway," the goddess continued. "I've always kinda wondered, in the back of my mind, what the real story was. Turn left. Ah... here we are."

Gabrielle looked around the austere room, finding the Eye with no trouble and taking in the rest slowly. There were sconces around the room and one wall that seemed to double as a door. A large, flat altar sat beneath the Eye and a few more traps were scattered randomly. There was no furniture to speak of and Aphrodite gestured to the altar. She got out her notes.

"Okay, you need to scatter Xena's ashes on the altar. Carefully, though it's not like there is any wind here to blow them away."

Gabrielle hesitated, then lifted the lid. The scent almost made her gag in reflex and she stood very still clenching her jaw until the urge passed. "Does it matter? I mean, do I need to form them into a pattern, spread them evenly, what?"

Aphrodite ran her finger down the scroll. "Doesn't say. I'd have to say spread them evenly though. Not like you can tell what ashes go where, ya know?" She turned her attention back to her notes, missing Gabrielle's shiver.

Gabrielle gingerly shook the pot, trying for even distribution of the ashes on the stone. It took a while and Aphrodite was sitting on the floor in meditation. When she was finished, Gabrielle walked back to the goddess and placed a tentative hand on her shoulder. Dite's eyes slowly opened and she smiled up at the bard.

"All done, sweetie?" Gabrielle nodded. "Kay, then, let's see. Hmm, put the sword here," gesturing, "and the chakram here," pointing to another spot. "Oh wait... you're gonna need to use the chakram to spill the blood." She wrinkled her face in distaste.

Gabrielle complied, putting the sword into place and separating the chakram. She laid one piece on the altar and kept the other in her right hand. She looked back at Aphrodite, waiting for further instruction.

"Okay, um... this is the gross part. You've got to... ew... um, make a cut deep enough to bleed really well." She shuddered. "You're gonna have to share about half your body's blood to make this work."

Gabrielle's eyes got big, but she nodded her acceptance.

"Don't worry, babe. I'll be here to keep an eye on you." Dite took a deep breath. "You ready?"

Gabrielle raised the chakram and Aphrodite took the bard's left hand in her own. With her right hand, she stroked the inside of Gabrielle's left wrist. "Here," she said quietly. "This one leads from your heart."

Gabrielle bit her lip and closed her eyes, then lifted the chakram and sliced neatly without a flinch. Blood began running slowly and green eyes opened and focused on Aphrodite for a minute, then she turned her attention to the ashes that were very slowly becoming soaked red.

Ashes that were forming into the ghostly outline of a well-known shape. Gabrielle felt her heart clench at the sight of the familiar form that she had missed with aching intensity for more than twelve moons. She felt the tears flow and watched as they fell unhindered to the altar and mixed with the blood and ash.

At that moment, Ares burst in on them, disrupting the ritual causing everything to halt. The ashes were scattered and Gabrielle screamed in agony when the blood tried to reinsert itself into her being.

Aphrodite touched a spot on Gabrielle's neck, rendering her mercifully unconscious. Then the goddess got up and slapped Ares, furious at this final interference.

"Gods damn you to Tartarus, Ares! We nearly had her!"

"What? Nearly had who??"

"Xena, you idiot. We were bringing Xena home and you just totally screwed it up!"

"Well how was \*I\* supposed to know?? Not like you told me!"

"Exactly... I didn't tell you because I didn't want you here... for this very reason. You have no sense where Xena is concerned and everything you've done lately has simply made things worse!"

"I... but...."

"Go away, Ares. I don't want you here when Gabrielle wakes up. She doesn't deserve the kind of pain you've inflicted and I don't think we can fix this. There aren't enough of Xena's ashes left to work with." She hesitated as a look of pain crossed his face. "Please Ares," she said quietly. "Just go."

He looked at Gabrielle, still lying mercifully unconscious near the altar. He sealed the wound on her wrist, then leaned forward to brush a kiss across her temple. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle. You were a worthy opponent, but you didn't deserve this. Neither of you did."

He didn't even glance at Aphrodite whose jaw was hanging open. He simply turned on his heel and left the way he'd come.

# Chapter V

Aphrodite knelt at Gabrielle's side and gently shook her awake. She wondered how the bard would feel about the fact that Ares had managed to find them and mess everything up but good. She wondered how he'd managed to locate them, then the green eyes opened and her attention refocused on the woman who lay at her knees.

Gabrielle gasped, the return to consciousness abrupt and unexpected. In that instant, she felt an intimate warmth flow through her soul and she rejoiced. She clenched Aphrodite's hand in her own, looking back at her with tear-filled eyes and a bright smile. "I feel her, Aphrodite. She's alive!"

She looked around. "Xena? Xena??" Her attention came back to the goddess. "Where is she, Aphrodite? I know she's alive... I can feel her." She put Dite's hand on her chest. "Here. Her heart is beating with mine."

Aphrodite smiled and clasped her hand, feeling the heartbeat in a steady rhythm before pulling away and pinching the bridge of her nose with her fingers. "Well, then... I have good news and I have bad news."

Gabrielle clutched the hand she still held, causing Dite to wince in reflex.

"Careful with the merchandise, hon. You're gonna leave a bruise." She gently extracted her hand and covered the bard's own. "Now, the good news is, she's alive, right? That's a good thing."

"Riiiiight... so what's the bad news?"

"The bad news is she's not here and I don't know where she is."

"But we can fix that, right? We can do the ritual again?"

"Um, no. There aren't enough ashes left to try again."

"WHAT?!?" Gabrielle jumped to her feet. "Where is he? I'll kill him myself!"

"Whoa, whoa, Gab! Slow down. He's gone. You can't kill him anyway, remember? He's a god again." She put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders, holding tight when the bard tried to shrug her off. Then holding tighter when the shoulders beneath her arm slumped in defeat. She cupped Gabrielle's chin and drew her eyes up to meet her own.

"You know she's alive, right?" She waited for the acknowledgement to come. "Right... so you can use the connection you feel from her to find her. Should be a piece of cake."

Gabrielle snorted in laughter through her tears. "Aphrodite, nothing has ever been a piece of cake for us. Somehow I don't see this being any different."

Aphrodite chuckled sympathetically and drew the bard's head to her lips. "Good point." She looked around and shuddered. "Let's get out of here. This place is giving me the creeps now."

They exited slowly, following the markers Aphrodite had left and now painstakingly removed. "Heph didn't mark it for a reason. I'm just trying to respect that," Dite explained in answer to Gabrielle's unasked question.

When they found their way out, Aphrodite replaced the shielding that had been in place. Then she waved them back to Olympus.

Dite popped them right to Gabrielle's room, knowing the effect of blood loss would hit her hard and suddenly. She surmised correctly and was just able to catch the bard as she slipped to the floor. The goddess got Gabrielle tucked into bed, then moved to her own room. This adventure had exhausted her more than she was willing to admit and she still had her regular love biz to take care of. She decided to take a nap.

Green eyes opened slowly, the pert nose twitching at the scent of cinnamon and sugar that wafted her direction. She stretched leisurely, smiling at the renewed warmth she felt coursing through her soul and marveling at the hunger gnawing at her belly.

"Guess immortality didn't completely take away my appetite." Gabrielle flung the covers from her and rose from the bed. She padded over the thick carpet to the table, smiling at the steaming cinnamon rolls that greeted her vision.

She brought the plate back to the bed and sat down, her gaze turning inward. The distinctive warmth that she knew was Xena was distant, but it was real. She smiled softly, feeling a renewed hope.

"I will find you, Xena. Somehow, some way, I will find you and we'll be together again."

It was still dark when the blue eyes finally opened and looked around, disoriented. This wasn't the afterlife she'd expected it to be. In fact, she felt a distinctive hunger in her belly and a burning in her blood. It didn't seem to be an afterlife at all. She poked at her torso and pinched her arm, concluding that her naked flesh was real.

Slowly, she rose to her feet, looking around in confusion. She wasn't in Japa and it didn't look like Greece, Chin, Britannia or Egypt. The land was flat and as her eyes adjusted, she realized she could see a very long way. There was a light in the distance and heedless of her nakedness, the warrior headed that way.

She tottered for a few steps, then stumbled and she realized she was weak from hunger and something else... indefinable.

She knelt in the grass, the stalks gently tickling her skin. She closed her eyes, putting the sensation out of her mind and focused on the sounds around her. There was the brush of the grass, the whistle of wind and... she smiled. Just to her left was the sound of an animal... wild have from its scent.

Stealthily, she circled her prey, waiting patiently. It was over before the rabbit understood it had jumped into a trap. The warrior grabbed the soft neck and sank her teeth into it with relish. She began to feel warmth and strength seeping through her bones until she realized what she was doing.

She flung the hare from her in disgust and tried to retch, but there was nothing in her belly to regurgitate. She lurched to her feet, strong enough now to move towards the light at a steady pace.

It was just daylight when she stumbled into the small encampment. Everyone stared at first, until an old woman approached her with a blanket. "Netonêševehe, ka'êškone? Tosa'e netao'setsêhe'ohtse?"

The warrior's brow furrowed, not understanding the language. The old woman wrapped the fur around the naked body slowly, gently brushing the wild, dark hair from the planed face. Then she tapped her own chest. "Hotassa," she stated and pointed to the warrior and arched her eyebrow in mute question.

The blue eyes scanned the small village, noting the well-laid camp and the patiently waiting tribesmen. They didn't seem to be threatening... merely curious and she decided that she would stay with them as long as they would allow until she could figure out where she was and how to get home.

She looked back at the motherly woman and smiled, eliciting one in response. She jerked a thumb at herself. "Xena," she answered and let the old woman lead her to a spot by the fire.

Gabrielle packed up her bag and wandered over to find Dite. Surprisingly, she found the goddess curled around a pillow sound asleep. She shook Dite's shoulder gently.

"Aphrodite?"

"Not now, Gab... sleepin'."

Gabrielle's eyes widened. She hadn't known gods and goddesses slept, then realized that Dite had been working extra hard pulling two goddess gigs besides all the help and research she had been doing for Gabrielle herself. Gabrielle pulled the down comforter up around Dite's shoulders and smile when she burrowed deeper into the pillow. Gabrielle leaned over and kissed Aphrodite on the cheek.

"Goodbye, my friend. Pleasant dreams. Pop in and see me sometime, will ya? I have a feeling I'm gonna need you to keep in touch to keep me from losing my mind."

Dite didn't answer, but she sighed softly and smiled.

Gabrielle put a note on the table, then walked to the door and turned one final time. "Thank you, Aphrodite," she said, before slowly making her way down the hall and out of the Olympian Palace. She figured she had several days' journey ahead of her before she reached the sea. She was going to go back to the beginning... to the place where all of this had started almost two years before.

It took almost a week before Gabrielle reached the shores nearest the base of Mount Olympus. She heard a hail, calling a name she had not heard since Japa and one she would be glad to forget. She searched the ships anchored off the small port town and found what she was looking for.

"Little Dragon Warrior?"

Gabrielle held up a hand. "Captain, please. My name is Gabrielle."

Katerina von Lihp's eyes bulged. That was more words from the Little Dra... Gabrielle... than she had heard during their entire voyage from Japa to Shanghai. The Captain took a good long look at the woman who stood before her in a loose cotton tunic and leggings and saw a renewed sense of hope and purpose in her green eyes.

"Well then, Gabrielle, is there something I can help you with? I did not think to see you here after all this time."

Gabrielle's brow furrowed. "Oh? How long as it been?"

It was Katerina's turn to look confused. "It has been eighteen moons since I saw you in the Southern port. Surely you knew this."

Gabriele shook her head. "Um, no. No. I've been kinda busy. Guess I lost track of time." Before the Captain could comment, Gabriele continued. "Are you busy, or can I hire you?"

"Well, we usually do not take passengers, but for you... what did you have in mind?"

"I need to get back to Japa... to Higuchi. I need to go back to where all of this started."

Katerina regarded her thoughtfully for a long moment before nodding. "That is good. We needed to go back again soon anyway, as I have more trade goods to pick up. When could you be ready to leave?"

"Um, now?"

"Now is good, hä? Come along. The crew should be about done with their loading. We are leaving with the tide, somewhere after the moon is high."

"And the fee?"

"Ah, we can discuss that on board the ship. It will be fair, I promise you."

Gabrielle nodded. Katerina had been nothing but kind and had never once tried to take advantage of her grief. She felt comfortable trusting this rather odd little sea Captain. She had learned the hard way when not to trust and her instincts were pretty reliable. So she followed the Captain to a longboat that rested on the shore.

Most of the crew remembered Gabrielle from their journey together before and gave her a pleasant nod as she boarded. Katerina got her settled in the same small cabin she'd used before and by dawn the next morning, the ship and her crew were sailing down the coastline of Greece.

Things fell quickly into a routine. Every morning, Gabrielle worked with her weapon of choice for the day and she rotated between sais, staff and katana to keep things fresh and interesting. Then she spent time helping do whatever odd little job she could find that didn't interfere with the regular running of the ship.

She was a little more outgoing, but the crew still strongly respected the boundaries they'd been given the first time and she found she was a little lonely. So at least once a week she went to the galley and cooked, to keep her skills from getting rusty, she said. But it was mostly because Cookie had taken her under her wing and reminded Gabrielle sorely of the grandmother she'd known as a child. The sailors didn't complain. On the contrary... they looked forward to the days that Gabrielle was in the galley. Extra treats seemed to appear that day.

So time passed slowly; one day pretty much like the next, only differing on the days that they would stop in a port for trading and supplies. Gabrielle learned that Katerina was considered something of an indulgent captain. She made her own rules and set her own schedule and she saw no reason for the crew to suffer sea rations for weeks on end if there were ports along the way that they could stop in to pick up fresh provisions. Only their rush to meet Gabrielle in Greece had gotten them there in only a year's time before.

So it was nearly six months into the voyage before they reached the bottom of the African continent and Gabrielle was more than grateful for the change in clothing she wore. Her leggings were thick wool and she'd traded in her tunic for a heavy sweater. The seas were getting rougher and the swells were bigger and even with Aphrodite's ring on, Gabrielle felt a distinct nausea beginning in her belly.

After her exercises, Gabrielle made her apologies to the Captain and went back below to rest. She knew she would do better with the seasickness topside, but at the moment all she wanted to do was close her eyes in the privacy of her own cabin.

Strangely, the motion did not seem to bother her once she lay down and closed her eyes and Gabrielle drifted in a twilight of sleep that was full of memories and images that made no sense to her whatsoever. She didn't know how long she laid there floating on the edges of sleep, but eventually she felt things around her calm. Gabrielle didn't open her eyes, not wanting to lose the meditative state she found herself in. It wasn't until she felt a soft touch in her hair that she slowly blinked her eyes open.

"Aphrodite?"

"Hiya, Sweet Pea! How ya doin'?" She continued her stroking and felt Gabrielle relax back into her touch.

"Better, now. I'm glad to see ya though. I've missed you."

"Aw, you're so sweet, Gab. I've totally missed you too. I'm sorry I missed your leaving," said with just the slightest hint of reproach.

Gabrielle opened her eyes just slightly and gazed into Dite's blue ones. "Sorry, Dite. You looked so peaceful and I didn't wanna disturb you. But...."

"But you really wanted to like, get started looking for Big X, huh?" The goddess smiled with understanding and continued stroking Gabrielle's scalp, grinning indulgently when the bard's eyes closed again and she relaxed even further into the touch.

"Uh huh," she agreed. "I wanna find her so we can put all this behind us and get on with our lives."

Gabrielle's eyes were closed, so she didn't see the look that crossed Aphrodite's face at her words. She felt the hesitation in the stroking though and opened her eyes to catch the grimace that crossed Dite's face before she schooled her features into a smile. Gabrielle sat up on an elbow, bringing her almost nose to nose with the goddess. Aphrodite stood up to pace the small cabin.

"Aphrodite?" Gabrielle's voice was almost growly in accusation.

"Ya know, Cutie, I've been totally busy since you left... lots of bitchin' love biz, ya know? Keepin' up with the Greeks and the Romans is enough to like, soooo wear out a love goddess doin' double duty. Anyway," Dite hurried on, seeing Gabrielle was getting a little impatient. "In what little free time I've had, I've been looking for that radical warrior of yours." Aphrodite paused and painted on a bright smile. "I have good news and bad news."

Gabrielle flopped back on the bed and covered her eyes with her linked hands and groaned. "I'm not gonna like this, am I?" She sighed. "Give me the bad news."

"Well, sweetie, the bad news is I'm still looking for exactly \*where\* Xena is. I'm just not totally sure where or when where is yet exactly. See, I've been all over the known world on the world wide god web looking for her and I personally went back to Japa, the Norselands and Egypt to speak to the gods there. I know she's not there because we searched through their webs too. I will be soooo totally glad when we get everything tied together between us, but I think that's gonna be a little while longer coming."

"Wait, wait!" Gabrielle sat up waving her hands. "I'm sure the intricacies of your god web thing are fascinating and any other time I'd be glad to discuss it in detail. But right now, I wanna go back \*just\* a little bit."

"The good news isn't gonna get me outta this, huh?"

"Good news?"

"Well, yeah! We know that Xena's nowhere in the known world, so you really don't have to go back to Japa. I know that place has some radically rotten memories for you."

Gabrielle scraped her nails through her hair in complete exasperation before scrubbing her face and sighing. "Aphrodite, if Xena is nowhere to be found in the known world, then where is she?"

Dite stamped her own feet in vexation. "I don't know!" She ran her hands through her own hair and made it stand up on end. "I've never seen anywhere like this and it was only a glimpse!"

"Then how do you know that it's nowhere in the known world?"

"Because it was between fifteen hundred and two thousand years into the future!!" Dite shouted, then slapped a hand over her mouth as what she said registered and Gabrielle collapsed onto the bed.

"What???" Gabrielle asked in a strangled whisper.

Dite sat down next to Gabrielle and took her hands, pulling her into a reluctant hug. For a few minutes nothing was said between them as Aphrodite concentrated on calming Gabrielle's racing pulse. Gently she rubbed the bard's back, willing her to relax. Finally and quite firmly, Gabrielle pulled back, though she held on to Dite's hands.

"You're telling me Xena is somewhere in the future and I'm gonna have to wait between fifteen hundred and two thousand years before I can even TRY to find her??"

"Uh huh. That was the best I could narrow it down. I...."

Gabrielle took her hands out of Aphrodite's grasp and stood up to pace. The goddess watched patiently as Gabrielle paced the three steps between the wall and the door, waving her hands and talking to herself. Eventually, she seemed to come to a conclusion and dropped back down next to Aphrodite.

She waved her hands, though Dite was sitting quietly with a bemused look on her face. "Okay, look. I don't wanna know how you figured this out right now. I'm honestly not sure my brain could handle the overload right now. But you're sure it was so far away??"

Dite shrugged. "Yeah. I don't know how she got there yet, or even where there \*is\*. But I'm fairly certain about the time frame."

"Fairly certain?"

"C'mon, Gab, cut me a little slack here, will ya? I'm working with a lot of unknowns. I know this is hard, but I'm doin' the best I can here!"

"I'm sorry Aphrodite. It's just...."

"I know, babe, I know!" Dite agreed, embracing the bard in a hug. "I'll keep looking, but there's nothing I can do to make time go by faster."

"I don't suppose you could send me forward fifteen hundred years?" Gabrielle asked half-jokingly.

"Babe, even if I knew exactly when and where she was I couldn't send you there. When Herc crushed the Cronos stone, he took our ability to cross timelines. We have to live through time like everybody else. I'm sorry."

Gabrielle squeezed Aphrodite before pulling back and looking up into her eyes. "It's all right, Dite. I didn't figure you could, or you probably already would have. It was worth a shot, though. I had to ask."

"I know you did, Cutie. You wouldn't be you if you didn't try everything you could to get to her."

They sat down on the bed, content for a while to absorb the comfort they offered one another. Finally Gabrielle lifted her head from Aphrodite's shoulder.

"So now I have to figure out what I'm gonna do for the next fifteen hundred years."

"Well, maybe I can help with that a little, at least to start," Dite answered, waiting for Gabrielle to look at her. When she was sure she had Gabrielle's undivided attention, she asked, "Do you think you could take the Amazons to a new home?"

Gabrielle quirked an eyebrow and waited.

"Diana... Artemis asked me to keep an eye on them and I have been as much as I could. But it's hard with everything else I have goin' on, ya know? And they are totally being screwed over. They are being pushed out of what little land they have left and I thought maybe you'd be willing to help them find a new home."

Gabrielle nodded. "Seems like the least I can do for them. Do you have a place in mind?"

Aphrodite popped a map in and put in on the bed. "Well, I was thinking an island, maybe here," pointing to an area that had several islands clustered together and was reasonably close to India. "They'd have a way better chance of keeping the Nation alive if there are men relatively close to them without necessarily being in the same space."

Gabrielle looked at the map closely. "That might work. In fact, it should do nicely. Tell ya what, next port we get to, I'll get off and start back to Greece."

"But...."

"Aphrodite, it's gonna take a while to get all the remnants together and I can't just go popping in and out of places. People will start to notice and if I've gotta survive for two thousand years, I need to keep as low a profile as I can."

Aphrodite gave her the barest hint of a pout.

Gabrielle relented just slightly. "Tell ya what. I'll write up a notice and give you a list of all the places it needs to be posted. If you could make sure that gets done, it would be a tremendous help."

Dite clapped her hands and bounced on the balls of her feet. "I can do that!"

"Good. Thank you! Then hopefully most of them will be at the meeting place by the time I arrive and I can leave some cryptic instructions for any stragglers or women who may want to join the Nation later."

"Radical idea... just bitchin', babe! Lemme go and I'll be back to get that stuff from you when you're done, 'kay? Just call me!"

"I will, Aphrodite. Thanks for coming to see me."

"Oh, hon... you can look for me to pop in and out of your life regularly from now on. We gotta stick together, you and me. Thanks for helping me out, babe! You ROCK!"

The goddess disappeared with her usually fanfare, leaving behind a scattering of fresh rose petals. An immediate knock on the door precluded any legitimate thought and Gabrielle wasn't quite surprised to see Captain Lihp standing in front of her.

"Are you all right, Gabrielle? The first mate told me he thought he heard you talking to yourself and I know the weather was making things difficult for you."

"I'm fine, Captain, but I find that I must leave the ship at our next stop. I will pay you for the entire voyage," Gabrielle hastened to explain, "but I suddenly remembered something I left undone and I have to get back and take care of it as soon as possible."

"We could...."

"No, Captain, please. This is your business and I know you have contracts with merchants aside from our arrangement. I won't allow you to lose time or business on my account. Especially since if I had been thinking when I set this up, I would have remembered this to start with."

"It's a long way back to Greece, Little Dragon. Are you sure...."

"Yes, Captain, I am, but thank you for your concern. I appreciate it."

"Well, you have been a good passenger and a contributing member of this crew. We will all miss you greatly vhen you leave."

"Thank you, Captain, for all you and your crew have done. I will always be grateful." Gabrielle extended her hand and Katerina accepted it gracefully.

"We should be reaching our next port in two days. I will make sure you are well set for your journey home before we leave the port."

"You don't...."

"I do, hä? I made a promise and Katerina von Lihp never breaks a promise if it is possible to keep it."

"I have to tell you, Captain... I have probably enjoyed my time on your ship better than any other I have ever C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

spent time aboard."

"Not a sailor, then, hmm?" said with just a hint of a teasing grin. "Well, I thank you. I am proud of my ship and crew. She's a fine craft and they are good people."

"Yeah, they are. And so are you."

Katerina blushed slightly. "Will you be topside shortly, or should I have your dinner sent here?"

"I'll come up. I understand Schmidt is singing tonight."

"Yes, he is. We will expect you shortly then, hä?"

"Yep, just left me clean up a bit and I'll be there."

"Good! Good! Meet you on deck then."

Gabrielle closed the door behind the effusive captain and sat down on the bed. She ran her hands through her hair and looked at the ceiling, though her focus was on something internal only she could see.

"Two thousand years!! Oh Xena, how am I ever gonna survive this? What am I gonna do now?"

## Chapter VI

The first few hours in Xena's new life were spent in mostly silence. She spent her time observing and listening to everything that was going on around her and she had come to the definite conclusion that Greece was a very long way away. The last coherent memory she had before her arrival was lying on their shared furs looking at the stars with Gabrielle and after that.... She was at a loss to know where she was or how she'd come to be there.

Hotassa was the first wife of the tribal medicine man and she had taken it upon herself to adopt Xena. The shaman didn't mind; his first-born son had indicated an interest in the warrior and it was good for Xena that Hotassa taught her the ways of the tribe.

After the discussion and argument with the tribal elders were over, Hotassa took Xena to the spring to clean herself up and she brought along with her the dress of a native woman. Xena bathed, then looked at the dress with disdain. It was pretty enough and the beadwork on it was nice, but it was entirely impractical for a warrior. She shook her head no.

"Heehe'e!" Hotassa answered vehemently. "He'eo'o hoestôtse."

Xena made no move to take the dress from Hotassa's hand and the older woman thrust it out to her again. "He'eo'o hoestôtse "

"No!" Xena answered with equal defiance. "I want that!"

Xena spun the older woman toward the village and pointed at one of the young warriors who was strutting

around in long pants and a breechcloth.

Hotassa shook her head. "Hova'âhane!" she exclaimed. "Notaxe nêhpêso'hestôtse... he'eo'o hoestôtse."

"Look, Hotassa. I am a warrior and this," taking the garment and shaking it at the older woman, "won't work for me. I want that!"

The two women stood staring at one another for long moments before Hotassa took the dress and threw it to the ground prior to stomping off.

Xena wrapped the blanket more tightly around her and picked up the dress. Then she wandered back to the village.

"Ah, this'll do nicely," she muttered to herself, slipping the blade from its sheath without a sound. Then she wrapped the blanket more firmly around her and began patiently cutting seams. She started gathering a curious crowd, but patently ignored them as she continued to work. Hotassa pushed her way through the group of women and children, noting that the men were equally interested but trying to put on an indifferent front.

"Netonêševe?"

"I need a needle and some gut. You know," seeing the confusion in Hotassa's eyes. She made motions with her hands. "For sewing."

Hotassa was intrigued and understanding the request by the motions Xena made, retrieved her sewing basket from her tent. Then she watched patiently as Xena reformed the garment into something... different.

Xena sat there until late afternoon, noting idly that all activity in the camp seemed to have stopped waiting for her to unveil her work. Finally satisfied, she held the two piece garment for her inspection. Pleased with what she saw, Xena dropped the blanket and slipped into her new clothing.

The bottom was similar to a breechcloth, except there were short pants underneath. Her top was a sleeveless one-piece that barely reached the top of her breechcloth. Xena smiled to realize that her new outfit highly resembled some of the clothes Gabrielle had worn. Without warning, her breath caught and she concentrated on forcing air in and out of her lungs. The place in her heart that had always been Gabrielle was empty and barren.

"Zee-nah?"

Hearing her name falling awkwardly from unfamiliar lips made Xena smile sadly. It was a stark reminder of just what she was missing.

"Zee-nah? Nepevomohtâhehe?" Hotassa put a hand on Xena's arm and even though Xena couldn't understand the language, the questioning the older woman's eyes was unmistakable. She smiled shakily and patted the hand on her arm.

"I'm all right, Hotassa. As right as I can be right now, anyway," she mumbled to herself.

Hotassa smiled and looked back to where the braves and warriors were lurking and waved at her son. The C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

man stepped forward and made his way through the crowd.

"Hetsêheohe, Kya Nenaasêstse!"

The young shaman stepped forward and started touching Xena's face and she knocked his hands away. He smiled and muttered something she didn't understand, running his fingers down her arms. This time she shrugged him off and pushed him bodily from her.

"Who in Tartarus do you think you are???"

Kya growled and lunged at her and she side-stepped and kicked him in the ass before turning and smiling viciously at him. She waggled her fingers at him.

"C'mon, big boy. Ya wanna play?"

He reached for her and this time she simply jabbed and watched as he fell to his knees, gasping for breath.

"I've just cut off the flow of blood to your brain. Maybe when I restart it, it'll flow well enough for you to figure things out."

His nose started bleeding and she jabbed again, pulling back to punch him senseless. She was startled when she found her hand caught by the elder shaman.

"Hova'âhane," he said, shaking his head. "Eneoestse!"

The older man motioned to his son and sent him scurrying off to another tent. Then the man turned her over to Hotassa and walked back to the fire he had been seated at. Hotassa took Xena by the arm and led her to the small tent that had been prepared for her next to her own.

Xena looked around the small space noting the hole in the top and the fire pit that was on the ground beneath it. Hotassa was gesturing around and Xena saw except that for a few furs the place was empty. She turned and exited the dwelling, Hotassa hot on her heels.

The older woman grabbed her arm and it was by sheer will that Xena did not knock her into next week. Instead she whirled around with fire in her eyes and Hotassa involuntarily took a step back. Xena consciously took herself in hand, reminding herself that it was not this woman's fault she felt so completely off balance and that so far, Hotassa had been nothing but a friend.

She smiled and held up her hands in supplication. "Sorry," knowing the woman wouldn't understand the words, but hoping the gestures would convey her thoughts. Xena ran her hands through her hair in frustration. She could feel a burning start in her gut and it made her uneasy on top of everything else. She signed to Hotassa as best as she could, but the older woman shook her head in non-understanding.

Finally, Xena took her hand and led her back into the small dwelling, motioning to the empty fire pit and the furs. Hotassa nodded with comprehension and led Xena out and gesticulated towards the open prairie. Xena returned the look with a furrowed brow.

Hotassa snatched up a basket from beside her own fire and took Xena's hand in her own, leading her out behind the encampment into the open field. They went a short distance, until they were out some ways and

Hotassa began looking at the ground carefully. Without warning, she bent and retrieved something triumphantly and placed it in the basket.

Xena took a closer look then drew her head back in surprised disgust. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me. You want me to use animal dung for fire?"

"Ho'esta, heehe'e!" Hotassa answered emphatically, as though she understood Xena's words. She thrust the basket into Xena's hands. Then she turned and went back to the camp.

Xena stood stock still for a long moment, closing her eyes and letting the breeze blow across her face. *Oh, Gabrielle... what am I supposed to do now? Where am I and what happened to us? To you? I can't feel you and yet you were alive in my arms just... oh gods....* Her thoughts trailed off and she sank to her knees in agony. The feeling of her soul sundering was overwhelming and Xena let it wash over her in waves.

She wasn't aware of the passage of time as she sat in shocked silence grieving. But it was totally dark when she came to herself again and she was covered with the blanket Hotassa had offered her... was it only that morning? and a bowl of slightly warm stew sat beside her.

The food beside her reminded her of another hunger and without recognizing her intentions, she shed the blanket and stealthily crept through the grass. The groundhog was dead and drained when she realized what had happened. Xena took off running, hoping to outrun the hounds of hell that suddenly seemed to be on her tail. Life made no sense anymore and she'd lost her balance.

When daybreak came, her resolve was set. She would find out what god was playing with her life and figure out what life or afterlife they had deposited her into. Then whatever it took, she would find her way back to Gabrielle.

Xena came back into the encampment disheveled and silent. She immediately went into her small tent, surprised to see her blanket folded neatly on the furs, small pile of buffalo chips in her fire pit and another bowl of warm stew and a waterskin nearby. She smiled sadly, recognizing that she'd found a friend in this place.

She took up the bowl first and ate every morsel, her body understanding it needed both forms of food to survive and survival was paramount until she figured this puzzle out. She guzzled the water from the skin, flinching slightly at its odd taste, then proceeding to drink the skin dry.

Xena retrieved her bowl, blanket and skin and quickly made her way out of her dwelling and down to the water's edge. She rechecked the water carefully, then refilled the skin and laid it to one side. She rinsed her bowl and utensil, the stripped out of her clothes and rinsed the night's grime from her body, feeling herself settle as she did so. She washed as well as she could manage without soap, then rinsed her leathers and wrapped up in the blanket before making her way back to the camp.

Xena drew a few stares, but not as many as one would imagine, as a good portion of the tribe wasn't present. She laid her clothes out to dry and went next door to Hotassa's home, bowl in hand.

She wasn't sure if Hotassa was home so she cleared her throat and called softly, "Hotassa?" Xena waited patiently and heard stirrings from inside. Hotassa stuck her head out, shaking her head when Xena offered the

bowl back to her.

"Zee-nah's," she said. Xena inclined her head in acceptance. Hotassa looked at her with a raised eyebrow, indicating her state of undress. Xena simply pointed to the grass where her clothing lay drying and Hotassa nodded in understanding.

Xena bit her lip, thinking about how to convey her next question. "Hotassa, I need a scroll, ink and quill," mimicking her words with her hands. Hotassa stared at her dumbly and Xena blew out a breath of frustration, her respect for Gabrielle's communication skills suddenly skyrocketing. She looked around, spotting a basket full of craft supplies and snatched up a feather and a pot of paint. Xena dipped the end of the quill into the container of black paint. Then she grabbed an odd piece of hide and made several small marks.

"Can I keep these?" she asked, holding the things to her breast in a sign of ownership. Hotassa, though not understanding the words, recognized the gesture and nodded her head in agreement, folding her hands over Xena's.

"Zee-nah's."

"Thank you," Xena said softly, then went back to sit in front of her small tent and began to write in earnest.

#### Things I need to know

- 1. Am I alive
- a. If so, where am I
- b. If not, what afterlife is this
- 2. Is Gabrielle alive
- a. If so, why can't I sense her
- b. If not, where is she and how did she die
- 3. How did I get here
- a. Gods with the ability to get me to wherever here is
- 1. Ares
- 2. Odin
- 3. Apollo
- 4. Morpheus
- 5. Michael's god
- 6. Aphrodite
- 7. Hermes
- b. Gods with the desire to get me to wherever here is
- 1. Ares just because
- 2. Aphrodite because of something that happened to Gabrielle?
- 3. Odin old grudge
- 4. Michael's god because of Lucifer?
- c. A third party? Someone like Alti with something to gain from my separation from Gabrielle?
- 4. Can I get home

Xena sat rereading her questions and points, pinching her bottom lip between her finger and thumb as she thought. She was heedless of the paint she was spreading on her face and didn't even realize that she resembled Gabrielle when she did the same thing.

After a few moments she took up her writing again.

## Things I am fairly confident about

- 1. This is a new place life or afterlife
- 2. I was manipulated to get here
- 3. At least part of the answer should be nearby

She reread her work one final time, then laid it aside, satisfied with her conclusions so far. There was still room to add questions, points or facts as the came to light. For now, she had other work to do.

Xena placed the hide in her tent, then reached out and snagged her dry clothes from the grasses where the lay. She dressed and picked up the paint, walking back to Hotassa's. Hotassa saw her coming and frowned at the pot of paint Xena held out to her.

"Hova'âhane. Zee-nah's," she said, shaking her head and patting the warrior's chest lightly. "Zee-nah's."

Xena nodded her acceptance. Then she pointed to the basket Hotassa had used the day before and motioned to the vast prairie with an inquiring look on her face. Hotassa smiled and nodded her approval and Xena took the basket and made her way to the open fields.

Xena made several trips back and forth, filling the basket and emptying it into a small but ever-growing pile between her tent and Hotassa's. Finally, Hotassa's husband, the elder medicine man, stepped in front of her and held up his hand. Her first reaction was to grab it and twist, but she thought about it when he spoke.

"Eneoestse," said kindly with a smile, indicating the now large pile of chips. "Epeva'e. Nea'eše."

Xena nodded and wiped an arm across her brow in an attempt to stop the sweat from rolling into her eyes. She placed the basket back at the side of the teepee where she'd found it and went to her own dwelling and retrieved her waterskin.

She sat down to rest a moment, drinking the water as quickly as she dared. She grimaced when a bowl of thick, unidentifiable yellow substance was thrust under her nose. Xena hesitantly took it from a smiling Hotassa with a murmured, "Thank you."

It was odd and the texture was disconcerting, but she found the mixture sweetly palatable and very filling. The heat and fullness of her belly, combined with the lack of rest and the emotional draining she'd been through in the very short time she'd been in the village combined to make Xena dreadfully tired. Try as she might, she couldn't seem to keep her eyes open and the last thing she remembered was Hotassa leading her into her tent and the scent of freshly cut grass before her mind shut down in exhausted slumber.

It was pre-dawn when Xena's eyes opened again and she blinked in confusion trying to remember where she was that everything was so unfamiliar. Reality washed over her and she closed her eyes until it passed knowing that she still had many unanswered questions and no Gabrielle.

Her first order of business was survival, however and despite Hotassa's kindnesses, Xena knew there were many things she needed to do before she could start on her quest for answers.

So for the next several days, Xena learned the ways of the tribe. She learned to weave baskets to collect

food and chips in. She caught fish and amazed the women and children with her bare-handed method. Hotassa took pity on her after her first meal fiasco and always made sure to prepare enough to share with Xena at her own fire. Xena in turn made sure to provide whatever food and chips she was allowed.

It had been made clear to her very early that in this society, men and women had separate functions. And women did not function in the role of hunter or warrior. So Xena hunted alone, providing the food for her own meals and the blood she seemed to crave. She actually preferred it that way. It kept there from being too many questions.

Hotassa gave her the knife she'd used in her sewing, but otherwise, Xena crafted all the tools and weapons she needed. Soon, she had skins and furs of her own, a longbow and arrows, several other knives and a staff. Daily she took the staff out for exercise and training and though the people thought it odd that she walked with a stick, no one questioned her right to do so. She had made it clear through words and gestures that she preferred to be left alone and though it angered some, they all respected her wishes. Having seen what she'd done to Kya, no one challenged her.

She was still excluded from warrior activity, though and it was making her short-tempered and hostile. The blood she consumed could not completely satisfy the burning she felt. So she was a part pf the tribe and yet remained separate from it as well.

The tribe slowly moved around, following the buffalo as they grazed their way across the plains. A month passed before Xena realized it and she'd made no progress in finding answers to her questions. Day to day existence took up so much time and trying to get information while she was still learning to communicate with these people was a difficult prospect at best.

The men had formed a war party and the women were left to wait for the outcome of a battle their warriors had little hope to win. Xena took the time to hone her staff skills and several of the women watching her asked for instruction.

She agreed reluctantly, remembering the times that Gabrielle had asked her for tutoring in one martial skill or another. She remembered with particular wistfulness Gabrielle's introduction to her staff and the Amazons. It had been the beginning of their Amazon Princess/Warrior Princess/Amazon Queen discussions.

The women went into the scrub area looking for limbs long enough to suffice and were unable to find anything comparable to their needs. Frustrated, they came back to the encampment. Xena noted their disgruntled faces and placed her staff in her tent and instead motioned for them to join her.

The women did so hesitantly and Xena began taking them through the meditative Chi exercises she and Gabrielle had practiced together. If she closed her eyes, she could still see the picture of serenity on Gabrielle's face as the moves flowed through and around her. Xena bit her lip, as the pain had not lessened with the passage of time; it had only increased.

The women were awkward at first, moving in a way that was unfamiliar to them at first and then with more beauty as their natural gracefulness came to the fore.

After a bit, with sweat trailing down their faces but smiling happily at their new skill, they stopped by mutual consent. This was something they would enjoy doing and Xena had finally found a contribution to the community that made both parties happy.

That evening, Xena went hunting. She had been too long without blood and the burning was making her mad with rage. She went out resolved to drain the first living thing that crossed her path.

Xena had long since determined that she was somehow suffering from the Bacchae burning, but was at a loss to explain why or how it happened. She remembered clearly the festival when Gabrielle had become bacchae... when she had shared the burning for the first time and the feeling had been... orgasmic.

It had been very brief, but Xena remembered it as clearly now as when it had first happened. It had been the first time either of them had let themselves imagine other possibilities between them, but it hadn't been the last.

And once they'd become lovers...

Xena shook her head, trying to clear it. This train of thought made the hunger worse and the pain of the loss of Gabrielle in her life more acute. Instead, she turned her focus to the hunt, hoping to sate the burning for at least a little while.

The tribe's wanderings had brought them within walking distance of some scrubland... not enough to supply wood for their fires or provide the women with suitable staffs, but plenty to give shelter to some of the wildlife in the area.

The buffalo tended to avoid the area as it was home to several predators that hunted them, but Xena felt the need for a fight and headed out to find one.

She hadn't gone far when her nose picked up several scents and she stood still and allowed herself to separate them into the animals to which they belonged.

Jackrabbit.

Prairie hen.

Wolf, maybe?

Snake... and...?

At that moment, a movement in the grass caused Xena to turn and jump, catching her prey easily. She lifted it up, feeling her incisors grow to meet her need when her attention was caught by the greenest eyes she had ever seen.

Save Gabrielle's.

Xena stopped short, noting that in the moonlight the fox in her hand had red-gold hair that prompted her memories of a much younger Gabrielle. She cursed her mind for allowing her to continually be reminded of Gabrielle in everything around her.

She still was unable to feel Gabrielle and being reminded of her constantly was painful in the extreme, especially in light of the fact that she'd been unable to make any progress in her inquiries. It was difficult and Xena had long since had anything as frustratingly difficult as this particular challenge was proving to be.

Xena sat down, gently stroking the fur of the fox who for reasons unknown had curled up contentedly in her

arms. She looked down at the small, furry bundle and unexpectedly, the fox returned the look with understanding.

"You remind me of someone, you know. Someone I love very much. There is no way I can look into those eyes, her eyes and inflict death on you, even for my own need."

The fox snuggled down into Xena's lap and a dark eyebrow rose into an equally dark hairline.

"Oh, please. Make yourself at home."

She lifted the fox up and looked it in the eye and swore for an instant she saw Gabrielle's soul looking back at her. Xena nearly dropped the animal and the fox instinctively dug its claws into Xena's hands. Her hiss of pain was covered by a much louder hiss and that sound sent a skitter up Xena's spine.

It had been a while, but Xena easily recognized the predator that now circled behind her. She tried to ease the fox out of her grasp as she stood, but the animal would have none of it. Instead, the fox gazed at Xena confidently, then scrambled down and took up a position of sentinel, sitting up proud and tall as the panther approached.

Xena watched, fascinated. She had never seen behavior like this between a hunter and its prey and yet it subtly reminded her of... something... familiar.

The panther continued to circle and Xena held herself in check, keeping a very close eye on the fox. The small animal showed no fear, but kept its green eyes focused on the cat that now paced back and forth in front of them.

The panther growled, yet the fox merely tilted its head in questioning. Nearer and nearer the cat paced, until the fox reached out a paw and laid it on the panther's muzzle.

Xena froze, her hunger forgotten as she watched the tableau unfold before her eyes. Breathing became optional as she watched the panther lower its head and gently nuzzle its face into the fox's neck. The fox laid its nose on the cat's momentarily and then they both looked back at Xena.

Xena sat down as two pairs of eyes, one blue and one green, gazed back at her. The familiarity of them was astonishing and she watched in continued disbelief as the fox settled between the panther's forepaws and the cat wrapped itself protectively around its... mate?

"Oh Xena," she said aloud to herself as she reclined back in the grass to look at the stars. "I think madness or bloodlust or some really bad mushrooms have finally caught up with you, 'cause you are losing it. Panthers and foxes don't mate. There are laws in nature and that goes against most of them." She rubbed her eyes and continued looking at the stars. "I think you are just tired and the pain of missing Gabrielle constantly has made you see things."

Xena sat up, keeping her eyes closed with her hands pressed against her lids. "Now, go find you something to eat before what little of the mind you seem to have left takes a hike."

She opened her eyes, fully expecting to be alone. The panther and the fox remained, though now they both seemed to be to be keeping sentinel over her. She rolled her eyes heavenward and murmured, "Gods, don't let me lose my mind before I figure a way out of this riddle and back to Gabrielle."

Then she collected her bow and headed out toward the prairie, her silent guards padding along beside her.

#### Chapter VII

Gabrielle stood at the rail of the passenger ship, enjoying the wind as it teased her long hair loose from its pins. She appreciated the fresh sea air, though her heavy clothing tended to keep most of the breeze from her body. Gabrielle disdained modern clothing, but there were times, like now, when she had to bend to the fashion of the moment to blend in with the rest of polite society.

She had long since outgrown seasickness. It was a fact she was devoutly grateful for, especially since sea travel was the only way for her to cross from the old world to the new.

The year was 1835 and the wealth Gabrielle had accumulated over the centuries meant she was able to travel from Southampton to Halifax in relative comfort. She smiled in retrospect, remembering the many times she and Xena had traveled much rougher. A familiar pang squeezed her heart and she held her breath until it passed.

It's been more than seventeen hundred years, Xena and in some ways I still hurt as much today as I did that day in Japan. Always there is an ache in my heart and an empty place in my soul that is waiting for you to fill it again. If not for the fact that I continue to feel your presence, I would surely have gone mad by now... not that I haven't been close to that a time or two in my travels.

Gabrielle's smile became bittersweet and she turned to her journal. It was comprised of several volumes of thick, leather-bound notebooks that she carried with her. They had become quite cumbersome over the centuries, but unlike the scrolls that she and Xena had deposited in various hiding places in the ancient world, she couldn't bear to be separated from her journals. Sometimes, they seemed to be the only link she had between her realities and the best way she had of maintaining her sense of self.

The journal she held in her hand was of her earliest travels and she signaled for a chair to be brought out. Money had enabled her to hire the ship as a private charter and she took advantage of that fact only rarely. In the early mornings, she could be found practicing with weapons the crew had never imagined and they watched enviously her strength and sheer grace honed from centuries of practice.

Otherwise she followed the traditions of society and if the crew found her slightly eccentric, it made little difference to her

The third mate ran back with her chair, while several of the other sailors scurried around to make her comfortable. Gabrielle couldn't help the smile that crossed her face inwardly, though she was careful not to let it show outwardly. *These boys are such babies*, she thought, remembering easily she had been the same way when she'd first stepped into Xena's life.

There had been ample opportunities for relationships, but nothing could compare with what she'd had with Xena and what Dite had promised she would share again. So she'd gone through life alone, but not lonely, because she attracted people to her. But she'd never allowed anyone to get too close and she'd watched as people got older and younger at the same time.

She shook her head to clear the maudlin thoughts and sat down with a sigh. Gabrielle opened her journal and

began to read, letting her words to Xena wash over her and take her back to a place long gone and almost forgotten.

Dear Xena.... (it read)

I'm taking the Amazons away to a new home. Greece has become unbearable for them and Dite asked me to. So, I'm going to lead them to an island we've found and help them get settled. I was never the kind of Queen they needed, but the time has come for me to lead.

It had taken Gabrielle several moons of walking before the land started taking on the familiarity of home. And even then, it was so changed from what she remembered; what she had known when she and Xena had traveled together.

Romans were everywhere and the streets were crowded. Places that she had known as forest or wilderness now all had the earmarks of civilization. People were crowded into small spaces and their houses would be considered hovels at best. The smell was something beyond comprehension and Gabrielle was suddenly less than thrilled with the enhanced senses immortality had given her.

People tended to give her the odd second glance simply because she looked so different than everyone around her. Gabrielle carried herself with poise and authority and her musculature was strong and firm while those around her tended to be round and soft. And it didn't take long for word to spread among the criminal element that she was one that needed to be avoided. Their kind tended to disappear when they messed with her.

Gradually, Gabrielle made her way to Amazon territory and was surprised by what she found there. The lack of territory was her first shock. She had gone into the woods quite a ways farther then she expected to before she was challenged. When the sentries realized who she was, they let her pass without comment, but also without escort. It was apparent by their demeanor that there was a lot of confusion and no one knew exactly what position Gabrielle held.

When she stepped foot into the village, though, Gabrielle stopped dead at the chaos that enveloped her. Amazons were everywhere, doing all manner of sundry things, but no one seemed to be in charge.

Gabrielle stood still watching the bedlam, waiting to be noticed. A fight broke out between two women and she calmly inserted herself between them, slowly drawing the attention of everyone in the encampment. Subtly, the atmosphere changed and with only a look and a few well-placed words, order began to come from chaos.

Amazons were represented from all over... from several tribes Gabrielle recognized and from quite a few she didn't. Her first efforts involved integrating the many tribes into a single cohesive unit. The tribes had to be one nation before they could move.

Daily more women arrived in the village and Varia and Cyane stepped aside willingly to allow Gabrielle to assume command of the Nation. For herself, Gabrielle immersed herself in the details of preparing the Nation for movement.

Gradually, preparations were made, provisions were laid in and arrangements were completed for travel. All C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

told, it took Gabrielle fourteen moons to have the Amazons travel ready, but when spring returned to Greece, the Nation headed out towards a new destiny.

It took a great deal of time, Gabrielle thought, though she knew in the back of her mind that that was completely relative for her. Still, with the amount of people and supplies they were moving, their progress was good.

She had split the Nation into smaller traveling parties, sending each of them in slightly different directions to make them less of a target. It took a little longer for everyone to arrive, but they did so safely and Gabrielle sighed with relief when they were finally boarding the ships she had secured for their voyage.

Gabrielle had them board in the night. They had managed to avoid trouble for the most part and she wanted to keep it that way until they left.

Finally, the ships were loading and as the sun rose, they slowly eased out of port. Gabrielle had found female crews, some of them already Amazon, who were willing to make the journey with them. With slight trepidation, she stood on the aft deck, watching the land retreat behind them. Things had fallen into place for the Nation remarkably well considering the magnitude of the task and Gabrielle stood reflecting on their progress and the things they still had to do.

"Hey, babe!"

Gabrielle almost jumped when Aphrodite appeared beside her in Amazon leathers, but she managed to hold herself in check. She glanced at the goddess with a look of fond exasperation.

"Dite, are you trying to scare me to death?"

"Huh? You're an immortal, babe, remember? Not like you can die."

The words, though spoken in a teasing tone, cut deeply and Gabrielle was again forcibly reminded of her solitary status. Dite shivered at the pain that crossed her friend's face and opened her mouth to apologize, but was cut off by Gabrielle.

"That's true. What can I do for you?"

Dite turned away from the receding shore and instead turned her attention to the bustling activity on the deck. It was all very orderly and she couldn't help but admire the difference in the Nation since Gabrielle had taken charge of them.

"Nothing. I just came to see how things were going. You have been so massively busy and so have I that we've had like, no time for girl talk. I've missed ya, babe!"

Gabrielle slipped her arms around Dite's waist in an unexpected embrace and the goddess returned the hug fervently. She understood all too well the loneliness that Gabrielle lived with and was happy to provide any measure of comfort she could.

"I've missed you too, Dite. There are days.... Can I do this for two thousand years without completely losing my mind?"

Dite held her, gently rubbing her back until she felt Gabrielle relax against her. She had a feeling this might be necessary from time to time and was determined to be there for Gabrielle to help her weather the rough bits that were in store for her.

"You're a strong person, Gab. One of the strongest I've ever had the privilege to know... or call friend." Dite paused, thinking of the millennia she'd been alive and knowing how hard that continued existence could be even for a god. "I think," she bit her lip then continued. "I totally think you can do this. You know what the payoff is gonna be, babe and I think for that reason alone your mind will hang in there. Besides, imagine the bodacious stories you will have to tell Xena when you finally like, catch up to her."

Dite felt Gabrielle chuckle and breathed a sigh of relief. Gabrielle was in a hard place and would be for the next quite a few centuries. But as long as she maintained her humor and her zest for life, she'd be all right.

Dite took Gabrielle's face in her hands, wanting to be sure she had the bard's complete attention for what she had to say next. "I want you to listen now and I want you to understand what I'm saying, 'kay?" Aphrodite held Gabrielle's gaze and Gabrielle read the serious intent behind the words that were being spoken. She nodded her understanding and Dite continued.

"Whenever... WHENEVER it feels like it's getting to be too much for you... whenever you feel overwhelmed to the point of absolutely exploding or losing your mind, you call me. You call me and I'll take you back to Olympus for a while."

Gabrielle's forehead creased and Dite hurried on. "You can call me anytime you need me, or just want to talk, Gab and I'll be here as soon as I can. But I can't risk taking you to Olympus too often for fear of Ares finding out. He doesn't know you and Xena are immortals and I don't see a reason to enlighten him right now."

"How will you know the difference?" came the whispered question.

"I'll know. You just trust me on that."

"I can do that."

"Good. And you can totally count on me to pop up from time to time on my own too, 'kay? I so need a friend sometimes."

Gabrielle smiled. "Good, cause I'd hate to have to climb Olympus to kick your butt or something."

Dite's hands went to her hips. "Girlfriend, you are a total troublemaker, ya know that?" She put her arm around Gabrielle's neck and proceeded to give her a noogie. "Good thing I love ya."

Gabrielle's first instinct was to fight, but instead she decided to tickle. Dite squealed, not expecting that reaction.

"Yeah, it is," Gabrielle agreed when Dite's hold loosened. "I love ya back."

"Cool! Now that we've got the serious stuff out of the way, why don't you show me around this gnarly setup? Looks like you've done good by these babes."

Aphrodite took Gabrielle by the arm and began to slowly walk across the deck. No one paid them much

mind; they had grown used to Gabrielle wandering through them talking to herself.

"I've tried to. They can be the most ornery, obstinate bunch, but they deserve the best I can do for them... both for your sake and theirs. C'mon, I'll show you around."

They moved below decks and Dite was even more impressed with the system Gabrielle had set up. Women moved everywhere with quiet efficiency and all the space was economically used.

"Is it like this on all the ships?" There were seven ships in the convoy that was slowly making its way out of the Ionian Sea. It had been a longer land trek for them, but worth it, as far as Gabrielle was concerned.

"Um hmm," Gabrielle nodded as they made their way back to the main deck. "Pretty much. Each of the ships has a designated leader who serves as my regent and is responsible for handling her group. They will handle anything that comes up. Only if they can't settle things will it come to me."

"Radically cool, babe! You rock!"

Gabrielle chuckled. Dite's enthusiasm was heartening. "Well, that remains to be seen. We've only just left port, ya know."

"Trust me, sweetie. Ya done a good thing here. It'll work."

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed."

Dite patted her back lightly. "At least you don't have that nasty seasickness vibe any more. That was so uncool."

Gabrielle's chuckle turned to outright laughter. "Yeah, no kidding. Thank you for that, by the way. It's made things a lot easier for me."

"I'm glad," Dite answered seriously, then lowered her voice, though no one could hear her anyway. "How are you doing with the other problem?"

Gabrielle shrugged, more than a little uncomfortable with the need that continued to plague her despite Aphrodite's talisman. "I dunno. It's still there, though the burning is not as fierce as it was before," remembering her actions prior to her wearing the ring. "I take it one day at a time, but this is the first time I've been away from any source of um... protein since...."

"Yeah, I got what your saying, cutie. Well, if you need... anything, you call me. I don't do blood really well, but in your case, I'll make an exception. You've got enough going on here," waving her hand around the ship and convoy, "without having to worry about that too."

"Thanks, Dite. I've been a little concerned about it."

"Anytime, babe. That's what friends are for, right? To help each other out?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Right. I'll be glad when I can return the favor though."

"Nah, I'm still catching up. You and Xena totally saved my bacon a few times. Besides, I kinda like doing
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things for my friend instead of someone who's made it an obligation. It's way more fun this way."

"Can't argue with you."

"True," Aphrodite agreed loftily. "You'd lose!"

Gabrielle's eyebrow went up and she smirked just the tiniest bit. "You think so? I am the Battling Bard, ya know," said cheekily.

Dite laughed, glad to see more of the Gabrielle she dearly loved. "Yep, I know, babe. But you totally agree with me here so you'd be like, arguing in circles."

Gabrielle scrunched up her face in thought. "Good point. I could give myself a real headache doing that."

"No kidding and think you're gonna have way more than enough of those for a while."

"Thanks, Aphrodite! That makes me feel better," Gabrielle replied wryly.

"Ah, c'mon, sweetie! You know it's the truth. But I'll always be nearby if you need me, 'kay?"

"Yeah, I do. Thanks, though. And you know where to find me when you get ready for some girl talk."

"Uh huh. Later, babe!"

The goddess popped out without a flourish, so no one noticed that she was gone at first. And by the time they did, everyone was immersed in their tasks, beginning a routine that would serve them well until they reached the shores of their new homeland.

Knowing it was going to take several moons of sea travel to reach the destination she and Aphrodite had decided on, Gabrielle was quick to make use of any land stops they could find along their way. It made for better relations between everyone to actually get off the ships for a while and it allowed her various regents to meet with her to discuss any problems they were having. Thankfully, those were relatively minor and only needed her guidance to steer them into the decision they knew was necessary to make.

Most importantly, these little excursions allowed her to feed and though no one was happy about her solitary hunting expeditions, no one begrudged her the need to some private time alone either. Besides, she proved more than capable of providing for herself and her sisters as she never came back to the fire empty-handed.

So the Amazon Nation leisurely made its way down the coast of Africa and headed towards the small islands known as the Sinhales.

The convoy circled the continent and finally began to make its way more northward. No one was gladder for that fact than Gabrielle and she had been thankful many times over for every single extra bit of covering they had stowed on board. The weather had become increasingly raucous and cold the further south they traveled. Many of the women became sick and there were days on end when sleep was not something she was allowed.

Just as illness started to loosen its grip on the Amazon, they ran headlong into a storm that would change... everything.

After more than two weeks of on board sickness, no one was happier to find civilization again more than Gabrielle. They'd been blown slightly off course rounding the Cape and had actually needed to backtrack to reach the island of Madagascar. But the illness that had circulated among the women had made it almost impossible not to drift and it took a bit of doing to get them back on track.

By the time the reached the island, everyone was looking forward to a bit of time on dry land and some fresh supplies. They knew to lay in as many supplies as the boat could manage, because this would be their last stop before reaching the small group of islands they had chosen for their new homeland.

The day started out fairly pleasantly for a change. The seas were calm and the sun was warming up... a nice change after believing they would freeze to death just a short week before.

The plan was to spend two or three days on shore airing out the boats and scrubbing everything and everyone down. Time would also be spent gathering fresh game and vegetation for the final leg of their voyage. They still had quite a reserve of dried food, but Gabrielle especially was beginning to suffer from the lack of fresh meat in her diet.

Several of the Amazons had noted a distinct edge to Gabrielle's behavior, but put it down to the lack of sleep she suffered from during the sickness that had swept through their numbers. The leaders on her ship spoke to the rest of the convoy leaders and it was decided that Varia and Cyane would probably make the most headway in encouraging Gabrielle to take better care of herself. So much of their welfare depended on her well-being and they selfishly wanted her to remain well.

Gabrielle had handed out assignments to the various team leaders then headed inland quickly. By the time Varia and Cyane started on her trail, she had disappeared.

Gabrielle had been trained by the very best and even driven by her hunger and her need, she kept the hard-learned lessons of stealth in the forefront of her mind. Soon, there was no trail for even the best of Amazon scout to follow and Gabrielle began her hunt.

She whispered a prayer to Aphrodite, knowing the goddess would understand that the thanks was for the ring she wore that kept this particular ritual from becoming all-consuming. They she spotted her prey and before the deer realized her intention, she'd broken his neck and sunk her teeth into him, draining his life blood before it could cool.

She had learned early to end an animal's life quickly to prevent needless suffering. She had developed almost an empathy for the creatures who gave their life for her continued existence as a bacchae. There were many times when she wished she could have accepted ambrosia or nectar, but understood painfully that that wasn't her lot in the immortal scheme of things.

So Gabrielle drank til she was full; til she could feel the warmth and strength flooding back into her very veins. She found it odd to feel the renewing because when she and Xena had been together it had been nothing like this. Of course, she'd never felt as drained as she did now, except on the rare occasion when she came back from the dead.

Gabrielle smiled in wry humor and sat back to wipe her mouth. She had to be very careful. Though she was *fairly* certain the Amazons would accept her as an immortal eventually, she was less positive about their reaction to finding out that she was an immortal due to Bacchus. Especially since they would see her as a threat to their society, given the nature of the beast that being a bacchae was.

She cleaned and butchered her kill, saving the hide and wrapping the meat in it to carry back to the small encampment they had set up.

Varia and Cyane were waiting at the head of the footpath, having lost her trail there and hoping she would return the way she came. Their patience was eventually rewarded when they heard the faintest scuffling of footsteps bearing a heavy burden and they rose from the ground to investigate.

Gabrielle emerged from the woods and saw them waiting for her and schooled her features as much as possible. There was no way for her to control the bright burning of her eyes, though and it made her glad for the sunshine that caused her to squint.

Varia and Cyane looked Gabrielle over carefully. There did seem a marked difference in both her demeanor and her appearance, but neither could put a finger on the exact cause.

"Well, she looks better at any rate," Varia comment sotto voce as Gabrielle reset the hide on her shoulder and began to cross the small space between them.

Cyane nodded and muttered under her breath. "Maybe she just needed some space. Gods know I've longed for it a time or two on this trip already."

Gabrielle heard the discussion, but did not let it keep her from approaching them. She realized that their curiosity was motivated primarily by their concern for her and the other she could easily excuse. The Amazons had always held her and Xena to a different standard of rules and accountability and she didn't expect it to change because she was leading them. That almost tended to make things worse in that regard. Everything she did was not suspect or challenged, but scrutinized, as though they were trying to understand the whys and wherefores of her mind's inner workings. Flattering in a way, but very unnerving for the woman who still remembered being the young, innocent farm girl from Poteidaia.

Still, Gabrielle had long since outgrown that innocence and it was the strong, competent woman who now approached her friends.

"Ladies," she greeted, patently ignoring the outraged eyebrows that rose in consternation to her salutation.

"Your Majesty... Gabrielle," Cyane said as the bard set the hide down and held up her hand at the address.

"What's up, guys?"

Varia looked up at her, squinting into the sun. "Honestly? We were just concerned about you. All of us, actually, but Cyane and I got chosen to, um...."

"We got voted to ask because we've known you the longest and the rest of the regents thought you'd be more likely to tell us if there was a problem."

"Checking up on me, huh?" But the question was asked with a smile and they knew that Gabrielle wasn't angry.

"Protecting our queen and looking after the interests of the Nation," Cyane responded tactfully.

This made Gabrielle chuckle. "You are quite the diplomat, aren't you? It makes you a good regent," Gabrielle continued, noting Cyane's deepening blush.

"It's all right guys. I do understand and I appreciate the concern. This is just... rough for me, in ways I hadn't imagined it would be. Sometimes I just need to go off by myself for a while and... regroup."

That's what we thought," Varia said quietly. "We'll make sure you get that as often as we can manage once we get to our new home. I don't think it will be that easy on the ship." She chuckled as she said it, recognizing the irony in the truth.

Gabrielle laughed as well, finally feeling the blood cooling to her normal temperature. "I'd have to agree and I appreciate the offer. I will probably take you up on it. In the meantime," she continued, hefting the bag again, "we should get this to the camp. I'm sure a little fresh meat will be welcome around the fire."

Two stomachs growled in tandem and the three of them burst into giggles.

"Well, all righty then. Guess that answers that question," Gabrielle said. "C'mon. Quicker we get there, the quicker we eat."

"Sounds like a plan," said Varia and they headed back towards the beach encampment.

The Amazons spent three days on the shore preparing themselves for the final leg of their trip. Everything was washed and scoured and the supplies were restocked. They indulged in some games to keep things light and give them a chance to exercise and enjoy the freedom being back on land afforded them.

When it was time to board the ships again, they did so with very little grumbling. Most of them were anxious to finish the trip and get settled into their new home. This had been more traveling for the majority of the Nation than they had ever done. And now that the illness that had plagued them seemed to have passed, they were eager to get to the island, even if it meant more traveling to accomplish that goal.

Gabrielle was happy to see the peace and contentment that pervaded the ship, remembering clearly how horrid it had gotten during the sickness and their monthly cycles. It was bothersome that \*that\* particular curse seemed to hit everyone at once, but the Amazons were more adjusted to that fact than she was and sort of took it as a matter of course.

They quickly learned to avoid Gabrielle during those few days, though. They didn't understand \*why\* she became a completely different person, but figured they could give her the space she needed if she preferred to suffer through it alone. Little did they know that she was doing her level best not to succumb to the burning that raged through her body.

So they set off in the morning with smooth seas and a light, warm wind at their back. Most of the women stayed on deck unless their duties required them to be below decks. It was simply too nice a day to spend

stuck indoors if one had no call to be there.

So the first two days of the final leg of their voyage was peaceful and it wasn't until nearly sunset of the second day that things started to go dreadfully wrong.

## Chapter VIII

Gabrielle was deep into her meditative exercises when the unusual activity on the deck caught her attention. She turned her focus to the east and noted the low band of clouds on the horizon, correctly surmising the danger they posed to the Amazon fleet.

She watched the movement on deck, noticing the calm, controlled atmosphere. Every woman seemed to be aware of the pending storm, yet no one let it interfere with her duties.

Gabrielle moved to the bridge and the captain acknowledged her presence with a nod.

"Looks bad, my Queen," patently ignoring the raised eyebrow the title earned her from Gabrielle. "We've been looking for a way around it for the last candlemark, but as you can see, it stretches from horizon to horizon."

"So we go through it?"

"Yep. Hopefully it won't be too strong or last too long, but our best bet is to meet it head on and push through it as hard and fast as we can." The captain indicated the activity going on around her. "You can see that we're preparing the ship as much as possible. We've been going back and forth with the other ships in the fleet and they are doing the same. We will try to stay together, but.... Everyone knows where we are headed, so hopefully, even if we do get separated, we will be able to find one another again once it's over."

"That bad, huh?"

The captain shrugged. "Natural precaution. Not like we can see what's coming, ya know?"

Gabrielle nodded, letting her mind wander to the many times in her life she'd been blindsided by things she hadn't been able to see coming and her breath caught at the pain those memories could still evoke.

"You all right, Gabrielle?" the captain asked solicitously, placing a gentle hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. The blood had faded from her face, her eyes were unfocused and her breathing had become shallow and fast. "Gabrielle?"

Green eyes blinked rapidly as Gabrielle brought herself back from a place she had no desire to be. She swallowed twice before turning her attention back to the captain. "Sorry." She cleared her throat but didn't offer any other explanation. "What can I do to help?"

"We're about set, my Queen. Now it's mostly a matter of riding it out."

Gabrielle nodded. "Very well. I'll be in my cabin if anyone needs me."

Gabrielle went below decks and retrieved her diary, moving to the built-in desk and readying her ink and quill. She opened it to her starting place and began recording the events of the past few days. Gabrielle still felt the calling of being a bard, but there were times, especially now, when there was simply nothing of interest to write about. Not like it had been when she and Xena.... She closed her eyes again and let the thought trail off, then forced her attention back to updating her diary.

Gabrielle had quite a bit of writing to do and she lost herself in getting all the details down. Eventually, this portion of her diary would be re-written for the Amazons, to give them their own history to keep.

It wasn't until she slid in her chair that Gabrielle realized how much time had passed. *Musta reached the storm*. She glanced around, seeing clearly the rather wild pitch of the boat, then noted that she was feeling very little residual effects from the rocking motion. She looked at the ring Dite had given her and whispered a prayer of thanks. Then she sanded the ink and let it dry before closing the diary and putting it away. Then she grabbed her oiled cloak and headed back up the stairs.

The wind was furious and the rain was harsh and they nearly drove her back down the stairs before she got the door fully opened. Gabrielle pushed hard against it, then was flung to one side as the wind suddenly aided her cause. It made her more than a little angry and she channeled it into a force she could use. With a mighty shove, she slammed the door shut, then made her way slipping and sliding towards the bridge.

The topside of the ship was mostly empty... only half a dozen essential posts were manned by women who had lashed themselves to the ship with long ropes. Gabrielle held on to everything she could reach to keep from being flung overboard. The short trip took her a good deal more time than normal and she was sweating underneath her cloak by the time she arrived at her destination.

"My Queen?!" the steerswoman exclaimed loudly when she recognized her visitor.

"My Queen!!" the captain repeated, seeing who had joined them on deck. "You should get below. It's not safe up here." She had to yell to be heard over the storm.

Gabrielle smirked inwardly at the sentiment, though she made a conscious effort not to let it show on her face. These women had shown her nothing but respect and courtesy and they had no clue what her true situation was. There was no reason to share it immediately; her circumstances were in the realm of the extraordinary.

"Yes, Hilda, I know. But what kind of ruler hides while her people face danger?" ignoring a time when she had done just that at their expense.

"The smart kind if she understands that the survival of the entire Nation rests on her shoulders," Hilda answered shrewdly.

Gabrielle nodded her acceptance of the statement, though she'd argued til she was blue in the face that the survival of the Amazon Nation depended on all of them together. "Point taken," she acknowledged. "I just wanted to know how things were going."

Hilda grabbed Gabrielle by the elbow as the ship lurched heavily to one side and nearly took their feet out from under them. "C'mon," she shouted, trying to overcome the sound of sheeting rain. "Let me take you back to your cabin. We can talk without screaming at one another."

Gabrielle nodded, parts of her soaked to the skin regardless of the well-oiled cloak she wore. The wind and

sting of the water simply forced the wetness in.

Together they slipped and slid back to the door leading below decks and fought to pull it open against the forces of nature that were conspiring to keep it shut. With a bellow, they managed to fling the door wide, then found themselves in a tangle of limbs at the bottom of the stairs when the pitch of the ship and the strength of the storm shoved them unceremoniously down the short steps.

"MY QUEEN?!?"

"Ow... I'm all right, Hilda. You?"

"Ow is right. Damn, that hurt. But I'll live," the captain answered, then started chuckling.

"Share the joke?" Gabrielle asked and she slowly untangled herself from both Hilda and her wet cloak, which now clung to her like a second skin. The process was complicated by the ship's continual movement that rolled them from side to side of the narrow passageway.

"Just thinking how peculiar we must look. Reminded me of my initiation as Captain and the only other time I've fallen down these steps." Gabrielle arched her eyebrow in question, then realized that Hilda wouldn't be able to see the gesture. But before she could give it voice, the captain continued speaking.

"The crew took me out and got me good and drunk... they were sober, which was a good thing considering what happened next. The initiation involved me trying to sail the boat, in open waters, mind you, while I was still trying to figure out which way was up."

Hilda regained her feet and braced against the walls, then leaned down and offered Gabrielle a hand up. "I did all right until I decided to come downstairs for another bottle. I missed the steps completely and Mel, being the good first mate she is steered us directly into a storm. I rolled around down here for what felt like days praying to the gods not to toss my cookies. It took me half a day to get up off the floor and another two days to recover from the seasickness Mel managed to give me with her helmsmanship. I won't tell you how long it took to get rid of the bruises. I decided then and there to never have cause to be rolling around in this passageway."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Well, I can't say it'd be my chosen method for travel. Ya wanna know the bad part? We've gotta get back up and close that door."

Hilda banged her head on the wall. They were standing only because she was braced against the walls holding Gabrielle by the elbow. Gabrielle reached for the railing, swaying as the ship rolled against her action. The Captain placed a steadying hand on Gabrielle's back and eased behind her to provide support if something caused her to fall.

It took a few minutes as Gabrielle had no desire for a repeat experience of head over heels down the stairs again, but eventually she did manage to pull the door shut with a resounding thud. Several amazons lurched up the passageway, having finally decided to see what all the commotion was. Gabrielle waved them back.

"Everything is fine. Go back to your cabins."

"Are you sure, my Queen? You both look a little, um..."

Blood Bond

17/02/2011 "Um?"

Hilda pointed, but didn't touch Gabrielle. "She's probably talking about the cut, although the bruise is pretty nice too."

Suddenly Gabrielle was acutely aware of the scent of blood and she felt a burning begin in her blood. The Amazon was offering her a towel and she took it, hoping to remove the smell of copper that made the hunger grow.

She drew a deep breath to contain the need and turned partially away from the onlookers. "Captain, why don't you go get into something dry and have those marks seen to? Then come back and join me and we will talk."

Before Hilda could respond, Gabrielle slipped into her own cabin and closed the door firmly behind her.

The Amazons in the hall looked at the captain who shrugged back at them. "You heard the queen. Return to your cabins, especially those of you on the next shift. You need to be completely rested."

The nodded their understanding, though not without a backwards glance before they entered their own living spaces. Hilda turned and entered the cabin across from Gabrielle's wondering what had happened to change her mood so swiftly. Then she concentrated on drying off. She didn't change though, knowing she had to return to the bridge shortly. She did pour herself a cup of wine. She'd gotten the message that Gabrielle needed a little space and damned if she wasn't going to give it to her.

Gabrielle, for her part, sat on her bunk and focused all her energies on simply being and breathing. In... out... in... out... until the rhythm was all she knew and she felt her heartbeat calm and steady. Then she blew out a breath and proceeded to change into a dry tunic and pour herself a cup of wine.

A few more minutes passed before a light knock was heard at her door and Gabrielle realized that Hilda had given her extra time to change and she smiled in appreciation of the gesture. She rose and opened the door, her eyebrows shooting to her hairline when she realized that the captain was still in wet clothing.

"I have to get back on deck," Hilda responded to the unasked question. "No point in soaking a second set of clothes."

"Hmm," was all Gabrielle said, though she managed to convey her agreement in the tone. "Come in and tell me how bad it is."

Hilda crossed the threshold and took the chair at the desk. Gabrielle resumed her seat on the bed and waited expectantly.

"It's bad, your Majesty. We are being drawn off course, but it is impossible to tell how badly or how far. I won't be able to tell anything for certain until the storm stops and we have a chance to get our bearings."

"What about the other ships?"

Hilda rested her elbows on her knees and dropped her hands between her legs. "I know there are at least three of us still together. At separate times I have seen the ships on either side of us pop up out of the storm." She didn't tell Gabrielle how closely they'd come to ramming the first one.

Gabrielle sat still, considering. "Well," she said at last, "guess we will just hope for the best for now and work with whatever we end up with when this thing blows over." Gabrielle sat up a little straighter and caught Hilda's eyes. "I see no reason for this to get out right now. There's no reason to send everyone into a panic over something we can do absolutely nothing about."

Hilda nodded. "Agreed, my Queen. I'll keep you posted as things develop."

"Thank you, Hilda. You're doing a great job!"

The captain blushed. "Thank you, your Majesty. Now if you'll excuse me...."

Gabrielle nodded and waved Hilda out, then shook her head. She'd done her best to break the Amazons of the habit of referring to her by title, but it was so ingrained in them that she'd given it up as a lost cause.

With a sigh, she finished her wine and turned to her diary which she opened it up and began to read. The storm continued to lash out furiously around her, but Gabrielle never noticed as she allowed her own words to take her back into memories that through the coming years would make her laugh and cry and keep her company like the old friends they were.

For two more days the storm raged around them and by then everyone on board was wet, sick and miserable. When they finally saw the sun break through in the early afternoon of the third day, the crew cheered, heartened by both its presence and the presence of their sister ships. Somehow, they had all managed to come through relatively intact, it seemed. It would take a day or two to determine the damage the storm had wrought.

As it was, they were all happy to see sunshine and calm water and by mutual consent they dropped anchor and took the opportunity to air out their bodies and their ships. Gabrielle and the captains had ascertained the need for both a bit of R&R and the establishment of their location. That couldn't happen until evening, so they moored the boats and swung into high gear, intent on enjoying the brief respite they'd been offered.

As sundown approached, the women sat around on the various decks, enjoying a meal of freshly prepared fish and calling back and forth to one another. Gabrielle sat a little apart in the bow, watching the Nation that had once been on the edge of extinction slowly coming back to life before her eyes.

Her reverie was disturbed when Hilda came and sat down silently next to her. The captain didn't speak, but sat waiting to be acknowledged. Gabrielle didn't turn to her, but instead gestured to the many happy women on the seven ships.

"It's good to see the Amazons whole again. For a very long time, we were fractured, despondent."

"You've given them hope again, my Queen... a future to look forward to instead of pining for a past that will never be again."

Now Gabrielle turned and looked at Hilda intently. "The future is what they make of it Hilda... not me."

"Perhaps, but you will always be remembered as the Queen who saved the Nation."

Gabrielle didn't reply, but instead looked back out over the water to the ships in their small fleet. Hilda got the distinct impression she'd crossed a line best left alone and cleared her throat. Gabrielle forestalled her apology.

"How far off course do you think we are?"

The captain blinked, her mind shifting gears to put her on a complete opposite track from the one she'd been running on. She'd come up her with something else entirely different on her mind, but she gamely put her own thoughts to one side for the moment and focused on the question she'd been asked.

"It's hard to say, your Majesty, but I would definitely say I'm concerned. It's just a hunch, since we're sitting in the middle of the sea with no visible reference yet, but I don't think we're anywhere close to where we were, or where we should be."

Gabrielle nodded, having come to much the same conclusion herself. "Very well, Captain. Please keep me advised once we've determined where we are." She stood. "I'll be in my cabin."

Hilda decided to take the plunge. "My Que... Gabrielle...." gently.

But Gabrielle held up a hand. "Hilda, please don't. You're a lovely young woman and I imagine any woman here would be happy to be your partner."

"Just not you," Hilda responded with only a hint of bitterness. Life continued to flow around them... no one noticing the little drama that was unfolding on the bow of the ship.

"Just not me," Gabrielle answered with honest sincerity. "My heart belongs to another, Hilda and it always has. I can't change that and I wouldn't if I could."

"But Xena's dead, Gabrielle!!" It was said with quiet harshness. "Do you intend be alone for the rest of your life??"

Gabrielle smiled sadly, understanding far too well just how long that would be and the seeming eternity that stood between her and her warrior. "Xena owns my heart Hilda and without that, I can't care for anyone else. Not that way. And it's not fair to ask... not you, not me, not anyone... to live with a sham of love."

"And if I want to?"

Gabrielle clasped the captain's arm and squeezed gently before she released it. "I won't." She moved away and reached the stairs before she turned back to Hilda. "I'd like for us to remain friends, but that's your decision. I won't force anything you're not comfortable with. However, as your Queen, I'm asking that you notify me when we have our position fixed."

Hilda blinked and squared her shoulders, then she nodded her head. "Yes, my Queen. It should be about a candlemark before the stars are out enough for us to get a good reading from them."

"Thank you, Hilda," Gabrielle replied, then turned without another word and made her way to her cabin. Hilda stayed at the bow for some time longer, looking out over the horizon and contemplating the truth of Gabrielle's words. Then she straightened and made her way to the bridge. There was work to do.

It was less than a full candlemark when the knock came to her door. Gabrielle had been dozing lightly, letting her mind drift. Now she sat up and called out, "Come in."

The door opened and Hilda crossed the threshold, just stepping into the room. "Gabrielle, you need to come on deck."

Gabrielle rubbed her hand across her face. "That bad, huh?"

"It's gotta be seen to be believed, my Queen."

"Oh boy."

When they arrived back on deck, Gabrielle was surprised to see not only the other captains, but also her interim regents waiting for her on deck surrounding a small table that had been brought up. They all bowed their heads respectfully and Gabrielle strove not to roll her eyes.

"Ladies...."

That got more than one head to pop up immediately and glares from several who did before they could school their features into impassiveness. Gabrielle chuckled and the Amazons joined her, appreciating her humor and the effort at tension breaking.

"What have we got?" The group looked at one another, no one wanting to be the one to share the news. Gabrielle grew impatient and sighed loudly. "Somebody better start talking before I do something really outrageous," hoping they wouldn't call her on it. She really wasn't sure how outrageous she could be on short notice to a bunch of Amazon women, though she'd certainly had her share of moments over the years.

"Your Majesty, we can't find our position on any of the charts we have. According to them we are in a place that doesn't exist."

"Excuse me?" sure she'd misunderstood.

Hilda blew out a breath and pulled the charts and maps over to her. "You've studied the stars, learned to navigate by them, haven't you?" Gabrielle nodded, remembering the time it had taken for her to master that skill and Xena's gentle, patient teaching. "Do these patterns look at all familiar to you?" passing a particular chart over to Gabrielle and effectively pulling her from her reverie.

Gabrielle held her breath, easily recognizing the bear pattern and the hunter and the bull. She let her fingers trace the familiar shapes and she nodded. "We spent many nights studying these patterns," she commented in a low tone, clearly recalling their standing arguments on the subject. But everyone heard the words and felt the remorse that slipped into her voice. Hilda ignored it and continued.

"Okay then... now look up."

Gabrielle did so, then her forehead creased in confusion. What she saw was foreign to her, unrecognizable. In all her travels, she'd never seen the stars... well, honestly, it looked as though they were standing on their

Blood Bond

17/02/2011 heads.

Gabrielle rubbed her temples, then turned her back on the group, walking away from them slightly. She pressed her hands to her lips as she thought, then spun back around to continue the conversation, realizing this news put a whole new spin on everything.

"Well, anybody have a preference on a direction? Do the currents indicate any land nearby?"

Now Varia spoke up. "Not really, though they seem to be flowing eastwardly."

Gabrielle nodded at the information. "I guess we'll head east then." She looked around at the group that nodded their agreement. "Do we have a mapmaker among us?"

"Yes, my Queen," one of the other captains answered. "We have several."

"Good. Let's see if we can get these new star patterns charted. Maybe once we find land and get settled, we'll have a chance to study them and figure out where we ended up."

There was a palpable relaxation of the tension surrounding the group at Gabrielle's sure words. It had occurred to all of them just how tenuous their position was, being lost at sea in uncharted waters. Now they felt a renewal of optimism and each of them smiled.

"All right," Gabrielle continued as though nothing had happened. "I know it's late, but the sooner we get started the sooner we get home. So let's tend to business and get ourselves home. I'm really not that fond of being on a ship."

They laughed then, having heard some of her tales of previous sea excursions. And truth be told, they were all pretty anxious to reach dry land themselves. This journey had turned into far more of an adventure than most of them had expected or bargained for.

Several more weeks passed and tempers were running short. They hadn't encountered any more serious storms, though a couple of rain showers did blow through. It was a welcome respite and it provided fresh water, which was naturally at a premium.

Still, their lack of direction and knowledge of their whereabouts was wearing and more and more often, Gabrielle's diplomatic skills were called on to keep fights from breaking out.

Finally, near the end of her rope, Gabrielle called for a sparring match, taking on all comers. They had all seen her practice routines and knew about her defeat at Varia's hands. So they figured that though Gabrielle was a capable warrior, she could be defeated.

What they didn't know and couldn't understand was that Gabrielle's knowledge of her immortality had made her fearless. And the blood need had made her aggressive. So it was a very weary, very beaten group of Amazons that were scattered on the deck by day's end.

"My Queen, when we reach land, will you be giving weapons instruction?"

Gabrielle swallowed the wine she had in her mouth before answering. "Probably not. There will be so much to do getting the Nation set up." She was glad they were talking positively about their new home. It had been touch and go and they were understandably disturbed by the unknowns they now faced. It took her a moment to notice the universal slump of shoulders in all the women who had faced her in combat. "Why?"

The women looked around at one another. Finally the bravest of them spoke up.

"We were hoping to learn from you."

Gabrielle blinked. It wasn't something she'd been expecting to hear. EVER. Especially not from the Amazons. Always before, Xena had stood for her and the one time she'd fought on her own, she'd been defeated badly by a warrior who had since proven herself less than worthy to hold the title of Queen. Even after she'd led them at Helicon, it had never been something she'd imagined hearing from them. So now Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons, sat breathing and blinking, absorbing the recognition of her skill and ability which was in its own way a coming of age.

The amazons waited quietly, knowing by her expression that Gabrielle was not with them in this time and place. Eventually she turned back to them with a smile.

"I think I could arrange some time for that if you'd really like it. I never considered it before." She smiled. "Thank you for asking me."

A cheer went up from all the Amazons on the flagship that was heard across the small fleet. It would be a little while before the rest of the Nation understood and accepted the enthusiasm of their sisters.

Three days later, during what was quickly becoming the first of three daily sparring sessions, a cry went up from the lookout of the ship farthest to the north. Excitedly, every woman who was not working ran to the railing to get a good look.

"Land! Land ho!!"

The Amazon Nation had finally found what was going to become their new home.

## Chapter IX

It took the better part of the day to reach land. The flagship actually beached itself unintentionally when the water became a sandbar with very little warning. They debarked themselves and a few supplies. Gabrielle had decided they were sleeping on shore even though there was no possible way to unload their supplies and find shelter. The weather looked good and for tonight, she simply wanted to lay on the ground and look up at the upside down stars and remember.

The Amazons were glad to step foot on dry land again, even though they were stepping out into the unknown. It felt good to be walking on flat earth and working parties were quickly formed. Each regent had been specially chosen as a leader of a specific sect. Now they took charge of the women under their command and soon the Amazons were spread out... some hunting, some scouting for recognizable plant life, others gathering

firewood or the large green leafed boughs they found spread out under the foliage that lined the beach area.

Some of the women that remained began to clear an area for a temporary camp and the rest went back to the ships to remove the things they would need immediately. Soon the area was alive with activity.

Several times, Gabrielle felt the tickle of eyes on her skin, but though she dismissed it as being one of the Amazons, she couldn't rub away the tingling feeling at the back of her neck. And she never found any of the women glance her way unless they were addressing her directly. They were all too busy to notice her. Eventually, the feeling faded and the hunters and scouts returned to the beachhead. Gabrielle put the feeling away for later study and forced her attention to the Nation in front of her.

The evening passed pleasantly as the Amazons ate fresh game the hunters had provided and the tubers the scouts had found. There were no longer barriers between the different tribes and factions. The voyage over had made them a single nation, for which fact Gabrielle was extremely grateful. It would make her job easier and would hopefully help them transition into the new life they were beginning more smoothly.

It took several days for the boats to be unloaded completely. It was expected, given the fact that they were stripping the ships to skeletons, but Gabrielle also had some of the Amazons building a few shelters as well. She had discussed it with her council and they had determined this would make a good outpost for them for several reasons. There was already a group of women set to rotate back to the beach as soon as the Nation had found a permanent settlement.

Finally, the women were ready and slowly they moved inward. After four days travel, the Amazons came to a place that made them stop in awe. There was a wall of granite on two sides that rose high into the air. A bit of investigation revealed that it seemed to be at the end of a mountain chain and there were several caves and crevices that would provide storage and shelter.

At the base of the wall on the third side was a thick forest with a clear river and after four days of sand and scrub, it was a welcome, restful sight. The procession slowed, gradually coming to a halt while Gabrielle walked slightly ahead of them. The council followed her until she motioned them to stay put and she stepped forward several more paces before turning to face the remnants of the Amazon Nation.

"Ladies, I think we have found our new home."

A cheer rose from the Amazons and it was almost loud enough to drown the sensation Gabrielle still had of being watched.

Almost.

The next several months were busy as the Amazons slowly carved out a niche for themselves in this rough and tumble new world. They were mindful of the fact that they were establishing a nation they hoped would last for a long time to come and were very careful to preserve as many of their resources as possible. They had learned all too well that nothing was in unlimited supply and it was a lesson they took to heart seriously.

Besides, this new land was harsh and it seemed loathe to give up any of its dearly hoarded resources without a fight. But slowly, steadily, the Amazons were forging a place for themselves in their new world.

The beach outpost had been successfully established and already the women were rotating in and out of there regularly. A second outpost had been set in the forest and a third existed at the top of the wall close to the mountain range. The Amazons felt well-protected and were settling in nicely.

Gabrielle continued to get the random feeling of being watched, but the scouts never reported any other human life and she herself had been unable to find any definite traces of humanity in her nightly treks.

She more then any of them was glad to be back on land, despite the new challenges and dangers they faced. It was much easier to control the blood need that sporadically coursed through her veins and she greatly appreciated having her own space... not that she hadn't had that on the ship. She had and the women were most respectful of it. But here, surrounded by mountains and trees and earth, Gabrielle felt the freedom she had known on the road with Xena.

Thoughts like those tended to turn maudlin very quickly and she allowed her attention to drift to her surroundings. Gabrielle was sitting on the wall cliff, affording her a view that just hinted at the large body of water beyond. Her mind focused on the ring she wore and she suddenly realized how long it had been since she'd spoken to Aphrodite and it dawned on her why that was.

"I miss you, my friend," she said aloud. "When you get a few free minutes, look around and see if you can find me, huh? I'd still like to keep in touch, even though we are no where near where we're supposed to be." Gabrielle's eyes widened in thought. "Guess we're gonna have two colonies of Amazons, 'cause I doubt fate will intervene every time a new group of women try to join us."

The weather was cooling quickly as the seasons shifted towards winter and Gabrielle shivered as the sun slid below the horizon. "So awkward to have winter coming when I'm expecting summer to be here instead," she commented, knowing Cyane was coming up behind her.

"I agree... everything is upside down and backwards here, but it's a nice place to be."

Gabrielle waited. She knew something was bothering Cyane because everyone respected her privacy at sunset on the rare occasion that she made the trek up to the top of the wall to watch them. Instead, they sat quietly together until darkness fell completely and the wind began to pick up across the plain. Finally, Cyane spoke into the silence.

"My Queen, I am a little concerned." She waited for Gabrielle to turn her head before she continued speaking. "Two things, actually and they may or may not be related."

"Okay, what's up?"

"Well, you may think I'm losing my mind, especially since we haven't seen any indication of human life, but I'd swear more than once that we've been being watched. Can't really explain it as more than a feeling, but it's there and it's real."

Gabrielle nodded her understanding and waited for Cyane to resume speaking.

"In a way I hope my feelings are right," seeing the expected eyebrow shoot into the blonde hairline. "If they are others here, even if we haven't found them, that's good for us. They obviously don't mind us being here, or they would surely have objected to our presence by now. And truthfully, we need them if we are to have any hope for the survival of our nation."

Gabrielle sat quietly for a little while thinking over what Cyane had shared. Then she stood and dusted herself off and waited while Cyane did the same.

"I've noticed the same subtle signs of habitation, but like you I can't find any other real proof aside from my feelings and I'm not sure how to describe it... an odd displacement of air, maybe?"

Cyane nodded. "Exactly. That's exactly what it is. Holes in the air that weren't there before."

"Well, things are settling down now since we have the basics done in the village, maybe we should set up some hunting parties with specific instructions on what we want them to be hunting for. If we have neighbors, I think we should try to get to know them. It'd be nice to know where we stood before the cold weather settles in to stay."

"I'll see what we can put together. I think we can ge...." Cyane stopped speaking as one of the scouts who'd had duty in the outpost near the mountain approached them at a run. Gabrielle had put a halt to kneeling and bowing, but the scout still bobbed her head in acknowledgement.

"My... Queen. Cyane."

Gabrielle reached out and put a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Take a minute and catch your breath, Chia." For a moment nothing was heard but her harsh breathing and Gabrielle met Cyane's gaze evenly, reading the same questions in the blue eyes facing her that she had in her own mind. Cyane shrugged and crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for the younger Amazon to continue speaking.

"Lana, Trei and I have the watch in the mountains this week. About a candlemark ago, I heard something, or thought I did and Trei volunteered to keep watch while I did some scouting. Just as the sun dropped to the horizon... well, I can't say I caught her, but an older woman simply walked out of the shadows and right up to me. Scared the centaur poop right outta me... gods! Anyway," she hastily continued, remembering who she was talking to. "This woman walked right up to me and for the longest time just looked at me."

"What did she look like?" Cyane interrupted.

Chia stopped abruptly, focusing her gaze inward a moment as she bit her tongue in thought. "Older, like one of our elders with similar clothing. Dark-skinned, but from the sun and not by birth. She had dark eyes and hair which was shoulder length and braided with beads and feathers on the left side, similar to what our warriors do, but different in style. She had several piercings and her tattoos were interesting... swirls and things that covered most of her left arm." Chia demonstrated.

"So what happened?" Gabrielle asked to get things back on track. Chia's description of the woman gave Gabrielle a prickling in her thumbs for reasons she couldn't explain and she wanted to know more.

"Oh, um well, she stood there and looked at me without saying a word, then she reached out a hand to touch me. I move back and grabbed my knife." Here Chia blushed. "She laughed at me. That made me kinda mad and I swung. She took me to the ground like I was a pup. Then she spoke."

"WELL??" Cyane roared when the silence grew lengthy.

"Oh, sorry," Chia said. "She looked at me and said in perfect Greek, 'You're an Amazon?' I told her I was.

So then she said, 'The blonde woman who leads you....' I think she was waiting for me to fill in the blank for her, but I didn't, I just stood there waiting. Finally she realized I wasn't going to offer her any information and she nodded her head almost approvingly. 'Is her name Gabrielle?'"

At these words, Gabrielle's head flew up. Chia chuckled and Gabrielle arched a brow at her.

"I'm sorry, my Queen, but that was EXACTLY my reaction. I didn't answer, but I think that may have given it away. However, the woman didn't press me further. She simply gave me something and asked me to give it to you. Said you would recognize it and that she would be in touch once you'd seen it so you'd have a chance to decide for yourself what happened next."

Gabrielle held out her hand and waited for the object. Chia took the small backpack she carried off and opened it, lifting a wrapped bundle from it and placing it in Gabrielle's hand. Even the darkness couldn't hide the slight trembling in her hand as the moon provided ample light to see by. Gabrielle slowly removed the outer covering, then gasped in astonishment as her eyes took in a truth she wouldn't have believed without the physical proof she now held in her hands.

She forgot about the two other women standing with her and cast her mind back more than thirty years before, when she'd first been introduced to the Amazons.

How many times had she hit herself with the staff? Six? Eight? A dozen? Her head hurt and her muscles ached even worse. She'd never felt as clumsy and out of place as she did with all these warrior women who obviously disdained her presence among them.

Still, in the midst of everything and while Xena was off trying to solve the mystery of who exactly was trying to start a war between the Amazons and the Centaurs, Gabrielle continued to try to master this new weapon she'd been accorded by Amazon law and tradition.

Her teacher was very patient and very quiet and Gabrielle, in her own exuberant way, tried to draw the older woman out, but aside from giving her instruction and occasional one words answers to her questions, Gabrielle didn't get much out of her instructor.

After Krykus was defeated, Gabrielle and Xena returned to the road and Xena resumed Gabrielle's staff instruction until the bard was a force to be reckoned with by any standards. It was during this time that Xena's death brought them back into contact with the Amazons and once that matter was resolved Gabrielle had the opportunity to show off the skills she'd developed.

Xena stood to one side and watched proudly as Gabrielle wiped the floor with every Amazon that approached her. Finally, her one-time instructor took her on and Gabrielle not only held her own, but managed to defeat her after several spirited minutes of sparring.

Xena grinned proudly, even as the weapons master stood there in open-mouthed disbelief. Eventually she shook her head and walked from the field without a word. Gabrielle looked at Xena askance... she hadn't expected to win, but she'd expected less to see poor sportsmanship. Xena shrugged and wrapped an arm around Gabrielle's shoulders smiling at the way the bard fit into her naturally. They turned to walk off the practice field when they saw the instructor coming back at a run. When she reached them, she knelt before Gabrielle and held up a ceremonial blade in a beautifully crafted sheath.

Gabrielle reached out a hand to touch it, then turned to Xena questioningly. Xena shrugged nonchalantly and looked at the Amazon eyebrow raised in question.

"This was the blade I earned in our last weapons competition. If you can defeat me so easily it should be yours."

Gabrielle looked at Xena in consternation. She couldn't keep this, even if she wanted to. They had no place to put it for one thing and there was no way she could carry it. She'd already made the conscious decision not to fight with a blade. Besides, this was obviously something that meant a great deal to the other woman and Gabrielle made a mental note to ask Ephiny about the history behind the sword itself.

"I have an idea," Gabrielle said suddenly. "I will accept this if you will agree to be its keeper." Gabrielle almost smiled at the confusion that crossed the weapons master's face. "I can't keep it, Eponin," she said softly, "but I will not affront your honor by refusing it. So I'm asking you to remain as the blade's guardian."

The older woman thought about it for a moment, then nodded her acceptance. Gabrielle took the blade and nodded and Eponin rose to her feet.

"Thank you, my Queen."

Gabrielle smiled now as she slid the blade from its sheath, feeling the quill etching she'd had added to it before she'd returned the sword to her teacher. Her smile faltered when her fingers fell on something unfamiliar and yet.... Well, she'd take a look at it in the daylight. In the meantime....

"Thank you, Chia. This is probably one of the nicest things to happen to me in a while."

They wanted to question her; she knew they did. But her rank, as much as their respect for her leadership, kept them silent. Instead, Chia nodded again and murmured, "If you'll excuse me, my Queen. I need to report back to my post."

Gabrielle nodded, her thoughts far away again. She and Cyane stood together silently as Chai ran back towards the mountain outpost. When Gabrielle turned to make her way back to the village, Cyane accompanied her without a word.

Gabrielle appreciated the quiet; she was busy contemplating the possibilities of what she now held in her hand.

"I'm telling you, Varia. It was the ceremonial sword of Artemis."

"Cyane, how can you be sure of that? It was dark. And it's not like you ever actually saw it. It's been missing for more than thirty years."

Cyane stripped off her top and groaned in relief as she bathed off with the warm water Varia had been thoughtful enough to provide. "Gods, that's nice. It got damned cold out there." She put on a clean shirt. "All right, Varia. Don't believe me. But I'm telling you that is the ceremonial sword and you'll know it when you

see it. It looks just like the stories described. Although...."

"Yes?"

"I'd like to get a good look at the etching on the blade. There is more there than the stories told."

Varia rolled her eyes. 'There is no way you could have seen that in the dark, even if you were standing in Gabrielle's personal space. The moon just doesn't get that bright."

Cyane swatted Varia on the shoulder. "Don't be a smartass. It was more the look that crossed Gabrielle's face. Now come on... I need a drink."

Gabrielle made her way to her dwelling without incident. The village was a mixture of cave dwellings and log huts and Gabrielle had secured a cave for herself. It had a hot spring near the back which had been the deciding factor in her choice. She was still looking for a back way out, but for now she was satisfied with the arrangement she had. Not like I'm in danger of dying, though the feeling of confinement was sometimes a little overwhelming.

All in all, though, she liked her living arrangements and tonight she was especially glad for the privacy the cavern afforded her. She stoked the fire, bringing the blaze back up, grateful for both the light and the warmth. She put on water to heat for tea and laid the sheath next to her bedroll. Then she moved to the hot spring to clean up.

She didn't dawdle, but instead bathed hurriedly and redressed, catching her tea water just as it boiled. Then she put it on to steep and turned her attention back to the sword and its keeper. She noted there were new markings on the blade.

"Eponin, how did you get here?" she asked aloud and suddenly she was anxious for the morrow and the answers it would reveal.

Morning saw Gabrielle walking towards the mountain outpost just as the sun began to creep over the rocky horizon. She didn't expect to find Eponin waiting for her there, but she felt confident that Eponin's extraordinary surveillance of them would insure her presence soon enough.

She nodded a greeting to the sentry who stood outside the post then headed into the small open area beyond. She felt the sentry's hesitation, torn between remaining at her post and accompanying her Queen to a place that the Amazons considered to be outside their borders. A hand signal was all it took and with a frown the sentry resumed her lookout.

The meadow had been an unexpected find. It was a tiny bit of grassland that was surrounded by mountains and trees. Gabrielle had the uncanny feeling that when she came, Eponin would instinctively look for her there. Gabrielle sat on a log and removed the blade from the sheath. Her fingers gently traced the etchings old and new as she waited for her friend to arrive.

It wasn't a sound as much as it was a feeling, but Gabrielle remained still for a long moment before she looked

up. There before her knelt an older woman head bowed in an attitude of respect. Gabrielle reached forward hesitantly not wishing to offend, but needing to know for certain.

When her hand reached the woman's shoulder, her head came up and Gabrielle looked upon a friend she had honestly never expected to see again. A million things ran through her mind, but all that came out of her mouth was "Oh, Eponin!"

The warrior took the proffered hands of her Queen but made no move to stand until Gabrielle said softly, "Rise, my friend." She did so with alacrity and was engulfed in an embrace so profound it hurt. For long moments the hug went on, until with some embarrassment at the tears in her eyes, Eponin pulled away.

Gabrielle unashamedly wiped at her eyes, then tugged on the older woman's hand until they were seated side by side. They took a bit of time to study one another and Gabrielle knew that unless things had changed dramatically, she would have to be the one to break the silence.

"You look wonderful, Eponin. It is so good to see you again, no matter how unexpected."

Eponin chuckled. "You haven't changed at all, Gabrielle and I'll bet there is a Tartarus of a story behind the reason for that."

"More than you know, my friend. More than you know."

Eponin hesitated, having so many things she wanted to asked, but fairly certain she didn't want to hear the answers. Gabrielle waited, not sure where to begin. Finally Eponin spoke.

"Where is Xena and what happened to the others - Ephiny, Solari and Chilapa? So many new faces in the people you brought with you and so many old faces missing."

Gabrielle smiled sadly. "That is all part of my long story. I'll share mine if you'll share yours."

Eponin nodded. "It is one reason I asked to meet with you after I was sure it was you and the Amazons that were here. That and I needed to return the sword," motioning to the ceremonial blade that now lay on the ground between them. "It belongs with the Nation."

"I'll start, I guess," Gabrielle said and launched into the tale of what had happened in the thirty years since she had seen the weapons master. Eponin's eyes grew increasingly large as Gabrielle's story unfolded and more than once she wiped tears from her eyes.

"That is... um, well...."

"Amazing? Unbelievable? Bizarre beyond description? All of the above?"

Eponin chuckled, as much of an emotional release as anything else, though there was certainly an ironic humor at work here.

"Yes," she answered with another soft laugh. "Certainly makes my story tame by comparison."

"What is your story, Ep?" The last time I saw you...."

"The last time you saw me, we were still kids, although gods know I didn't think \*I\* was. I didn't have any doubts about you."

"Hey!" Gabrielle exclaimed in mock outrage, but had to acknowledge the words for the truth. She was surprised at Eponin's gregariousness and wondered if it was due to her years' experiences since leaving the Nation or if it was simply the astonishing encounter they were how having. Gabrielle gave a mental shrug. Either way, it was nice to actually be able to have a conversation, especially with an old friend who would understand and appreciate just the tiniest bit what Gabrielle had to look forward to.

"I like this," Gabrielle said when the silence threatened to become awkward, motioning to the chakram that had been etched around her quill on the sword's blade. "It fits, somehow."

Eponin shrugged. "I remembered when it was all over and you were wrapped in Xena's arms that night how perfectly you fit together. I didn't add it for along time, but when it became apparent I would never make it home again, it just seemed like the right thing to do."

Gabrielle smiled. "You won't be terribly surprised if I agree with you, will you?"

"Nah. I'd be more surprised if you didn't, even with everything."

Silence fell then for a time and Gabrielle was content to let it stay until Eponin felt comfortable with whatever it was she had to share. Eventually, the weapons master drew a deep breath and began to speak.

"You know how things were after Velaska," Eponin started with no prelude. Gabrielle nodded and waited silently. "Eph and the council talked it over and it was decided to try and bring all the tribes together."

Eponin smiled at the look on Gabrielle's face and nodded. "Yeah, even then the Amazons were trying to consolidate the tribes. Anyway, we knew where some were and then there were others... ones we'd only heard about through legends and stories passed down through generations."

"It was decided that someone would go and see if these lost tribes could be found. I volunteered."

She shrugged again and looked at Gabrielle. "I figured, how hard could it be, right? I mean the stories had clues indicating where to find them if you knew how and where to look and I did." Eponin shook her head. "What arrogance. I had no clue what I was getting into and I was so sure I could manage on my own. I did find the first two in Africa. Then I made the mistake of getting on a boat."

Eponin cut her eyes at her Queen. "Do you know what it's like to be on a ship when you're prone to seasickness? Do you know what it's like to be on a ship during a storm when you're prone to seasickness??"

Gabrielle laughed out loud so hard that she slid from the log. "Have you ever eaten raw squid because the cure for your seasickness killed your taste buds?" she countered. Eponin made a face.

"Well, ew! I'm not sure which is worse."

Gabrielle climbed back on the log, still chuckling. "Me either, actually, though I'd be tempted to go with the squid, cause you're still gonna chuck it right back up."

"Oh, thank you for that image, my Queen. Just what I needed to start my day out right."

"Happy to help," came the cheeky answer, then Gabrielle motioned for her to continue.

"I never knew I suffered from seasickness... I'd never been on a boat before. Imagine my unhappy surprise. About three days out from the coast, we hit a massive storm. I dunno what happened after that exactly. I was too busy being seriously ill. When they storm finally relented, we were just off the coast here. I was traded for fresh supplies."

The last was said so low, Gabrielle had to strain to catch the words. And then she blinked as she tried to understand them.

Eponin hurried on to save them both the embarrassment of her having to repeat her words. "I was too sick to stop them and the crew traded me to the locals in return for fresh supplies to try and make their way back home. The headman took a liking to me." She shrugged depreciatingly.

Gabrielle reached out a tentative hand, pleased when the weapons master didn't flinch away from her touch. "Eponin, are you unhappy here? Are you being held against your will? You're still an Amazon, you know and you are always welcome among your sisters."

Eponin's smile was genuine. "I'm not unhappy, Gabrielle. I found a place for myself here and as much as the Amazons are a part of me, this land and the people who live here are also my home and my family. In fact, I've come to talk to you about that."

Gabrielle cocked her head. She had a fair idea of where this was going, but she didn't want to presume. Eponin glanced at her, then looked out across the meadow.

"We, my tribe, have been watching the Nation since you all arrived here. Once the scouts realized what was going on with the settlement, I was brought in to help determine your fate. When I recognized you, I realized what must have happened with the Nation and I explained to the headman what I believed was going on."

Gabrielle nodded. "The men of my tribe are willing to work an arrangement with the Amazons similar to what we had with the surrounding villages in Greece. They would welcome the boy children into their village while the girls would stay with their Amazon mothers."

"How do the village women feel?"

Eponin shrugged. "Well, their society allows a man to have more than one wife. So it's not something they are unused to."

"Wait... are you saying the Amazons will have to marry these men to mate with them?? Eponin...."

"No, no, Gabrielle." She ran a hand through her graying hair. "I'm not explaining this well. They understand what the Nation needs to survive and are willing to provide the service necessary."

"In exchange for...? C'mon Ep... we all know nothing is free in this life... or any other for that matter."

Eponin cut her eyes over at Gabrielle. "Anyone ever tell you you've gotten cynical in your old age, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle sighed wearily. 'I've seen too much of the world Eponin and it's not a pretty place. People do what C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

they have to do to survive and that usually doesn't bring out the best in them."

Eponin sat quietly absorbing the truth in Gabrielle's words. "The tribe is willing to provide men for child-making in exchange for all the male children that are born. It's good for you and good for them."

Gabrielle nodded. "All right. I'll take it to the council, though I don't think they will refuse. It's been a concern. And in the meantime, perhaps I can meet with the headman? Maybe they will be willing to set up some sort of trade."

Eponin smiled. "I think I can arrange that. The tribe has been anxious to meet the Amazons, but especially you, since you arrived."

"C'mon then," Gabrielle said as she stood, extending a hand down to help the older woman stand. She picked up the ceremonial blade and hefted it into place on her back. "I want to introduce you to the sisters here. Then we can go meet with your tribe and see what we can work out between us. I think this could be a good thing for everyone involved."

Eponin took Gabrielle in a hug which startled her, but one that she returned in full measure. "Despite everything, Gabrielle, I am selfishly glad you're here."

"Me too, Eponin. Me too."

## Chapter X

The moonlight was bright enough to see by even without the enhanced senses Xena had developed since her separation from Gabrielle. She was glad they only tended to kick in when she was on the hunt or in some sort of perceived danger. She was fairly certain the scents and sounds that assaulted her would drive her mad if she was forced to endure them continuously.

Her guardians made no sound and since they were downwind of their prey the trio were able to walk almost right into the herd.

The buffalo were milling together, lowing softly as they settled in for the night. Xena noticed that a small commotion at the back of the herd and focused her attention on it. The panther crept forward while the fox remained at Xena's side. Still some distance from the disturbance, the black cat stopped and turned its gaze back to the fox. Without a sound, the fox slunk forward and Xena moved without thought to follow.

The two animals stopped again as Xena slowed to take in the tableau before her. Directly in front of her, though still some distance away, was a white buffalo. Aside from the fact that it was a beautiful animal whose hide she admired, the animal was obviously an outcast and was continually being butted and chased by the larger buffalo around it. Xena raised her bow as the white buffalo was herded her way by both the herd and the panther that had crept up behind it.

Almost negligently, Xena let an arrow fly straight and true into the buffalo's eye. It tottered for a moment then fell over, causing a shifting of movement in the herd until the panther let out a roar. Then they loped steadily away from the fallen animal to relative safety.

Xena walked to the dying buffalo, reaching out two fingers to its neck and ending its torment. The she set about neatly skinning and draining it, being sure to take her fill before bleeding the animal out. The panther and the fox sat on either side, patiently waiting for her to finish before procuring their own meal.

Xena couldn't help but be amazed at the odd behavior of the pair and she deliberately cut a portion of the meat for them to share and set it aside from the rest of the creature. She continued to watch as the panther carefully checked the selection she'd laid out for them; then the cat gently nudged the sustenance towards its mate. The fox delicately raised a morsel to its mouth and began gnawing before the panther took a bite, keeping a watchful eye on the warrior.

Xena shook her head to clear it. Such behavior was completely unnatural for these animals and she couldn't help but wonder if she'd gone too long without feeding to make her hallucinate such odd conduct in the two natural predators. She blinked again, but the image didn't go away; the cat and fox continued to eat the piece of meat she'd given them, the panther making sure the fox got its fill before scooping up the remainder in its strong jaws.

Xena turned her attention back to the buffalo, discarding the entrails and realizing she had a dilemma. There was no way she could manage to carry the remainder of the animal back to the makeshift village and waste was unacceptable.

She rooted around in her mind for a solution, finally deciding she was completely out of her mind with what she ended up with. She turned to the panther, which looked back at her with singularly intelligent eyes.

"I don't suppose you'd watch over the rest of this for me til I get back?" she queried rhetorically as she hefted a large quantity of meat in her hands. "Well, I needed a good workout tonight I suppose," she muttered to herself as she took off back towards the village at a run.

It was very late and the camp had already settled in for its night rest when she arrived. Hotassa and a few of the other women hurried from their homes as the sound of running footsteps thundered through the compound. They looked at Xena in surprise when she approached blood covered and hands filled with buffalo meat.

Hotassa accepted the burden Xena carried, calling out instructions to the women who stood around staring. Soon, the camp was all a-bustle with activity and several of the women accompanied Xena back to the prairie to see if anything remained of what she had left behind.

It is difficult to say who was more shocked when the small troupe arrived back where the buffalo was. The panther and the fox circled the animal in opposite directions, intent on keeping any threat at bay. When Hotassa approached, the cat hissed and tensed to spring. Xena held the woman back by a touch on her arm and the older woman halted. Xena walked forward and the panther hesitated, studying the warrior for a long moment before resuming its place by the fox's side.

The women were amazed and began chattering among themselves at the unusual behavior the two were exhibiting. Xena stepped forward and began to gather the remaining meat for the women to carry back to the camp, then she lifted the heavy hide herself. It was then that Hotassa got her first good look at the hide.

"Évó'kómo hotoa'e. Ma'heono hova! Zee-nah epeva'e notaxe," she stated emphatically, falling back into her own language and lowering her head in respect. Xena's brow creased in confusion and she cursed herself once again for not having a complete grasp on this language yet.

She noted that all the women had lowered their eyes before her and when she stopped and took Hotassa's elbow, everyone stopped and waited. Xena took a deep breath and motioned them forward. One of the younger, braver souls glanced up in her direction and she made distinct shooing motions and commanded, "GO!" The women scurried off to take care of the buffalo meat she had supplied. Hotassa remained with her eyes still on the ground, trying to come up with words they would both understand, because she could feel the irritation emanating from the tall figure before her.

Xena rubbed her face and Hotassa felt compassion for the frustration she knew Xena was feeling. They had made great strides in communicating, but there were still times, like now, when they forgot and fell into their old ways. They had to put some thought into speaking the same language.

Hotassa took Xena's hand and drew her back to the hide that once again rested on the ground. She stroked it gently. "White."

Xena nodded. "Yeah, it is. It's unusual, but it was being abused by the rest of the herd." She stopped speaking at the confusion in Hotassa's eyes. Xena was unused to having to justify a kill and it showed in her tone of voice.

"Zee-nah, great hunter. Sacred," motioning to the hide. Xena didn't see it that way at all. She had merely taken pity on a creature that had no real hope.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to kill a sacred animal. It just seemed like the right thing to do." She didn't add that both the herd and the panther had cut it out of the pack as though giving it to her.

Hotassa shook her head. She was fairly certain Xena was not understanding the honor she'd been given. Instead she motioned towards the two animals that had taken sentinel positions on either side. "Zee-nah strong seo'ôtse."

Xena rubbed her face again. "I'm not sure I understand, Hotassa, but I'm not sure I want to either."

Hotassa merely nodded. There wasn't a way to convey what Xena needed to know without some help from her mate the shaman and that would have to wait until the men returned from war. In the meantime, it appeared as though Xena had acquired two rather formidable mascots and the animals padded along silently beside her as the women made their way back to camp.

Xena blinked in surprise at the abundance of late-night activity still obvious around the village. Women scurried to and fro setting up smoking fires to cure the meat; another small group was tending to the bones, preparing them to be converted into tools and weapons needed in the community. Still a third was building a large fire in the pit before Hotassa's dwelling and readying a cauldron of water for heating.

Xena understood Hotassa without words when she slipped a cake of soap and a thin piece of cloth into the warrior's hand and motioned her towards the spring. Xena was happy to comply with the unspoken command as the scent of blood on her person was keeping her on a razor edge she preferred to avoid when surrounded by so many people.

She took a few moments to scrub the dried blood from her hands and arms as well as her clothing. Then she let her mind drift as she relaxed and rinsed. Inevitably, it centered on Gabrielle and the many times they had shared a lake or stream and the now familiar ached of loneliness welled in her soul once more.

"Oh, Gabrielle," whispered on a prayer to the wind.

Xena took a few minutes to compose herself before exiting the water and dressing. Then she moved back to the mostly silent camp.

In the short time she'd been gone, the women had completed their preliminary tasks for curing the different parts of the buffalo Xena had slain and had returned to their homes for a bit of rest before morning was upon them again.

Xena crossed to her home, noting with interest that the panther and fox now lay curled up together in front of the flap. She shook her head in bemused wonder and crossed the threshold. "Wonder what Gabrielle would have made of the two of you," she muttered to herself before settling herself in with the now clean hide and beginning her work to cure it.

Several days passed before the men returned. A few were missing, but thankfully a majority came home though there were more wounded than not. Among the worst wounded was the shaman and without a word, Xena moved to help him. His son Kya stepped between them, intent on keeping a *woman* and especially \*this\* woman away from his father. After her public refusal of his advances, Kya had done his best to put her in her place.

Unfortunately for him, he wasn't nearly as capable as he imagined himself to be and Xena constantly thwarted his attempts to contain her.

Now she raised a hand to physically move him out of her way, the intensity in her eyes making it clear to all present that he was not going to stop her.

"Kya hova'âhane!"

The words were softly spoken, but the meaning was clear even to Xena's untrained ears. She cocked an eyebrow at the young man, waiting for him to comply with his father's request. He glared at her but moved out of her way. A passing thought of wondering why his ritual had brought Xena to them crossed his mind again and he shook his head as he stepped aside.

Xena waited until the shaman beckoned her closer, then she knelt and began to assess his injuries. He lay quietly and let her work, though she could see the questions in his eyes. She didn't have time to worry about them immediately since she was concentrating on cleaning and binding his wounds. She patted his arm and stood to move on to the next warrior in need of healing. His hand on hers caused her to hesitate with a question in her eyes.

He motioned to the two animals that now sat beside the warrior. They had been patiently sitting together by one side of her doorway and had stepped between her and his son at the young man's first movement towards Xena. "Nanose'hame, ma'êhoohe. Tosa'e? Tone?"

She understood what he was asking and motioned to the vast plain beyond the encampment. Then Hotassa knelt beside him and wiped his brow.

"A'e," she assured him and he nodded and released Xena to continue her work. The shaman's eyes closed as he let his body relax into a healing sleep.

One by one Xena applied her healing skills to the warriors and slowly they allowed her to care for them. Many of the wounds were relatively minor, for which everyone was thankful and just before midday she finished treating those who needed it. Then she retreated to her dwelling and out the back in an effort to get away and find some peace.

Meanwhile, the women had begun to tell their mates what had transpired on the plain three nights previous. The men sat in awed disbelief at the story that unfolded and many expressed skepticism at the possibility. Hotassa hushed them all by showing them the white hide that sat curing in front of Xena's home. She promised to give them the whole story when her husband awakened and they accepted that edict with only minor grumbling.

Xena exited her home quietly and was down the path before the conversation got too embarrassing. She still didn't understand all the words, but she understood enough and got the tonal inflection easily enough to know exactly who and what the conversation was about. It didn't take much for her to decide she needed a long walk.

She found herself moving away from the village and into the small scrub hills they had settled near while the men had been gone. She sighed. This place was so foreign, so different from home and it made her ache for the comfort of trees and hills and the familiarity of a cool breeze on her face. Xena wanted to go home.

Without realizing it, her steps became faster and before she knew it, she was running full out. She wasn't sure if she was running to something or running away from something, so she stopped thinking and stopped feeling and just ran.

A stitch in her side finally made her slow to a walk and she noted with some surprise that the sun was more than halfway to the horizon. She shook her head in disgust.

"Brilliant, Xena. It's gonna be real late before you get back to the village. Gabrielle would be furious if she was here."

That thought caused her knees to unbuckle as a flash of a previously hidden memory exploded across her mind. The look of anguished betrayal on Gabrielle's face was heartbreaking and Xena allowed herself to drop to the ground as the last events of her life paraded forth in her mind's eye.

"Oh, Gabrielle.... I am so, SO sorry...." And Xena sat lost in tormented thought reliving a decision she could no longer comprehend until the moon was high in the sky.

It was actually the feeling of warmth curled in her lap that brought Xena out of the haze she was in. She looked down, somewhat unsurprised to see the fox curled into a small ball on her legs. More surprising was the fact that the panther sat unmoving next to but not touching its mate. Xena smiled down at them sadly, tears still sitting on her lashes unspent.

She sat lightly stroking the fox's fur while the panther kept sentinel over both of them, though Xena did note with some amusement that the panther was very aware of her actions as much as it was of the environment

that surrounded them.

Xena lifted the fox from her lap and set it gently beside the cat who gazed at her with watchful eyes. "You two," she said as she rose to her feet and dusted herself off, "oughta be fairly close to your home. It might be best if you head back there. But thanks for keeping me company."

She looked like she wanted to say more, but for the life of her, Xena could no more articulate the feelings in her heart right then than she could fly to the moon. She was sure a lot of that had to do with her exhaustion, both physical and emotional. She felt very much like her world had spun completely off its axis and totally out of control and she was at a loss to know what to do to get things back on track. Having these two animals nearby sharing a bond that was as strong and familiar as what she had shared with Gabrielle as a constant reminder of what she had lost simply made it worse.

It was a sweet pain, but it was agonizing nonetheless and she had no desire to be a martyr to it... especially now that she knew the truth. Part of the truth anyway and Xena knew beyond a doubt that the vicious death she now recalled with stunning clarity lay totally at her feet. Now it was critical for her to discover what sort of afterlife she had fallen into, because it was time to see what god she could manipulate into sending her home... and back into Gabrielle's arms.

Xena had started walking while processing these thoughts and she came to with a start, realizing that the fox and panther were casually strolling along beside her.

"Don't you two have somewhere to be?"

They gazed at her compassionately and the intelligence she saw in both their eyes nearly unnerved her. Without words, she understood that they considered themselves her guardians and her shoulders sagged in defeat.

"All right, c'mon. We've got a long trip back to the village." They started back together at a walk while Xena's mind turned to serious contemplation of finding her way back to life.

It was sunrise when Xena and her two companions made it back to the encampment and she noted the odd sense of reverence in the glances now cast her way by the various individuals she passed on her way to her home. She snatched up her towel and went to the small creek to wash, then slipped back into her teepee unnoticed and settled down for a bit of rest. She had a lot of things to consider.

Xena's very first thought upon waking was of Gabrielle, but it had been that way since that very first night outside of Amphipolis if she was honest enough to admit it to herself and here in this place, it was easy to be that honest with herself. She sat for long moments undisturbed as her mind began sorting through the puzzle it had been given. Something just didn't make sense.

A light knocking at the doorway caused blue eyes to flitter open and she called out, "Come."

Hotassa stuck her head in the flap, a look of relief crossing her face when she saw that Xena was awake and alert. She offered forth the steaming bowl in her hands.

"Mesêhestôtse?" she asked. She had a look though that reminded Xena of Cyrene. She was fairly certain if she refused, Hotassa would insist to the point of feeding the warrior herself to insure that Xena ate. Instead, Xena received the food with a graceful nod of her head and a slight smile.

"Nea'eše," Xena said and dug into the meal with relish. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until the first taste crossed her lips. Then she began to devour the stew rapidly.

"Enovahe," Hotassa said with a chuckle. "Slow."

Xena chewed a little more slowly and swallowed the mouthful she had before wiping her mouth with her hand. "Sorry," she mumbled. "Hungry."

It finally occurred to Xena what had been niggling at her about this afterlife... this place was far closer to what LIFE had been to her than any other afterlife she'd experienced. Tartarus had been torture on the cross; in Hell she'd been a demon bent on destruction. In Heaven she'd had been an archangel, though she didn't remember having needs or desires like Michael and Lucifer seemed to suffer from. *Probably wasn't there long enough*... she thought with a sneer, remembering clearly how THAT little escapade had been the beginning of a hellacious year for her and Gabrielle that had nearly ripped them to shreds.

Valhalla was a little different, but that had more to do with being a Valkyrie because she hadn't actually been dead in that afterlife. Since she only helped bring Odin's chosen warriors into their place of eternal reward very briefly, she really didn't know much about that afterlife. Especially since her true focus had been on obtaining the Rheingold by any means necessary.

That left Elysia, but her experience of that afterlife had only been brief glimpses. Still, it was nothing like what she had in this place. This place reminded her so much of Greece and Gabrielle. It reminded her of home.

There was no peace and tranquility here. People fought and lived and.... Did they die? Xena couldn't say for sure, not having actually witnessed a human death in this place. Certainly they were wounded. There was hunger and sickness. Xena shook her head. No, this wasn't like any afterlife she'd ever experienced or even possibly imagined.

Her focus turned inward toward the burning she always felt now that grew stronger the longer she was without bloodshed of some kind. Her bloodlust had always been sated by fighting and killing or by the occasional assertive lovemaking with Gabrielle.

She smiled... she had been surprised and oddly pleased by Gabrielle's aggressiveness the first time the bard had drawn blood. It had been completely unexpected and more satisfying than she'd ever imagined something like that could be. For all her prowess, it was actually a new experience for Xena and on the rare occasion it happened, it had added an incredible dimension of feeling between them.

Xena shook her head again. This line of thought was taking her body places she really didn't want it to go right now and it was muddling her thinking. The truth was, if this was an afterlife, the burning should be gone, shouldn't it? At least if she was being rewarded. And her ability to sate it should be gone if she was being punished. It made no sense.

The only logical conclusion she could come to was that this WASN'T an afterlife. But if that was the case... where was she? Her language difficulties with the native people troubled her no end. She'd never found it

difficult before to learn a new tongue and now when it was the key to her figuring out the convoluted puzzle she seemed to be living, she was having difficulty with even the basics.

Maybe this \*is\* an afterlife and I am slowly supposed to lose my mind as punishment....

Xena raked her hands through her hair. She was going to have to learn this impossible language... that's all there was to it. Though the people were somewhat reluctant to share their words with her, she couldn't keep pointing at things or using the pinch to get her point across.

She'd been lucky, though. Her two mascots had provided a measure of respect she needed and a leeway she'd appreciated beyond words. Once she'd put the pinch on the young shaman Kya, interested suitors had approached her much more warily. A young woman and two warriors, one younger, one older had tried to make contact with her to no avail. None could advance past the two animals and when Xena made it clear that they were complying with her express wishes, she was left to her solitude.

The women as a group still welcomed her to whatever activity they were busy with, but for the most part, Xena did her own thing, content to hunt for herself and to exercise her warrior skills outside the bounds of the encampment. The warriors still weren't sure what to make of the woman who had fallen among them that exhibited the skills of warrior, healer and shaman.

So now she decided to see if she could make headway into communicating with the people who for now, in this place were her family and friends. The sooner she could talk to them, the sooner she could get some answers to at least some of the questions that weighed heavily on her heart and mind. Somewhere out there was the solution she needed to find her way home.

When she stepped from her dwelling the following morning, her face bore a grim determination that would not easily be denied. So it took her a few minutes to realize that the camp's perception of her had changed radically, literally overnight.

Eyes dropped now instead of meeting her own and only Hotassa spoke directly to her. The older woman brought Xena some food to break her fast, then started to move away to allow the warrior the privacy her sudden change in tribal standing demanded. Xena put a hand out to stop her, hoping Hotassa would answer some questions.

"Hotassa, what's going on? What's changed?" Xena motioned to the village around her. The women regarded her differently and the men now made eye contact, something they had been loathe to do previously.

"Zee-nah, notaxe... warrior. Ma'aataemeo'o evesetano notaxe ševe. Learn path."

"Learn...?" Confusion washed over Xena's face. "Why?"

Simple, direct and to the point. Even Hotassa would understand the meaning even if the words were still difficult for them both

"Nanose'hame, ma'êhoohe ehvestâhem Zee-nah. Mets strong ma'heono." She paused and tried to phrase it for Xena to easily understand. "Animals... strong guides. Powerful spirits."

Hotassa looked as frustrated as Xena felt, but the warrior nodded her head. She was fairly confident she understood exactly what Hotassa was implying and she glanced to the fox and panther that reclined sedately on either side of her. Inexplicably, she felt Gabrielle's love surrounding her and for the first time in more than a moon she felt.... It was as though the bard had reached beyond the grave and provided Xena with the tools she needed to survive.

The feeling was very brief, but it was a real as anything she'd ever felt in her life and Xena took comfort from the fact that even if she was dead, Gabrielle was looking out for her. And she determined again to do whatever it took to find her bard and make things right for them again.

Hotassa waited quietly, having watched Xena's focus grow introspective. She wasn't quite prepared for the intensity of the stare that turned her way when Xena's gaze turned her way.

"Heehe'e... êstse. You have a lot to teach and I have a lot to learn. Then I have a bard to find."

She stood and took Hotassa's arm, gesturing that she was ready to meet with the tribal shaman and begin her training. Without a word, the two animals stretched and rose, padding silently along beside them. The entire camp watched as the injured shaman gestured to her and for the first time, a woman warrior was welcomed at his fire and in their tribe.

Days became weeks and weeks turned into months. The tribe settled for the winter and it made Xena antsy, though it gave her plenty of time to learn the language and customs of what had become her extended family.

She had passed their warrior tests with ease and had proven her prowess as both a hunter and a healer. She was a welcome addition to both war and hunting parties, though they had yet to let her lead either.

The animals never strayed far from her and in the beginning, negated any threat they felt impinged upon her space. It was only after Xena proved herself to both them and the tribe that they allowed her to fight her own battles, though there were several instances when they did watch her back... much as Gabrielle had. Xena was amazed at how well the bard had chosen her spirit guides. Separately, they reminded her of the two of them... so much of them reflected both their traits and personalities. Together they reminded Xena of Gabrielle and though she still could neither feel nor sense the bard's presence, she drew a measure of peace in her memories.

The language continued to frustrate the warrior and she had to wonder if her difficulties with it lay in her desperate need to understand and communicate with the people who might hold the answers to her questions. Many were the times that the aggravation drove her to the hunt and after a successful feed, she would return sated and settled and able to focus her concentration on the task at hand again.

In many ways she was marking time, but time, no matter how slowly it appears to be moving, does move steadily forward and it was a bit of surprise for Xena to realize that spring had come.

Finally, as the days became steadily warmer, Xena made up her mind to leave the tribe and strike out on her own across the vast plains. Somewhere out there laid the answers she sought and she was determined to find them. She was comfortable enough with the language now to be able to get by and she figured she could pick up more in her travels. It was, after all, how she'd learned many of the tongues she now knew. And more and more her heart urged her to begin her hunt for Gabrielle.

Before she'd made up her mind to leave, a rider came into camp announcing that war had been declared by another tribe... the tribe that had nearly decimated them the previous summer. The shaman stared at Xena and by look alone made her the head of the war party that would seek retribution for the damage they had inflicted.

Xena sighed... she didn't want this... not now. She had a bigger greater good to concern herself with. She needed to find Gabrielle and reunite with her. But even as she opened her mouth to refuse, her head nodded her acceptance. Even in this screwed-up, oddball afterlife she'd found herself in, she knew that either she took care of the problem sooner or later. And in this case, sooner was better because it meant she would have more time later for her own personal quest.

Several clans of her tribe showed up, though some balked at first of following a woman warrior. But Xena's tribe contained the nation's shaman and after he spoke, the male warriors fell reluctantly into line.

None could say how happy they were with his choice, because she led them to a total and complete victory over their enemies. And though some did die and more were injured, they had redeemed themselves in both their eyes and the eyes of the enemy.

Xena spent a couple days tending the wounded and the few who developed sickness before she prepared to leave. Hotassa noted her packed bag and nodded in understanding. She'd known Xena was searching for something the village could not give her.

The shaman came to Xena's dwelling... an almost unheard of honor. Usually he summoned those to whom he wished to speak to his own fire. Xena stepped from her teepee at his knock and they sat down to talk.

The shaman blessed her and chided her. Told of dangers seen and unseen and cautioned her to be careful. He reminded her that they were her family and she was welcome back at any time she felt her journey was over, or even if it was just to visit. Finally he thanked her for the things she had taught them and her willingness to learn their ways as well. Then he touched her shoulders and kissed her forehead like the daughter he'd never had and sent her on her way.

Hotassa came by and offered food for her travel, as did many of the women of the tribe. One or two of the bolder ones assured her they would continue their staff practice and reminded her they would be waiting for lessons when she returned to them. As she gathered up her bags to leave, each and every warrior took a moment to say a parting word and it was with mixed emotions that Xena finally hit the trail.

With her companions by her side, though, Xena found she was less lonely than she expected to be and as the encampment faded from view, she took to her search for Gabrielle with boundless energy and determination. Nothing was going to stop her from finding her bard and finding a way for them to be together again. Whatever it took, whatever sacrifice needed to be made, it was time for \*them\* to be the greater good.

## Chapter XI

Gabrielle came back to her surroundings when the young man playing at being a purser brought a lemonade out and set it on the small table at her elbow. She thanked him with an absent smile and dismissed him, returning her attention back to her journals and the memories that lay therein.

So many years, she thought and so many friends come and gone. We're not the only immortals in the world. Do you know that Xena? Have you even discovered your own immortality yet? You haven't been in this time very long and I worry about you... I worry about us. Do you remember me, Xena? Do you remember us? Will you still love me when I find you again? Because I will find you and then we will find a way home together. I'm tired and I'm ready to go home... to you and to the Greece we shared together years ago.

Gabrielle sighed and put those thoughts out of her mind. She had a tendency to brood more often these days, but I suppose almost eighteen hundred years of separation from your other half will make a person unreasonable from time to time.

She had to chuckle. *Unreasonable*. There had been several times when the loneliness had been overwhelming and the sheer magnitude of what her soul bore nearly drove her to madness. It was in those moments, in the darkest times of her life that she felt the separation most harshly. It was then that the doubts assailed her and made rational thought nearly impossible and her feelings....

Gods, if it hadn't been for Aphrodite and her constant friendship, I surely would have lost my mind... several times over. It was nice to know I wasn't completely alone and being reminded later that I wasn't the only one like me....

Gabrielle shook her head to clear her thoughts more forcefully. She reopened the journal, her eyes searching until they landed on the first time she'd gone to Olympus for a respite.

Dear Xena, (it read)

A plague has come to the Amazons and it is beyond my knowledge and experience. It is also beyond the best efforts of our healers and those of our tribal neighbors. It is like no plague we have seen in the almost three hundred seasons we have been in this land and Buitu, the headman for the tribes says it is nothing they have encountered in recorded history.

Bless his heart, he almost said it as though it were a question when we talked since we both know I would remember anything like this happening.

I have to say, both my Amazons and the People have been mostly accepting of my status as an immortal being. Perhaps because I leave them to live there lives here and do not interfere or participate with them unless invited to do so.

Now that this plague has come, I have not only been asked to help, but representatives from both sides are pleading with me for a solution. Unfortunately, I believe that solution lies outside my bounds here. I will have to find a way to travel back to the outside world and visit some of the great libraries, if they still exist. Who knows what has happened in the three hundred years we have been in this new land?

Even Aphrodite hasn't been able to find us... or she has forgotten about me.

she and a very small, select group of warriors would set out for the boats and would then sail away towards what she hoped was Greece. She had spent many nights since their arrival in this wild land studying the stars and she believed with a little luck she could get them home. Well, not home to them any more, but we should make it to Greece in a reasonable amount of time.

She wondered again briefly what had happened to Aphrodite that the goddess had not visited her once. Then her mind returned to the many friends she had cared for and buried in this place.

Gabrielle let her thoughts guide her footsteps and in the late afternoon sunlight, she made her way to the small graveyard just outside the village, remembering when it had first been set aside for their dead.

The People had been horrified at the thought of burning human flesh and the Amazons compromised. They had been taught the People's ways of preservation and then had buried their dead standing up, so that their spirits could quickly and easily ascend to the Amazon Land of the Dead. A small memorial pyre was built atop the grave that burned brightly for three days, guiding the spirit on its journey and watched over by the tribe. At the end of three days, the ashes were gathered into a small container engraved with the sister's name and placed just behind the burial site.

She walked slowly through the rows, remembering each and every person that was buried there and how they had died.

She frowned as she realized that a few people had suffered from similar symptoms to those that now seemed to be slowly killing the Nation. It wasn't often and until the last few moons, no one had died, but the indicators were almost the same.

Gabrielle set the thought aside, promising herself more thought on it during the trip to Greece. She would have plenty of time to consider all the implications later. For now, she was approaching the oldest part of the cemetery and she paused as she remembered the old friends that had made the journey with her from Greece... Cyane, Varia, Hilda and the many other sisters who had passed on to their reward.

Though she missed and mourned all those who died, it was these first ones, the ones she'd actually allowed to be friends, that Gabrielle missed the most.

Finally she reached the grave that represented Eponin. The People had allowed her body to remain in preservation for three days while the Amazons burned a fire for her before they buried her in their own cemetery. As a wife of the headman, she was accorded special honor because she had never forgotten that she was still an Amazon and the People respected that.

Now she sat down at the marker that indicated Eponin's resting place.

"Hello, old friend," Gabrielle said softly. "It's been a while since we spoke last and I'm afraid it's gonna be even longer before we have the opportunity here again." She drew a deep breath and continued. "Something is killing the Nation slowly and I am going to go back to Greece and see if I can find something in the libraries there to help."

Gabrielle was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she did not see the spirits of her sisters gather round. It was something she never saw, because they never revealed themselves to her as Ephiny once had. But they always came out to listen whenever she sat to have a chat, usually with Eponin.

"Hopefully the libraries will still be there," she muttered, remembering the destruction she had seen in her short mortal lifetime in Greece and knowing that conquerors were rarely careful to keep knowledge of other cultures, no matter how hard learned the lessons of that knowledge were.

"Maybe we will try Egypt first," Gabrielle continued. "It's closer and Queen Cleopatra was quite proud of her library... justly so," remembering her awe at the grandiose building on their first visit. "Do you know... once we got past our differences, Cleopatra asked if I would archive a few scrolls there. I was surprised, really, since I was a foreigner, even though we were the Queen's guests." Gabrielle chuckled at the memory. "Then Cleopatra explained to me that they collected ideas and knowledge from the entire known world."

Gabrielle sat quietly for a time before nodding her head in decision. "I think we will try Egypt first. It's much close than Greece and the diversity in thinking that we will find at the Library in Alexandria should more than equal what I could find in Athens." She looked at the small urn manifest with Eponin's name. "Thanks, Eponin. Even now talking with you helps clear my mind. I miss you, my friend. Tell the sisters...." she broke off. "Well, they know I miss them too. Keep a watch out over the Amazons. They still need the guiding spirits of their ancestors."

Gabrielle remained where she was until the sun hit the horizon, then stood and dusted herself off. She walked to the edge of the glade, then turned and whispered a prayer over the three hundred years of graves that remained behind. Then she left at a brisk pace to find the Captain of her ship. There were some changes in their route that needed to be addressed.

The spirits of the Amazons waited until Gabrielle was halfway back to the village before they re-emerged in the glade.

"Do you think it's serious?" from Varia, referring to the plague that Gabrielle had referenced.

"Well, it is serious enough to warrant Gabrielle's leaving what has been her home for the last three hundred cycles," Eponin commented. "We'll keep an eye on things, though I do think it is probably in \*Gabrielle's\* best interests."

"How so?" from Hilda as they each took seats on the ground in a circle.

"Because," said Ephiny as she stepped from the mist, "Gabrielle is alone here. And she is reminded of her immortality daily because of the reverence the Nation bestows on her. Not that she doesn't deserve it," Ephiny added hastily as she held up a hand to stop the protests. "But she was never comfortable being Queen. How can she be content to be regarded from a distance with such awe but with not a friend to be counted among them?"

Ephiny looked at Eponin and smiled. "Remember that young, friendly kid we met so many years ago?"

Eponin nodded and Ephiny cast her gaze around the clearing once more. "Gabrielle has been without real friends here for many seasons - partly by her own choice and partly because no one is quite sure how to treat her."

"I agree," Cyane said. "It was hard at first when she first shared her secret, until we realized she was still the same person and still our Queen."

"She has fulfilled the prophecy and led the Nation to greatness once more," Yakut remarked. "I think she is C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

entitled to a reprieve."

Heads all around nodded in agreement.

"It is decided then," said Melosa. "We will keep a watch over the Nation and Gabrielle and hope that she finds what she is searching for very soon."

"Xena better hope Gabrielle finds what she's looking for pretty soon," Solari replied with a chuckle. "I'm not sure the Warrior Princess will be able to take on the Amazon Queen if it takes too long. Xena won't know what hit her."

With that, the rest of the group winced in sympathy for the warrior, knowing it for the truth. And they had to chuckle at the image that truth produced for each of them. Then the spirits began to return to their places of rest and readiness, crossing through the mists back into their eternal home.

Gabrielle was excited by the time she reached the village. She was confident the Library of Alexandria would have what she needed. It would simply be a matter of finding it. And the women who were accompanying her would be an asset in the search. They had been chosen from many volunteers for their knowledge as well as their sailing skills.

It was hoped that they would be able to make a short stop at the Sinhales Islands that had been their original goal to see if perhaps there were more members of their Nation who might want to join their sisters and return to the new home that had been established so very far away.

The small crew was preparing the last things that needed to be taken care of when Gabrielle strode into the village. Her presence was so unusual in the village anymore that everyone froze and then fell to a kneeling position.

Gabrielle stood for a moment with her hands on her hips just shaking her head. For whatever reason, the Amazons couldn't get passed her title, to say nothing of that whole immortality thing. She suddenly realized that despite the circumstances warranting her departure from the Nation, she was looking forward to it. At least no one in 'civilization' knew her secret and she would be treated much like anyone else. And she looked forward to that more than anything.

"Rise, ladies. You have better things to do than kneel at my feet, I'm sure." Without missing a beat, Gabrielle turned to the woman who would be the captain of the Amazon ship. "Demetria, do you have a minute? We need to alter our route."

The younger woman frowned. "My Queen? Are you sure? We checked and rechecked everything you gave us. I'm certain all is as it should be."

"It would be if we were still going to Greece. Plans have just changed. C'mon."

"But...." Demetria sputtered before following her rapidly disappearing Queen into the council hut.

"That makes perfect sense, Queen Gabrielle. I'm sorry I questioned...."

Gabrielle held up a hand to forestall the apology. "Don't be Demetria. Immortality doesn't make me perfect. It just gives me longer to practice." She smiled and the captain couldn't stop the return smile that blossomed on her face. "Otherwise, I would have thought of this first."

"Well, I'm glad you thought of it now. It will shave months off our trip out and back. I'm glad we are taking two ships though. Inya will be able to check the island and meet us in Egypt which will cut some time off as well."

"Anxious to be back already, Captain?"

"Yes, my Queen. I'm a little nervous and I so want us to be successful." Gabrielle remembered that Demetria had lost her baby sister to the plague fourteen moons prior.

"I understand, Demetria, more than you know. We'll be as quick as we can, I promise. The Nation will get our best."

"My Queen," Demetria answered seriously, dropping to one knee in front of a startled Gabrielle. "Despite the fact that this Nation has not always done right by you, you have never failed to give us your best when asked for it."

Gabrielle scrubbed her face, glad she was already sitting down. "Demetria, get up please. You don't need to kneel in front of me."

"But...."

"The fact is the Nation hasn't always been first with me and there have been many times that I decided what was best for us was for me not to be an active part of life as an Amazon."

"Yes, but every time we've needed you, you've responded. You came and did what you could, just like now."

Gabrielle smiled and shook her head. "Nothing is gonna change your mind on this, is it, Captain?"

"No, my Queen," came the reply with a smile.

"Then I will capitulate to the argument in favor of an early night. We want to get an early start in the morning."

"Indeed we do, Queen Gabrielle."

They exited the council hut and the Captain walked with Gabrielle the short distance to the cliff side. "Good night, my Queen."

"Good night, Demetria. I'll see you at daybreak."

The Captain waited until Gabrielle reached the opening of the cave she called home before turning and making her way back to her hut. Even though Gabrielle was an immortal and beyond the need of such protection, the Amazons continued to extend her the courtesy of an escort whenever they could manage to get away with it. Gabrielle acceded to their wishes on this point, much as she did to their referring to her by

title mostly because it was a position of honor with them. It didn't hurt her really, though it did cause her some private eye-rolling and it gave them a sense of keeping to a code that had been lain down by their sisters long before even Gabrielle's time. It was easy when she reminded herself she was merely keeping traditions alive.

Gabrielle entered the cave with a mixture of relief and trepidation. In the years she had been here, this had become home as much as anything she had known in her brief life as a mortal, except Xena. And tomorrow, she was leaving home again for parts unknown, though she did have high hopes to reach Egypt and eventually Greece.

For though the women accompanying her didn't yet know it, Gabrielle expected to find a cure and send them on their way back here. She herself planned to stay for a bit longer if it could be managed. She needed some time for herself, in a place where no one knew who she was or expected her to make the hard decisions all the time. Gabrielle's very soul was tired and knowing that she had centuries more to pass before her solitary state would change did nothing but make things worse.

She looked around the cavern thoroughly once more, insuring there was no foodstuff left to rot. Things were neatly put away and she smiled. She would always have this place when she returned, but for too long now she had been settled in one place and her life had fallen into a rut. It was time to see what else the world had to offer and her first stop was to find a cure for what was ailing the Amazon Nation.

They made good time, not surprisingly given the amount of time and care spent pouring over the maps and charts they'd made in the years following their initial voyage. Though their new homeland was relatively uncharted as far as Western civilization was concerned, Gabrielle and the original captains had invested a lot of effort into remembering as many details as they possibly could.

Gabrielle spent many nights studying the stars, insuring that their memories had not been faulty and Demetria helped chart the distances they were traveling to allow for even more accurate maps to be made when they returned home.

When the stars took on their old familiarity, Gabrielle climbed into the crows nest and wept silent tears at the memories the well-known patterns evoked. For the first time in many years she held a conversation with Xena out loud, knowing the warrior couldn't hear or respond, but feeling somewhat better to fall into their proverbial star chasing argument. When she was done, she climbed down and slipped below to her cabin, recording her thoughts and feelings.

It was something she'd always done as a matter of course, but with Xena's disappearance, it had become the best way to communicate with the warrior. The Amazons respected her privacy and never invaded any of her writings. But they tended to wonder about her a little bit when she talked to Xena as though she was still standing beside her. So her diary became her refuge and the one safe place she could still talk to Xena and anything... and everything.

As the trip continued, Gabrielle found herself antsy to return to the known and loved. The logical part of her mind understood that after three hundred cycles, nothing would be as she remembered it... twenty-five years in the ice caves had taught her that lesson quite clearly. But her heart only knew that Greece had been home more than any place she'd been in her years of travel and she was anxious to see what differences time had wrought on the world she'd grown up in.

About a week out from their arrival at the inlet of the Red Sea, from what they had surmised at any rate, the second ship veered north, headed to the islands that had been their original destination. It was hoped that there might be more Amazons there who would want to return to their new homeland. They were to pick up anyone who wished to join the Nation, then meet Gabrielle and her crew in Alexandria.

Though everyone desired a quick resolution to the problem plaguing the Nation, the Amazons were realistic about the possibility of it taking weeks to find what they needed in the huge library. So it was with a bit of anxiety that they stepped off the ship onto the dock of Alexandria. Then they stood stock still, though for very different reasons.

Gabrielle tried not to breathe in too deeply the smells that always seemed to be prevalent on every dock she'd ever set foot on. Idly she noted the amazing changes that occurred during her absence.

The Amazons were divided in their reaction. Half were fascinated and the other half disdainful. But they all found it intriguing in the extreme and Gabrielle was fairly certain when they returned home, they would be implementing some of the things they bore witness to here.

Gabrielle had resumed the use of her staff as a tool for walking with. Though she still kept up her skill with all the weapons she had mastered, the staff gave comfort to her in a way that none of the others did. Besides, it was an accepted practice for travelers to walk with the aid of a stick. Any of her other weapons would have caused talk and speculation.

Today and for the remainder of this trip, she and the Amazons blended in fairly well. Their leathers had been traded in for a colorful woven material made from a native plant back home. It had taken a bit of persuasion on her part, but Gabrielle had made the women come to see that it was in the best interests of both themselves and the Nation that they be as inconspicuous as possible. They had left Greece to avoid being destroyed. There was no reason to advertise their existence to the world now, especially since they were so well hidden even the gods couldn't seem to find them.

A pang went through Gabrielle at that thought, but she shuddered and put it out of her mind. She had priorities to take care of first. Then she would go to Greece and see if she still had a friend there in the goddess of love.

She was astonished at the amount of influence Rome seemed to have here. She had hoped, honestly, that Rome would be gone by now. They'd brought nothing but misery and suffering to her and Xena and she wished the world well rid of them. She shrugged. It really didn't matter so long as they left her and the Amazons alone to get what they came for.

Gabrielle was thankful for the time she'd spent learning both Egyptian and Latin as it made it much easier for her to get around. With few words, she started out for the library and the Amazons gathered their things and followed her.

Gabrielle could feel how impressed the Amazons were with the grandeur of both the city and the library itself despite their efforts at nonchalance. For herself, she could see the years of wear and neglect in places and wondered if she felt her age as plainly as the graceful old buildings did.

With a sigh, she led them up the steps and over to the long marble counter where several well-dressed men

and women stood busily working. They looked up at the group's approach.

"Excuse me," Gabrielle said in flawless Arabic, gleaned from her time in Egypt and years of subsequent study. "Can you direct us to the medical section?"

The librarians looked the group over as a whole and at the speaker in particular. It was apparent even to the most novice among them that these were neither Egyptian nor Roman nobles and yet the language tripped musically from her lips with the grace of a native. A very rotund man stepped forward and stared, surprised when Gabrielle returned his look measure for measure.

To his amazement, he found an intelligence there he rarely saw and never expected. With a humble nod he said softly, "If you'll follow me, lady."

The other librarians followed the small assembly's progress with wide eyes. Nelium never spoke softly and he never personally led anyone anywhere. His sense of importance as the head of the great library was portrayed in his pompous demeanor and bellowing tones. When the party turned the corner to mount the stairs for the second floor, the librarians looked to one another with delighted grins.

"Never thought to see that happen."

"Wonder who they are and who the blonde woman is. She has such presence."

"Yes and nice to see Nelium put in his place without so much as a word."

"Well," said the most practical among them. "Best if we get back to work. Regardless of her effect upon him, I doubt seriously it will carry over to us."

That was easy enough to understand and agree to and they fell back to work with a will.

The man had led them to a quiet alcove, filled with shelf upon shelf of scroll texts. There were several small chairs and tables scattered throughout

Gabrielle and the Amazons looked around slowly and Nelium stood hesitantly watching them before speaking.

"Lady, is there something specific I can help you find, or...?"

Gabrielle turned to him before any of the Amazons could speak. Though his tone was polite, it was not friendly like the men of the People's tribe when they spoke to the Queen and Gabrielle did not want any misunderstandings to get them thrown from the library before their work was even started.

"My name is Gabrielle," she offered kindly, extending her hand in greeting.

With evident surprise, the man accepted it and gave her a brief squeeze. "Nelium," he replied a bit gruffly. He noted suddenly that the women that surrounded him were more than what they seemed. *In fact, they could be warriors by their demeanor....* He shook his head. No warrior save those who considered themselves noblemen patronized the library and most tended to stay out of areas that didn't speak of war.

Gabrielle waited patiently, knowing the man's thoughts had wandered off. He blinked and returned his attention to her with a light blush. "Apologies, la... Gabrielle."

"It's all right, Nelium. Tell me, are the texts in a specific order?"

"They are alphabetized by illness. Do you know what you are looking for?"

The blonde head shook in the negative. "No. Only the symptoms."

"Oh dear," the heavy man responded. "It could take you some time then. Would you like some help or would you prefer to do your own research?"

"I think for now we will be fine, Nelium, but thank you." He bowed and started to depart. "Unless...."

He stopped and turned to face Gabrielle. "Yes?"

"If there is a healer that we could talk to... someone you know of perhaps?"

"I will send out some inquiries, la... Gabrielle. It will probably take a day or two."

Gabrielle extended her hand. "Thank you, Nelium. I would greatly appreciate it."

He nodded and took his leave and Gabrielle looked around again to see that the Amazons had already separated to begin their search through what now looked to be an infinite number of scrolls.

It was slow going. Even with all their formal training, the Amazons were encountering all sorts of difficulties reading the various medical texts. For one thing, they were written in a variety of languages, depending on the nationality of the author. For another, most of them were not healers and were not trained to look past the obvious symptoms for the obscure ones that could point to a cure.

Gabrielle spent much of her time making notes for things she wanted to come back for... things that would be useful for the Amazons to have in their healing scrolls. First though, they had to find the cure for the ailment that was slowly killing the Amazon Nation.

The first few days were spent separating the texts into stacks of possibilities. The Amazons and Gabrielle were working from before dawn til after dusk and quickly became a familiar sight in the library.

They were so preoccupied with their search that they failed to notice an increased Roman presence in the city. And then it was too late.

## Chapter XII

"This is impossible!" Demetria exclaimed half a moon after their arrival in Alexandria. "My Queen, we are never gonna find what we need here! Look at this!" she practically screamed, snatching up a scroll. "This one

shows chills and fever, but no paralysis." She grabbed a second sheet. "This one has swollen, aching joints, but no fatigue or headaches. These," gesturing to a whole other stack, "have nothing at all we can use!! And we're not even through the first row of texts!!" Without warning the Captain slumped back down in her seat.

Gabrielle sat quietly letting the words wash over her with a calm facade that belied the turmoil running just below the surface. She wasn't surprised by the outburst... only by the fact that it had take as long to come to fruition as it had.

The fact was she was feeling the frustration as well and it was aided by the reality that they had become virtual prisoners of the library in their haste to find a cure for their people. For fifteen days they had spent endless candlemarks in this little alcove searching and researching every single scroll shelf by shelf for the information they needed and they had yet to make a real dent in the magnitude of scrolls provided.

The healer that Nelium had sent for had proven less than useful. He had never heard of anything quite like what the Amazons were suffering from and even consulting with his fellows brought little enlightenment. So it made their task doubly daunting, knowing that even the elite of Alexandria were unfamiliar with their cause.

Gabrielle rubbed her forehead, looking for answers that felt like they were just beyond her reach. They pace they had set for themselves was going to kill them without some down time. The hard part was deciding to take it, because even though logic dictated the need, it didn't lessen the guilt they would feel by 'wasting time in frivolity'.

Finally she looked up at the anxious faces surrounding her and blew out a breath. "All right, everyone. Mark your places and leave things where they are."

She waited until everyone had complied and was looking at her expectantly once more. Gabrielle stood from her place and picked up her journal, then began to make her way down the stairs. The Amazons followed as a matter of course with looks of confusion.

When they reached the ground floor, Nelium came out from behind the counter immediately.

"Gabrielle, is there a problem? Something unsatisfactory?"

"No, Nelium, thanks. We just need to get out for a while. We left our stuff up there, so we'll be back shortly."

Nelium nodded. "We'll make sure it remains undisturbed." Secretly he was glad they were getting out for a while. They had put in more hours in the last fortnight than some of his regular patrons did in a whole year and he had been growing concerned by their paling features and pinched faces. Judging just by the anticipation he could see lurking in their eyes, he was sure this was a good idea.

The Amazons stepped out into golden warmth for the first time in fifteen days and they all drew a sigh of relief as the late afternoon sunshine touched their skin. Being an outdoor people by nature made this assignment difficult from the outset and with what was riding on their shoulders, it became an almost impossible burden to bear.

Gabrielle watched as they each seemed to shed a little of the pall that had been hanging over them and nodded to herself. This had been the right thing to do. Despite the fact that their work was critical to the Nation as a whole, they could not run themselves into the ground doing it. It wouldn't solve anything and was just as likely to make their task impossible.

She turned to them and said, "I want each of you to go into the market for a bit. Relax. Enjoy yourself. Try some new food. When the sun is completely set, meet me back here. We can work a little later tonight, but I think we all need a break away from this place." She made a shooing motion. "G'wan. Have a little fun." Then she stepped around them, headed for the heart of the market.

Gabrielle was gone before they realized it, completely disappeared into the crowd of people that was again roaming the streets in the late afternoon sun. The Amazons were at something of a loss. They'd never had a leader quite like Gabrielle and weren't sure what to make of her now.

It took a full minute before they understood that their Queen, regardless of her immortal status was wandering around in a crowd of potential hostile people with no honor guard and another minute to grasp that that was precisely the way Gabrielle wanted it. With a collective sigh they split into small groups and made their way into the marketplace, more than a little curious to see what this old 'new' land had to offer them.

Gabrielle, meanwhile, was noticing the many changes that had come to this land since her last visit. Especially obvious was the appalling number of Romans out and about. Something was off-kilter here and it made Gabrielle's warrior sense tingle unpleasantly.

Still there wasn't much she could do about it right now besides watch and listen since they were merely walking around like she was, so with eyes peeled and ears open, she went in search of some food.

The afternoon passed pleasantly enough and Gabrielle could feel herself begin to relax as she strolled along the outer banks of the river that ran through the city. The solitude was pure bliss. We needed this... \*I\* needed this she thought to herself. We've been pushing so hard it's a wonder no one has started a fight... or worse. She shook her head to clear it of memories. I'll have to pace us a little better. Won't do anyone any good if....

The thought broke off completely as the copper scent of blood and slaughter reached her nose and sent the nape hairs on her neck standing up in both excitement and fear. It had been a while since she'd fed or fought and the smell reminded her how desperately she needed the blood.

Gabrielle adjusted her grip on her staff, unconsciously setting her steps to those of a hunter that had no desire to be heard in her quest. The hunt caused her senses to change - her hearing and sense of smell became acute and it only took and instant for her body to register the trouble.

There were sounds of fighting... the grunts and groans of human beings hitting and being hit. The clash of metal on metal as weapons clanged together. The sucking wet sound of flesh being impaled. And far off was the acrid smell of smoke as a fire began to rage somewhere.

Without conscious thought, Gabrielle's hold on her staff tightened and adrenaline lent wings to her feet. What she found when she reached the edge of the city astonished her.

Fire was everywhere, illuminating the city to the point of seeming daylight. Romans were thick as a swarm of locusts and just as destructive. Where ever Gabrielle turned her eyes, there were Romans - stealing, killing, destroying.

She felt the rage and this time made no effort to stop it. Instead, she welcomed the burning, feeling her teeth lengthen to meet her need and desire as the scent of blood wafted to her hyper-sensitive nose.

Without a sound she waded into battle, decimating anything and everything in her path. Her staff was swift and sure and killed everyone it touched with a single blow. Methodically she made her way forward towards the library, knowing her Amazons would be there and fearing what she would find.

She came around the corner and stopped dead at the sight before her. The library was engulfed in flames. Gabrielle choked back a cry and let the rage build. The fury of what they had lost held her rooted to the spot. It was only when she noticed her Amazons under attack that she moved forward.

With hard, precise movements she decimated every Roman that came within reach of her staff. Then the unthinkable happened.

Gabrielle knew she had let the rage go too far when a Roman soldier gutted Demetria before her eyes. Immediately she fell on him, sinking her fangs into his neck without thought or hesitation. He reached for her and she clawed him, shredding away his chest. She left a hole in his neck when she ripped her mouth from it, tearing the flesh away down to the bone. He was falling dead to the ground before she realized the consequences of her actions.

She moved to the fallen Captain, her eyes returning to their normal verdant green color even as she sank to the steps to check her wound. The Amazons which had shrank away from her animal fury now tried to stand between their Queen and their fallen comrade. Their shock prevented them from interfering with her ministrations to Demetria, but she could feel the myriad of emotions coursing through them as they inwardly debated their options.

"Don't," was all she said when one raised a sword at her back. The woman hesitated. "There are things here at work you have no possible understanding of."

The woman snorted. "I know you're a bacchae... that means you could have saved any number of us over the years. Just like you could save Demetria now, but I bet you won't. The plague that has fallen on our Nation is probably due to you."

The rest of the women stood open-mouthed, shocked at the woman's audacity, but Gabrielle could see the beginnings of doubt spring up in their eyes even as she continued to work to save Demetria's life.

"In fact," the woman continued, emboldened by her success thus far, "how do we know you're trying to heal her? How do we know she or any of us won't be your next meal?"

Gabrielle turned, unwilling to move her hands from the Captain's body as they persistently fought to keep Demetria alive. But they could all see the banked fire in her eyes spark to life and involuntarily stepped back a pace.

"Never, not once in almost three hundred cycles have I ever been anything but a friend to the Amazon Nation! I have fought with you, cried with you, helped birth your babies and buried your dead! This is the reason I never shared this secret... knowing that you would turn away from me in fear and disgust despite the fact that I never did anything to deserve it!"

She turned away and bit her lip, the pain and anger overwhelming for a moment and she struggled to bring it under control. She ripped a clean bit of her robe off and pressed it against the hole to staunch the blood flow. Then she looked back up at the women who until a few minutes ago she had considered sisters and friends.

"You're right. I could have used this to save those who died over the years, but let me assure you that the cruelty involved in doing so would be more than I can bear. You have NO idea what it's like knowing that I will NEVER find an eternal rest. Why in the name of the gods would I inflict that on people I consider my friends and my family?? Especially knowing the curse that is attached to the immortality!"

Gabrielle turned back to Demetria and noticed that her breathing was less erratic and that the bleeding from her wound had slowed considerably.

"Let me ask you something, Tyra. What makes you think that immortality is such a gift, huh? What makes you think that being a slave to a drive you have no control over is such a wonderful thing? There are days I would give anything to have remained just the simple bard who traveled around with the Warrior Princess and after a time found peace in the Elysian Fields."

She looked at her hands, covered in Demetria's blood, then held them up for the group to see. "Eternity with years upon countless years of bloodshed to look forward to." She stuck her tongue in her cheek and shook her head. "Suddenly it's a lot less appealing, isn't it?"

Gabrielle's shoulders slumped in discouragement and she stared to rise. Though she'd already decided to remain behind for a while, having the option of returning to the Amazons had been one she'd wanted to keep open. Now in all likelihood not only was it closed, but it was just as likely that they would come hunting for her. And she would kill them to stay alive. Despite everything, she was going to survive to find Xena.

Gabrielle turned away from them, stopping only when she felt the slightest pressure on her foot. She looked down to see Demetria's dark eyes looking back at her.

"My Queen?" she whispered.

Gabrielle turned back to the Captain, conscious on a way she had never been before of the blood that covered her.

"What is it Demetria?" asked softly though the sounds of the city burning around them drowned out all other noise, including the screams of the dead and dying.

"Thank you."

"For what?" asked through tears now. She knew that even with all her skill and years of practice, the odds were still extremely slim that Demetria would survive the wound she'd received.

"For letting me choose to die... if it comes to that. I think it takes more courage to live forever than to die a warrior." The Captain coughed, then winced in reflex at the pain it caused. "I cannot imagine living with what you've seen... with what you know. Especially alone." She drew a deep breath. "So thank you."

Gabrielle nodded and let the tears roll silently down her cheek as she patted Demetria's shoulder gently. "You're welcome, my friend. Just live to appreciate it a while longer, hmm?"

Then Gabrielle rose and turned to face the rest of the Amazons.

"I think in light of what has happened here tonight and given your now obvious distrust of me, it would be best C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

if I remain here for a while. I have no desire to inflict myself on you or the Nation and I certainly don't want to cause harm. You can wait til the second ship arrives, which should be in a few days and go home then."

Suddenly she rose up and as though donning a cloak, assumed the look and posture of Royalty.

"I would appreciate it if you could keep what happened tonight between us, though if you feel you can't, heed my words well. I will not hesitate to kill anyone who comes after me in order to stay alive. I have some things to take care of in the future and I fully intend to be there to insure they get done."

"Did you just threaten us?" asked the woman called Tyra.

"No," Gabrielle said regally. "I just gave you a guarantee."

The silence that surrounded them amidst the chaos in the city was profound and Gabrielle let it sink in before she spoke again.

"Now, let's get Demetria back to the inn and see if anything is left of it. She needs more than I can do for her here if she's to have any hope of surviving."

"We can manage...." Tyra started, but was cut off by the Captain's words.

"Thank you, my Queen. I would be honored if you would join us."

The honest warmth of the words easily offset the chill that had run through her veins since her physical attack on the Roman. With only a few mutterings, the Amazons set out to build a travois and were just ready to move the wounded woman when a new set of problems came their way.

Gabrielle stood, once again letting the burning take her to a place she seldom sought and even more rarely used. The Amazons stood amazed for a very long moment, watching the conscious transformation of their usually gentle Queen into the sheer ferocity of a bacchae.

The Romans were now going through the city in small squads, eliminating the remaining pockets of resistance and generally terrorizing those few people still able to fight back. When they came upon the Amazons and saw what had happened to the man they had called centurion, they fell to with a will, expecting an easy conquest.

"Leave us now, children," she spoke in a low, husky voice. "Mama has some business to attend to and it's past your bedtime."

Each of them recognized the wording as a way for Gabrielle to retain some semblance of control until they left. They also understood it was a direct order and made all haste to escape back towards the inn that they had called home during their short stay in Alexandria. They heard her roar and picked up their pace, knowing that Gabrielle had deliberately become something she despised in order to protect their departure.

Surprisingly, their inn, tucked in an inconspicuous little corner two streets off the main road was currently untouched and the Amazons quickly went to their rooms. They placed the ailing Captain on one of the pallets and two of them stayed with her while another pair moved out into the common room.

They waited and called for service and when no one replied, they finally went behind the bar and took what C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

they needed. When the re-entered the room, they noted Demetria's pallor and shallow breathing and went to work, hoping beyond hope they weren't too late.

Meanwhile, Gabrielle had tapped into a part of herself so dark, Ares, or Mars as he was in this time and place, felt the trembling in the essence of force around him. He promised to investigate the cause of the tingling in his spine and the stirring of blood in his veins as soon as the city was secure. There was something almost hauntingly familiar about it, but he was breaking in a new warlord and wanted to watch his prodigy's progress.

The war god sighed. It wasn't like it had been in the old days. Again his thoughts turned to Xena. She had been his most favored chosen and he still missed her... missed her fire and her passion. He even missed her irritating little blonde friend, who in the end had been as much of a warrior in her own right as Xena had.

He mulled the thought over even while his eyes stared unseeingly at the battle around him. It would have been something quite spectacular had he been able to bring Gabrielle into his fold. She would have brought Xena with her and they would have been unstoppable. He sighed again and disappeared, suddenly more interested in searching for the reason behind his disturbing thoughts than remaining with a battle that had become boring and predictable.

Since he wasn't sure what he was searching for, it took Ares a bit of time to find the cause of his excitement. And when he found it, it caused him no small amount of alarm.

"Bacchae?" he said to himself. "I thought we were rid of those when Xena destroyed Bacchus. I wonder if the Romans...." He let the though trail off, taking note of the total destruction that had been wreaked on the bodies strewn around the library. He doubted anyone short of a god would be able to identify what was left as human, much less put names to faces. He briefly wondered if they bodies had been desecrated as a warning. Then he shook his head and returned to what was left of the battle of Alexandria.

Gabrielle didn't take any time or finesse with the soldiers who approached and now surrounded her. This was about life and death pure and simple... her life and their death. Unfortunately, none of them were bright enough to realize that the small woman who stood before them was more than she seemed and they spent a bit of time making lewd comments to and about her.

Finally, Gabrielle had enough and without warning she moved. The bodies of the soldiers were shredded, ruined beyond recognition as she tore through them, unleashing the fury of centuries against Rome without the thought of mercy.

It didn't take long and when she was done, Gabrielle walked away with the thought of needing a bath to rid herself of the stench of Rome that now clung to her skin in a tangible reminder of what she'd done. Her mind refused to dwell on it and the part of her that needed blood to be sated gloried in it. It had been years since it had felt such satisfaction and never had it been so gratifying.

Gabrielle knew in her soul that she would be sickened when her mind had a chance to process what had happened - what she had become and what she had done with the becoming - but for now, she was content with how things stood.

She made her way to the inn and noted that it seemed to be deserted. She hesitated and looked down at herself, knowing that the spectre of her appearance was the thing nightmares were made of. Instead of going in immediately, she took a short detour to the bathing room, dropping her clothing outside the door and locking the door behind her as she crossed the threshold.

Alexandria had some of the most convenient plumbing arrangements she'd found and she took advantage of the fact that this particular inn offered warm showers. For long minutes Gabrielle stood under the running water, letting it rinse away the blood and gore that lingered on her person. Then she took the provided soap and scrubbed, scratching at her skin in a frenzy of cleaning until it was raw and nearly bleeding itself.

Only time spent breathing and meditating brought that impulse under control and she quickly finished up and stepped from the shower, wrapping a towel around her bare body before emerging from the room. She picked up the bag she'd keep with her by habit and wiped the leather surface clean of blood. Then she moved to face the Amazons once more.

Gabrielle stepped into her room, thankful she was alone. The rest of the Amazons insisted that her position as their Queen demanded she was entitled to the privacy of a single room and Gabrielle was happy to let them. She'd grown accustomed to her solitary existence and knew that adjusting to a roommate after all this time that wasn't Xena would be more than a little awkward and uncomfortable for her.

She removed a new set of clothing, thankful she'd had most of hers tailored in the Samurai tradition of trousers beneath the skirt. Gabrielle had foregone them since their arrival in Alexandria, choosing instead to wear the toga fashion that was most common here.

Now however, knowing it would be a fight to get to this ship, assuming it was still in the harbor, she donned the warrior's costume fashioned for her by a master, centuries before.

When she was finished, Gabrielle stood before the small looking glass seeing the reflection of someone she hadn't been in a long time. Her hair was a little longer perhaps and more golden, but the person staring back at her was much the same as the one who'd stood on Mt. Fuji and watched the sun go down.

The day everything changed, she thought absently, knowing that one decision was responsible for the oldness now reflected in her eyes. Though her immortality was what gave her the opportunity to see and do what she had since, the fact that she was alone is what made her feel the age of every single year she had already lived through and all the years she had yet to experience.

Gabrielle sighed, knowing how fruitless such contemplation was, but unable to stop it. The melancholy was only going to get worse until she got past the darkness that had overtaken her and right now there was no time to work through it. Right now her responsibility was to the Amazons and getting them to the harbor and away as quickly and safely as she possibly could.

Gabrielle straightened her shoulders and opened the door, nearly running into a courier who stood just outside with hand poised to knock.

"Nadine?"

The woman flushed and bowed. "My Queen."

Gabrielle quickly adjusted her mental plans, knowing it Nadine was here that the second ship had arrived. She was glad she'd had the foresight to explain to the second crew exactly where they planned to be and how best to find them if they were not there.

"When did you arrive? And where is the ship?" Gabrielle asked as they crossed the hall and she knocked on the door before opening it.

Two Amazons stopped her with raised swords before they realized who it was and nodded to allow her to approach. Gabrielle returned their nod, approving of their discipline and care of their fellow Amazons.

"How is she?" Gabrielle asked softly as she reached the bed that Demetria lay on.

"A little better, I think," Tyra replied, then continued a little more uneasily. "Your quick action outside the library probably saved her life."

Gabrielle accepted the words silently, knowing it was more of a concession than she had expected to get from this particular Amazon. Instead she turned to the woman who had accompanied her into the room.

"We need to get out of here and to the ship as quickly possible."

Nadine nodded. "Captain Eulee found a cove up the coast a ways. It's a bit of a walk, but it was the safest place we could hide in and still have any hope of finding you and getting everyone out of here safely. We can leave as soon as you're ready."

Tyra spoke up. "What about our other ship?"

Nadine shook her head. "It's impossible to tell and even harder to get to the harbor right now. It is awash in Romans and fire." She didn't tell them of the debate that had raged on her own ship when they'd seen the chaos running rampant through the city long before they approached it. It was only when the Captain found a place they could land without being seen that they had agreed to hunting for Gabrielle and their sisters on shore.

"It is gonna be a little crowded," indicating that their stop at the Sinhales Island had been very successful, "but I think under the circumstances everyone will kinda get over it. We need to go soon though. I know everyone was a bit wary of being caught here."

Gabrielle nodded and assumed the reins of command once more.

"If everyone is packed and ready," noting the bags that sat on the small table, "we can get moving. You two," motioning to the two nearest the door, "gather everything together. Tyra, you and Nadine take the travois. That leaves Lisset and me to cover the front and rear. Now Nadine, where exactly is the ship?"

While the small scout gave Gabrielle the directions she needed to find the boat, the rest of the small contingent made ready to leave. And within moments, the group was headed out and away from what was left of the once great city of Alexandria.

They were making good progress, Gabrielle carefully making sure to avoid anyone or anything that would detain them. Demetria had been given a healing draught that put her out and was thus able to make the trip in unknowing comfort. Nadine gave Gabrielle directions occasionally, making sure they stayed on track. And slowly the small troupe made its way to the shore.

The breeze that carried the tang of salt to them was refreshing and helped them to pick up the pace, knowing their escape was near. Just as they saw the ship in the near distance, a shower of rose petals heralded the arrival of an unexpected visitor.

"Hiya, Sweet cheeks!" putting her arms around Gabrielle in a big hug. "How are ya? Man, but I have so totally missed you! Where've you like, been?" taking a look around and seeing the wounded Captain on the pallet. "Ew, like, what happened to the babe?"

The Amazons stopped at the sudden intrusion, never having actually seen a god in the flesh before. Gabrielle wasn't sure whether to be gratified or annoyed. She eased out of Dite's arms.

"Hi, Dite," Gabrielle answered a little stiffly. "Can we talk in a bit? I've got to get these guys to that boat over there so they can get outta here."

"Oh, no problem," the goddess answered, snapping her fingers. In a blink, the small group went from the far side of the beach to the deck of the ship. "There ya go, cutie. All present and accounted for."

"Um, thanks, Aphrodite," Gabrielle said as the Amazons on deck slowly lowered their weapons as they recognized their comrades. "Uh, let me get these guys settled and then, um, maybe we can talk?"

The goddess nodded and moved to stand next to Demetria's pallet. The Amazons stood back respectfully, but watched closely as Aphrodite smoothed the hair from the unconscious woman's face. Her hands trailed down the Captain's body until the reached the wound and they lingered there for a long moment. Without a word, Dite moved away from the woman and went to stand alone on the bow.

A murmur rose from the Amazons, most of them amazed to have seen a god in person. Gabrielle called out instructions and after a moment's hesitation, the Amazons moved to get the ship ready for departure.

It only took a few minutes for Eulee to get everyone settled. It would be a very tight fit on the voyage home, but at least they were all returning and had a new group of sisters joining them. Just as they were ready to cast off, Gabrielle stood before them.

"I wish you all well on your journey. I hope it is speedy and safe."

"You'll not be coming home with us then?"

"No, Dite and I have some things to catch up on. We haven't seen each other in a while. I hope to return at a later time." Gabrielle looked right at Tyra when she spoke and the Amazon bowed her head in acknowledgement. She and the others would keep Gabrielle's secret.

"Queen Gabrielle, is that really the goddess of love?"

Aphrodite turned to face the mass of amazons then and came to stand at Gabrielle's side. "I sure am, babe!"

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There were more mumblings among the women and Dite actually blushed at some of the comments she could make out. Gabrielle chuckled silently, though she blushed as well.

Dite cleared her throat. "Well, it been radically, um... well not fun, but definitely different. You gals rock! I'll make sure ya'll get outta here safe." And with a shower of sparks and rose petals, she and Gabrielle disappeared.

## Chapter XIII

Mount Olympus hadn't changed much in the three hundred cycles since her last visit, Gabrielle pondered idly as she stood at the window. She wasn't sure exactly where she was looking at... it was a beautiful outdoor scene of somewhere she had never been. Beautiful white sand beaches melted into green grass that led to a lake with a waterfall rushing off the side of a mountain.

"Radical, isn't it?" Dite asked as she came into the room. "I put all my faves together in one pic so I could always look out and see what I wanted."

Gabrielle nodded without turning around. "It's nice," she commented absently, letting the breeze stir her hair. Approdite walked up behind her and placed a hand on the longer locks.

"Is something wrong, Gabs? You've changed so much, though your hair reminds me a lot of that young kid from Poteidaia." Aphrodite waited a moment, then drew a deep breath and plunged ahead. "I've really missed you. You've got no idea how surprised I was when you crossed my scrying bowl earlier. Where've you been, babe?"

Aphrodite noted the shaking shoulders and without another word she turned Gabrielle into her and enfolded the bard in an embrace. For the first time in an eternity, Gabrielle returned the hug of another being fully and wept silently as though her heart was breaking. Dite couldn't stop the tears that welled up in her eyes and wiped them away as Gabrielle withdrew from her arms.

"You wanna talk?" was all she said.

Gabrielle nodded. "I'd like that. It'd be nice to be able to talk to someone who understands immortality and what an eternity really is."

Dite nodded but didn't comment. She been alive for an eternity when Gabrielle was born and yet how different it must be for her, the goddess thought. I was born an immortal with the powers of a god and an immortal purpose in life. Gabrielle was born with the expectancy of living and dying a natural human life.

Instead she popped them into her favorite relaxation spot... the hot tub, complete with jet sprays and pink bubbles. With a sigh she settled back and waited for Gabrielle to speak, not understanding until this moment how much she'd missed her interaction with the bard. A sudden thought cause Dite to sit upright and slosh bubbles all over the place. Gabrielle looked at her a little startled.

**Blood Bond** 17/02/2011

"Sorry, babe. Just thought of something." She popped out and a moment later popped back in. Gabrielle blinked in confusion at her sudden burst of energy.

"Cool. Now we're all set for some majorly serious catching up. I just had to make sure Ares couldn't like, you know, waltz in here."

"Waltz?"

"Yeah, you know... c'mon in uninvited. He almost caught you today, ya know. It's how I found you."

"How you found me?" Gabrielle was beginning to feel less than articulate. She wasn't sure if it was her or Aphrodite or her exhaustion or that fact that her mind was beginning to replay the night's episode in her head, but whatever the cause, her coherence was less than what it should have been and she found herself simply repeating the pertinent parts of Dite's words to her.

"Yeah, you know, you like totally disappeared. You didn't take the Amazons to that gnarly little island. I checked and I kept checking. I even looked at all those other little islands and I never like, found you. Where'd you go babe?"

Gabrielle swallowed hard. "You didn't forget about me?" in a small voice.

"No way, cutie. Why would I do something grody like that?" The goddess reached a hand over and brushed the bangs back from Gabrielle's face, placing a light kiss on her forehead. "You're my friend."

The events of the night and three hundred years of loneliness caught up to Gabrielle suddenly and violently. "I think I'm gonna be sick," she said before rushing from the tub. Aphrodite followed her, covering her and wiping her face down and giving her some water when she was done. Then she clothed them both and popped them into the room in her suite that she'd set aside for Gabrielle's use. Gently she tucked the bard in and moved to her own room, lost in thought over Gabrielle's reaction. Twice she arose to sooth the nightmares that plagued Gabrielle's sleep. It was a long time before she closed her own eyes in rest.

Gabrielle had no way of discerning how much time had passed when she finally opened her eyes. She had eventually fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep, though her nightmares returned to her vividly in the light of day. She closed her eyes and held on until the wave of nausea passed. She knew it would fade with time. She just wished it wasn't there to begin with.

With a sigh, the bard rose from the bed and made her way to the shower Dite had set up for her use... after her comment on how she missed the waterfall showers she and Xena had always shared. It wasn't the same, of course... Xena was absent and the water was pleasantly warm, but she enjoyed it anyway and she walked away from it feeling better than she had in a while.

Gabrielle did a little investigating around her room and found that Aphrodite had set up things for her comfort. The goddess's thoughtfulness almost brought her to tears again, but she shook her head and got dressed, determined to find her friend. They'd been apart too long and had a lot of catching up to do.

Aphrodite looked up from her scrying bowl as Gabrielle knocked tentatively on the doorway, removing her

glasses and studying the bard with frank appraisal. What she saw made her smile sadly. Immortality was taking a toll on Gabrielle, as told by the oldness of her eyes. But she looked better for her night's sleep and she was as fit and lean as Aphrodite recalled her being in her youth. Dite smiled. She remembered well several of the gods watching the duo just to see Gabrielle lose a little more clothing each time she got a new outfit.

Gabrielle noted the odd smile and wondered at the cause. But she promptly forgot as Dite bade her enter the workroom. Without further hesitation and feeling sure of her welcome, Gabrielle walked right into Aphrodite's arms and gave her a big hug.

"Good morning, Sweetpea," the goddess commented around the lump in her throat. The affection was totally unexpected and she knew that from Gabrielle, true friendship lay behind the gesture. She kissed the bard's head and smoothed her hair down as she stepped back slightly to catch the green eyes with her own.

"You look better this morning. How ya feelin'?"

"Better. It's good to be here. I've missed you."

"Oh babe!" taking her in another hard, fast embrace. "I've missed you too." Dite stood back and took Gabrielle's hand in her own, leading her away from the scrying bowl and toward a table laden with all of Gabrielle's favorites... or at least the favorites Aphrodite was familiar with.

They are in silence for a bit before Gabrielle leaned back and looked Aphrodite straight in the eye. "I owe you an apology."

Confusion crossed Dite's features. "You do? What for?"

Gabrielle looked down at her plate, putting her bread down and clasping her hands together in her lap. "Doubting you. I knew you would have to hunt for us when we blew so far off course, but when year after year passed and you never came, I just figured you'd...." Slim shoulders shrugged. "I dunno... gotten too busy or forgotten about me."

Aphrodite bit her lips in a sad smile at the forlorn picture Gabrielle presented in this moment. She'd always known the bard as a strong-minded, independent, iron-willed person and the fact that she was still in her right mind after three hundred years of virtual aloneness attested to that fact. But even she... Hades, \*especially\* she understood just how lonely immortality could be. And she admired Gabrielle's spunk in admitting to needing a friend who understood it. It had taken the Olympians the coming of Twilight to admit any sort of need and even then they skewered it until it had almost become their oblivion.

Dite rose from her seat and went round the table to kneel at Gabrielle's side. She reached up one hand a lifted Gabrielle's chin to meet her eyes and covered the bard's clasped hands with the other.

"Oh babe, I NEVER forgot about you, just like you never forgot about me. I just couldn't find you. You disappeared completely off of my screen. As soon as I found you, I popped in. And I gotta tell ya, girlfriend, you were a sight for sore eyes."

Gabrielle gave Aphrodite a genuine, if watery smile. "Really?"

"Absolutely. I was way glad to see you again." She paused and pushed the bangs out of Gabrielle's eyes and C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

popped a chair beneath her. "Getting a little old to be kneeling like that," cheered when she heard Gabrielle's soft chuckle. "So tell me where you've been... what happened."

And for the first time in a very long time, Gabrielle fell into bard mode, and with flair and enthusiasm told the story of the Amazon's journey to their new homeland. By turns, Aphrodite was thrilled, appalled, overwhelmed and joyful. Eventually the tale turned melancholy as Gabrielle spoke of friends who had passed into their afterlife.

Aphrodite could feel the loneliness of Gabrielle's soul and again cursed her brother for the predicament they all, but particularly Gabrielle, found themselves in now. She saw how Gabrielle had withdrawn from the world around her as a way of coping with her isolation from the mortal realm as she knew it. Curiosity tickled in the back of her mind and when the bard paused, Aphrodite spoke up.

"So what brought you back out, Gab? I mean, it sounds like you've totally settled in your new pad."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I think I would have come out eventually. I was beginning to feel um, hemmed in. But a crisis in the Nation brought us out and then Rome once again," her voice hardening, "destroyed years of knowledge and weeks of hard work."

Dite's brows crinkled in concern. "What kind of crisis? Maybe I can help."

"I dunno...."

Aphrodite was profoundly hurt by Gabrielle's lack of faith in her and her abilities. "C'mon Gab... at least let me try."

"Oh, no, Aphrodite," Gabrielle waved a hand to stop the goddess's speech, then she grasped both of Dite's hands gently in her own. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to slight you or your abilities. You know I think you totally rock!"

Aphrodite couldn't help but laugh and forget her mad when Gabrielle smiled up at her in all sincerity with those big green eyes and the cutest blush. She leaned over and kissed Gabrielle's forehead and all was forgiven between them.

"Okay, so ...?"

"I don't know what kind of crisis. I mean, we were here to look for a cure to something that was killing the Nation slowly. I had a list of symptoms to go by, but we still hadn't found out what it was, much less how to cure it," said with more than a hint of bitterness. "I guess I failed the Nation, again."

Dite rose and picked up her glasses, a little annoyed that she actually needed them more than she wanted to admit. She held out a hand to Gabrielle, who clutched it and stood up with a questioning look on her face.

"C'mon. I'll bet we can figure this out. After all... I have the Olympic library at my disposal here and it that doesn't work, well, we can always go to Rome."

Gabrielle's face screwed up in distaste.

"Then again, maybe not," Dite replied lightly and tugged the smaller woman with her to her desk.

Gabrielle would have taken a seat on one side of desk, but Aphrodite continued pulling her around to the working side. With a wave of her hand a map of the known world appeared on the desk top. Gabrielle gazed at it, intrigued by the way it seemed to be lit from within and wondering just how it was managed. But her attention was drawn back to the map itself when Aphrodite started talking again.

"Okay, cutie. This is the world as we know it - Greece, Britannia and the Norselands, Rome, Gaul, Egypt, India and Chin," pointing out each of the places on the map and deliberately omitting Japa. *No need to bring up those memories now*. Nothing but water and clouds cover the remaining squares of the map. "This is the Sinhales Islands," gesturing to the original destination. "So where were you?"

Gabrielle looked at the map, then looked up at the ceiling and closed her eyes. "We made charts once we figured out we weren't going where we thought we were. And we updated them on our way back to Egypt." The bard furrowed her brow in thought. "It was so strange... the stars that I knew so well from my time with Xena all changed. Some of them stood on their heads; others were missing completely; and there were new ones I had never seen before."

Gabrielle opened her eyes and looked at the map again. "From everything we could figure out, we landed somewhere right about...." She pointed to an area almost off the map covered by clouds. "Here."

Aphrodite's brows shot into her hairline. "Are you sure?"

"Can you...?" Gabrielle motioned towards the ceiling. "Can you put the stars above us?"

Dite looked at her strangely, then waved the constellations into being overhead. Gabrielle searched the heavens, spinning until she was sure.

"Okay," she said, removing a bit of parchment from her bag. "This is how they look in the Amazon homeland."

Aphrodite took the scroll and studied it, changing the sky above her until it resembled the sketch she held in her hands.

"Like this?"

Gabrielle studied it carefully before she nodded. "Yep."

Dite took off her glasses and chewed on the earpiece thoughtfully. "All righty then. We need to turn the worldwide god web southeast a bit to see if we can get a reading on this gnarly new place. C'mon."

They walked over to the area that held the wwgw and Dite flipped on the screen. "Kay... if we...." She turned a knob and pushed a couple buttons. "And then we...." Another button. "And then...." She aimed her little block box at the screen. "We should...." She waited a moment, then smacked the side of the monitor. "Oh yeah," Dite said as the picture came through clearly. "That rocks. 'Kay, let's see if we can find us some Amazons."

Gabrielle watched in fascination as the familiar shores of the Nation came into view.

"Cool," Dite said. "Looks like you were totally on target there, cutie. Awesome. Now, let's see if we can find C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

out what is ailing these bodacious babes and figure out how to like, fix it."

They skimmed through the Nation until they came to the healer's hut. It was empty. They moved on to the Regent's hut, the mess hall which only had the cooks in it at this time of day and then they came to the council chambers.

Here sat the leaders of the village, including the healer who was at the moment answering a question from another of the council members.

"Well, I'm sure whatever Queen Gabrielle and the rest come back with will be helpful should we encounter it again, but hopefully it was destroyed by the fire that went through the eastern plain right after they left."

"So you think it was confined to that one area?"

"It appears so, Regent Cylla. It was the one common thing that all the victims shared. We still don't know \*what\* caused it. Buitu tends to think and so do I for that matter, that the fire will have eliminated it. But we can't be sure for a while yet."

Cylla ran her hands through her dark hair. "Well, with any luck then, the fire has taken care of it. At least for now it's gone then and the eastern plain is off limits until further notice. Perhaps the Queen will be able to pinpoint the problem so we know what to look for if this starts happening again."

Dite felt rather than saw Gabrielle's shoulder's drop. "Well," she commented brightly, "the good news is your plague seems to have fixed itself."

Gabrielle nodded forlornly. "The bad news is I gave them nothing and after what happened...." She broke off and Dite didn't wait long to jump in.

"What did happen? I know you like, did something radical to get Ares attention, but I missed a lot of stuff looking for you once I saw you, ya know, cross my screen."

Gabrielle sighed and her shoulders slumped even further than before. "The Amazons found out the truth behind my immortality."

"Oh," was all Dite said, but a world of expression was housed in that single utterance.

"Yeah, oh," Gabrielle repeated. "I had already decided to stay behind, see if you still remembered me or whatever," said with a slight shrug, "but...."

"But that was like having the decision made for you."

"Yeah and I know what we needed was there somewhere. We would have found it." She smiled a little. "It was frustrating, though... that's why we weren't in the library when it went up in flames. We just needed a little break."

Aphrodite sat lost in thought for a moment and Gabrielle's attention went back to what had happened and what she could have done differently. Without warning, Dite rose from her place and took Gabrielle's hand again.

"C'mon. I got an idea."

They went into the vast library that Olympus held... both of them sneezing violently at the amount of dust contained in the large room.

"Guess this place doesn't get used much," Gabrielle commented wryly as she wiped her hands together to rid them of dirt.

"Um, no," Dite replied with a sheepish shrug. "I actually can't remember the last time I was in here. Hmm," she said, looking around at the towers of shelves. Then she apparently came to a decision.

"Here," Dite said, leading Gabrielle to a console. "Ew! Grody! Hang on a sec," and with a wave of her hand, made centuries of dust and neglect simply disappear. She took another look, pleased by the difference. "Muuuuuch better. 'Kay, now... I want you to sit here and.... Oh, you like, don't know how to type yet, I guess."

She pushed the keyboard out of the way and replaced it with a scroll, quill and ink. Gabrielle studied the odd instrument a moment longer before turning to Dite with a serious question.

"Why are the letters all mixed up?"

"Pul-eeze... like anyone would explain that to me. Rumor had it that it was a test Hera devised for Zeus, but really, who knows." She shrugged then waved her hands. "Anyhoo, that so doesn't like, matter right now. Right now, I need you to sit your cute self down and write out every radical detail you can remember about this... thing... illness, plague, whatever... that was messing with your Amazons. Then we'll put it into the web and should have a fix, like pronto."

Gabrielle shook her head, gleaning the important parts of Dite's speech and letting the rest fall to the wayside. She sat down immediately and wet the tip if the quill, dipping it into the ink and beginning to write. She had the symptoms memorized. It wouldn't take long.

Dite went back to her work room, not a little surprised to see Ares waiting outside the door.

"Hey bro! How's it hangin'?"

Ares pushed off the wall and shrugged. "A little to the left," smirking when Dite made a face at his answer. "Hey, you asked."

"TMI, bro... waaaaay TMI."

Ares gave a full out belly laugh. "You know better than to ask."

Dite chuckled. Despite the fact that he was a sincere pain in her ass, she really loved Ares and missed him a lot now that he was in Rome so much. "Yeah, I do." She paused. "So whassup?" hoping Gabrielle would take her time before coming back.

"Not much," he answered, following her into her workroom. "I thought I'd stop in to say hello before I got back to work. The Romans are keeping me busy these days... or I'm keeping them...." He shrugged again and waved a dismissive hand. "Whatever. I, um...." He kicked the ground with the toe of his boot and looked

for all the world like a kid caught with his hand stuck in the cookie jar. "I kinda miss you." Not mentioning the odd feeling in Alexandria that reminded him of home and her.

Aphrodite broke into smiles and sparkles. "Oh Ares, you're such a sweetie." Her eyes became slightly teary. "I miss you too... I miss all you guys. I get a little lonely here by myself sometimes."

"Well, you know, Dite... you could come to Rome." But even as he spoke, he knew she wouldn't.

"No, this is home for me," she said softly. "I get over there a lot, but it's just not the same."

Ares nodded, knowing it for the truth. The Romans took up a lot more time than he'd imagined they would, but he still missed the old days... Greece and Olympus.

He took her in an awkward embrace then stepped away, almost embarrassed at his perceived weakness. "I gotta get back," he said. "Maybe I can get some of the others together and we can come home for a short visit."

"Oh, I'm liking that radical idea, bro! You rock!"

Ares couldn't help the color that suffused his features or the tiny smile that crossed his lips. Despite their differences, Dite was and always would be his favorite. She just had a knack for making him crazy... in the many various incarnations that it was possible to do so.

"So do you. Later!" And he was gone in a field of blue fire before she could respond.

Aphrodite stood rooted to the spot, gazing with tears in her eyes at where he'd been for a timeless moment. Only when Gabrielle cleared her throat behind her did the goddess of love take a deep breath and wiped her eyes none-too-subtlety.

"I, uh... I'm sorry, Dite. If this is a bad time...."

"No, babe. You're timing is fab. I was just, um..." Aphrodite bit her lip, unsure exactly what to say.

Gabrielle shrugged. "Well, I was done kinda quick, but..." when I heard Ares voice, she thought, though she didn't say it out loud, "I decided to look around the library." Her eyes shone in remembered excitement. "I could get lost for days in there."

Dite gave her a genuine smile. "Well, you've got the time. But let's see whatcha got here and take care of business first."

The goddess walked back to her desk, removing the virtual map and replacing it with her god web input screen. It had been quite a surprise to find out that there was land beyond the known world and Dite wondered briefly what other realities they were missing out on. Then she turned her attention back to the matter at hand.

Aphrodite got so completely caught up in what she was doing that she never even heard Gabrielle approach her until the bard laid a hand on her shoulder. Dite looked up, startled.

"Thank you, Aphrodite."

Gabrielle didn't say any more than that, but she really didn't have to. Dite understood what she said and even more what she did say and nodded her acceptance of the sentiment with a smile. Then she drew a deep breath.

"Well, I'll be honest, babe. I haven't found out a whole lot about this. This is something radically new apparently...." Dite smiled sadly at Gabrielle's defeated posture. "I'm gonna do a little more research on this thing though. See if we can at least find out the why behind it... ya know... to keep it from happening again."

"You really think we can, Aphrodite?"

"Well, I think if it's in the scroll bank we will." She paused, pinching her lip before continuing. "The bad news is we were REALLY bad about keeping it up, so...." She shrugged. "We'll keep trying though," patting Gabrielle's arm.

"Now," Dite said, turning towards her screen again before the loud rumble of Gabrielle's empty stomach interrupted her train of though. "Hmm... guess we better feed that beast ya got roaming around in there. You got a taste for anything in particular?"

"Xena," Gabrielle stated without thought, then blushed to the roots of her hair. She scrubbed a hand over her face. "Sorry, I didn't mean to say that."

Aphrodite laughed out loud. "No, but you totally meant it now, didn't you?" taking Gabrielle's hand and leading her towards what in any other place would be called the kitchen. She looked back at the blushing bard. "Hey, it's nothing to be ashamed of. I think... no, I \*KNOW\* what you two have absolutely rocks." She hesitated, then continued. "I uh... can I tell you something honestly, friend to friend?"

The seriousness in her tone brought Gabrielle's head up in concern and she lost her embarrassment in light of Aphrodite's flushed face.

"You can tell me anything. We girls gotta stick together you know."

Aphrodite cupped Gabrielle's cheek and kissed her forehead. Then she turned and started walking back towards the food. Gabrielle waited, a little puzzled, then followed patiently behind, knowing Dite would speak when she was ready. Dite began rummaging up a snack for Gabrielle.

"What I had with Hephie, have with Vulcan as he is now... he's a great guy and I love him a lot. He's always been kind and wonderful. Very loving and caring and even after centuries together, we are still passionate with each other." She looked at Gabrielle to see if she was paying attention, then nodded in satisfaction when the bard motioned for her to continue. Aphrodite set a platter of food in front of her then moved round the bar area and took a seat beside Gabrielle. She purposely looked ahead instead of at Gabrielle, not wanting to influence her thoughts or feelings with her facial expressions.

"Still, you know being the goddess of love, I tend to get around and I never once, EVER found a love like yours and Xena's. Not in the world and not for myself. It made me jealous."

Gabrielle choked as a bite of food went down the wrong pipe as she inhaled too quickly. Aphrodite quickly rapped her on the back to clear the passage. Finally Gabrielle took a deep breath and picked up the water Dite set in front of her.

"Excuse me... sorry. Did you say you were jealous?"

"Yeah," Dite answered, biting her lip. "I mean... it's just... see, Gab, gods don't have soulmates and watching you and Xena together sometimes made us all jealous. Probably why we meddled with ya'll so much."

"Trying to break us up?" Gabrielle asked in an anguished whisper, the loneliness of three hundred years and an eternity alone ahead of her nearly drowning her in the intensity of her pain.

Finally Dite turned and looked at Gabrielle, winding an arm around her shoulder in a gesture of comfort. "Uh uh. Watching you come together stronger and tighter than before. It was... amazing."

"Yeah, right up to that last one."

"Well it would have been pretty fabulous, if it had played out like it was supposed to," Dite answered before waving those thoughts away. "I guess my point is that I understand \*that\* you miss her and \*why\* you miss her and even to some degree, I understand why you can't be with anyone else." Dite shook her head. "Don't think I could give that up, though."

Gabrielle smirked, wanting to get out of the funk she was in and needing to tweak Dite just a little bit. "That's 'cause you never had Xena. Kinda spoils the appetite for anything else."

Gabrielle slid of the stool she'd been perched on and headed back to her room. Aphrodite sat completely still for a moment longer, her jaw swinging loose in shock. Then she spun around and nearly ran to catch up with Gabrielle just outside her door.

"Hey Gab, I don't supposed you'd...."

"Nope."

"Not even...."

"Nope."

But I...."

"Nope."

"It totally rocks to see a love like that," Dite said with another kiss to Gabrielle's head. "I'm glad it happened to an awesome chick like you. Now," before Gabrielle could say a word, "go get some rest. We have a lot to do tomorrow and you want to be fresh starting out."

Gabrielle hadn't realized she was exhausted til the words fell from Dite's lips, but now she couldn't contain the yawn that threatened to break her jaw. She leaned slightly forward and brushed her lips over Aphrodite's cheek.

"Night, Dite," she said before stepping into her room and closing the door softly behind her.

The goddess stood completely still for another minute before turning her footsteps towards her own quarters.

"And it's a total bummer that the goddess of love will never know love like that," she whispered dejectedly before crossing into her own domain.

Gabrielle came back to her surroundings with a start. She smiled in memory at how long it had taken her to see exactly what Aphrodite wasn't saying and vowed to go visit her friend just as soon as she found Xena and they were home together again.

## Chapter XIV

Xena traveled for many days to the east before she came upon signs of civilization *or at least other life* her mind mocked her, knowing that civilization was a very thin veneer for most of humanity. If asked why she'd traveled east, she could have given no answer, save that it was an age old instinct that she followed and the few times she'd ignored that feeling in her gut, she'd paid dearly for it.

However, now she approached the outer edges of the town and noted immediately that she had attracted the attention of \*everyone\*. The stares and whispering made her drop her warrior mask even firmer into place and her expression was inscrutable as she and her two companions crossed into the small town.

It was hardly more than the village Amphipolis had been, she noted wryly. Just a gathering of a few ragged storefronts huddled together on the vast prairie. She looked around slowly, noting that the conversation she could hear was in a language she didn't understand. Her shoulders slumped on the inside, though she gave no indication of the setback in her quest she could feel coming. It was bad enough she had no horse - the tribe needed them for war and she couldn't justify taking one for herself, though the shaman had offered - and now it seemed like the time she had spent learning the language of her adopted people was for naught. The sounds she heard coming from the strangers that surrounded her was unintelligible to her.

The words may have been foreign, but Xena recognized quite easily the gestures that indicated her unwelcome status in the town. A young man stepped forward, his intentions clear in his body language, but before he had the opportunity to touch Xena, he found his hand caught in the vise grip of a panther's jaws.

The man screamed in agony, but no one made a move to help him. Clearly this woman... warrior... Indian... whatever she was... was far more than she appeared to be. Xena spoke softly to the cat and it turned and looked at her with what could only be interpreted as disbelief. She raised an eyebrow at it and with an audible sigh of disgust, the panther opened its jaws and released the human, making sure to lick its lips for every single drop of blood before moving back slightly to stand by its mate.

"Hey," a grizzled old man spoke up from the back of the small crowd. "Ya speak any 'Merican?"

Xena looked at him confused, shaking her head. The crowd watched her a moment more before wandering off, leaving her alone except for one lone middle-aged man and his native wife.

"You Cheyenne?"

Xena pointed to herself. "Xena... Natsêhestahe notaxe."

The woman's eyes widened before she stepped forward. "May I see your marking?" exposing the skin below her right collarbone so Xena could see her own tattoo.

Xena nodded and opened her shirt enough to pull it to the left side. It was a tattoo unlike anything the woman had seen before, though it contained the same claw marks that her own did, identifying their tribe. She reached out a hand to trace the unusual tattoo, then hesitated when a low growling began to emanate from the panther at her feet. The woman smiled unsure at Xena and withdrew her hand.

"She is Cheyenne," the woman said to her husband before turning back to Xena. She pointed to the warrior. "Xena," was all she said. Then she placed a hand on her own chest. "Ari." Then she pointed to the man. "Michael."

Xena nodded to the woman and extended an arm to the man who grasped it in pleased surprise.

"Nenaasêstse!" Ari said softly. Xena eyed her warily, then decided to go with her instinct and trust this woman who spoke the language of the tribe... who was somehow part of the tribe and yet not. Ari pointed to herself once more. "Vovestomosanehe. Ari will teach Xena ways of the white man."

They stood in silence for a time while Xena considered the words and tone. Finally Michael spoke up. "Otahe, Xena. Ari kin help ya."

Before Xena could speak, she felt a soft touch on her knee. Looking down, she saw the fox nuzzling up against her in an oddly familiar manner. Once assured it had Xena's attention, the fox gazed into Xena's eyes trustingly, clearly conveying its thoughts. The panther came to sit behind its mate, as though giving its approval of the couple that patiently waited for her answer.

Without a word, Xena looked back at Ari and Michael, then nodded and motioned for them to lead the way.

Xena wondered at her odd behavior, then realized it had been many, MANY years since she'd been as dependent on others as she was right now. And her much vaunted instincts told her that rampaging through here, wherever \*here\* was, was probably not only a BAD idea, it would more than likely screw up any chance she had to fix things for her and Gabrielle. So she bit her lip and followed Michael and Ari to their wagon, hoping that it wouldn't take her long to learn whatever it was that Ari needed to teach her.

Xena was an apt student and she was eager to learn everything as quickly as she could, knowing that her learning and understanding more about this place was the key to finally start unraveling the puzzle that her life had become.

Xena spent her days learning the language and customs of the place she now called home and came to the realization that this was a real live place and not an afterlife. It was the only thing that made sense in the grand scheme of things and she knew none of the gods she was personally acquainted with was clever enough to come up with an afterlife this elaborate just to torture her. Besides, they would have left her completely alone and she had made friends here. Now it was just a matter of finding out where here was.

After several weeks of intense tutoring and study, Xena asked Ari, "Do you have a map of the known world? I need to see where I am so I can figure out how to get back home." The Indian woman looked at her strangely, but went to find one. She had put the various history texts away, knowing Xena needed to focus on

language and math.

"Whatcha lookin' fer, Ari?" Michael asked as she walked into the small barn where her trunk was stored. She smiled warmly at her husband, thankful he'd been willing to teach her the many years ago when they had first married.

"The histories, Michael. Xena asked for a map."

The man's brows rose to his hairline. The warrior had been quiet during her stay with them... doing her bit to contribute to the household, but otherwise keeping to herself when not engaged in study with Ari. He wondered what she did in her time alone, but found her intensity a little more than he was prepared to deal with and left her to her peace and quiet. Besides, the two spirit guides she'd acquired tended to stick fairly closely and he had no desire to take on that mountain cat.

"Michael?" He came out of his self-imposed trance when his wife called his name again and shook his shoulder gently.

"Sorry, Ari. What?"

"Do you remember where I put the histories?"

Michael rubbed his hand over his unshaven face making a peculiar sawing sound and causing a chuckle to spring from Ari's lips. He smiled sympathetically, loving that sound and then turned to the small boxes that were stacked neatly beside the trunk.

"Didn'tcha put 'em in here?" motioning to the smallest box before bending down to open it. He withdrew several bound volumes and passed them over to her. "Did she say why she wanted 'em?"

Ari frowned. "She said she wanted to know where she was so she could go home."

Now Michael frowned as well. "Okay... that has gotta be the oddest thing I ever heard from a Cheyenne. Hell fire... that's about the damnedest thing I ever heard from anybody. How do ya not know where ya are?"

Ari shrugged. "I do not know, but I did get the distinct impression she was completely serious. Let me get these back to her."

Michael nodded. "Go on. I still gotta feed the stock 'fore I come in." He turned back to his work as Ari rose from the trunk she'd seated herself on when Michael went looking through the boxes. "Hey," he called to her as she reached the barn door. "What's fer supper?"

"Xena brought in a couple rabbits after her hunt last night. I have those on for stew."

Michael nodded his acceptance, but didn't comment. He found it rather odd that the warrior did her hunting at night, but she was successful enough at it that he just let it lie. Ari turned and left, making her way back to the house, where Xena was not-so-patiently waiting.

Xena rose from the chair she'd been sitting in bouncing her legs and twiddling her thumbs in an effort not to pace a rut into the floor or go running across the plains to expend the nervous energy coursing through her body. Her two companions eyed one another, then looked at her warily. They had a far better understanding

of what was coming than Xena possibly could have at that moment.

Ari crossed to the table and motioned Xena to join her, which the warrior did with alacrity. The native woman opened the larger of the books she carried and beckoned Xena closer.

"This is the United States," she said, pointing to the large land mass that filled the map and gestured to the center of it. "And we are here in the Territories."

A flash of fear washed over Xena's features as her mind remembered clearly her tormenting by the Furies. Suddenly she felt like she was being punished by madness again and it was only her iron will that kept her at the table and allowed her to voice the question burning in her mind.

"Ari? Where is the rest of the world? Greece, Brittania, Chin..."

Ari's brow scrunched up in confusion for a moment. "Oh!" she exclaimed and reached for another book. She flipped through the first few pages and Xena's mind was again briefly distracted by the thought of how much Gabrielle would have enjoyed books. Eventually Xena hoped to figure out how they were made so she could do something like that for Gabrielle when she found her again. But that thought brought her back to her current predicament and her forehead creased in anxiety.

Ari was unaware of the multitude of thoughts washing through Xena's mind and set the book down on the table. She placed a hand on Xena's arm when she noticed that the warrior was not looking at the book before pointing again.

Xena shook herself from her thoughts and turned her attention to Ari and the book. She scowled mightily when she realized that a good portion of what she was seeing was unknown to her. Xena focused her attention on Ari's voice.

"Here is Greece and this is um... well this is Great Britain. And here is, uh, China," Ari started uncertainly, hoping these were the places Xena had mentioned. They were the closest facsimiles to the names she had mentioned, at any rate. Xena nodded in recognition. At least some things seemed to be unchanged, but the remainder of the map....

"What are these places?" indication the continent that lay down under all the others and the large land mass in the west. "Wait, this is the United States one you just showed me, isn't it?"

Ari nodded affirmatively. "Yes and the other is a British prison colony called Australia. There are...."

"Ari, when is this place? What's the cycle?" Xena interrupted somewhat frantically.

"Cycle?" Ari puzzled over that for a moment.

"A cycle... the passing of the four seasons."

"Oh, you mean year? It's eighteen thirty-five."

"I don't understand."

"Don't understand what?" Michael asked as he crossed the threshold into the house.

"Eighteen thirty-five."

Michael frowned. "What don't ya understand?" Now despite Michael's appearance and somewhat casual speech, he was actually quite a learned man who had studied and read all he could before moving west to settle. "Here," he continued before she could reply. "Lemme show ya how the Julian calendar works."

"The Julian calendar?"

Michael assumed the posture of a teacher and even his speech inflection changed. "Yes. The birth of Christ changed the way we account for the passage of time and Julius Caesar is credited with the conception of the modern calendar."

The fury that Xena felt at the mention of that name was clearly reflected in her features and the growl she emitted from deep in her chest was echoed by the panther that had been contentedly resting with its partner.

"That bastard gets...." Xena stopped speaking when she realized her reaction was considerably off the scale as far as Michael and Ari were concerned.

"Sorry," she muttered, not bothering to explain and trying to get her mind back on track. "Go ahead."

"Um, yes," Michael said, clearing his throat. "Anyway, according to our modern calendar, one thousand, eight hundred and thirty-five years or what you counted as a full cycle of seasons have passed since the birth of Christ."

Without warning, Xena's knees gave out as the implications of what Michael was saying sank into her mind. It was only her swift reflexes that allowed her to gracefully sink into the chair that had been pushed to one side to allow them to study the map.

Blue eyes grew wide and round and she swallowed several times trying to speak, though coherent thought had completely left her mind. Ari set a glass of water down at her elbow and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Xena," asked with motherly concern, "are you all right? You are so pale you look as though you've had a visit from the Great Spirit."

"I...." Xena croaked before reaching for the glass with shaking hands and draining it. "I'll um... excuse me," was all she managed before she flew out the door and across the vast plain as though Lucifer himself was on her heels.

With Xena's abrupt departure, Michael's teacher persona faded and he fell back into lazy, comfortable speech patterns. "Whaddya s'pose that was all 'bout?"

Ari shook her head, at a complete loss to understand what had happened. "I do not know," she finally said as she crossed to the door and looked out at the rapidly disappearing figure before closing it softly. "I am glad her spirit guides are with her though." Then she moved to the stove and stirred the slowly simmering stew, wondering what demons were chasing the woman warrior she was able to call friend.

How long Xena ran she couldn't have said. She only knew that she didn't stop til the moon was high in the sky and the stitch in her side burned with an intensity she hadn't felt even in Tartarus. She fell into the grass as her breathing slowed, enjoying the cool wetness of the dew against her skin.

Her head came up as two warm soft heads landed with a light thump on her ribcage and she almost had to smile at the glares she was receiving from her two animal friends.

"Don't feel bad, guys. I think I overdid it myself."

Two soft snorts was the only response.

Xena laid back and looked up at the stars, trying to understand the chaos her life had become. *Ever since Japa... Japan...* she thought morosely, remembering the island's marking on Ari's map. *I've become someone I don't even know. When did running from something become my first instinct... my first choice?* 

She thought back, ignoring her still burning side. The best she could figure, she had been in this place and this time about a full cycle and for the most part, she'd stayed off balance in both her perceptions of this world and her reactions to everything around her.

She closed her eyes, the stars reminding her too closely of the last night of peace she'd shared with Gabrielle. Then they popped open in blinding revelation.

"That was it," she whispered to herself, though her two companions raised their heads to look at her. "I have been off balance since that night... so many memories and bad decisions that brought me to the here and now that I am now in. The question is... can I get back to the where and when I belong in? Maybe do things differently?"

She pondered her thoughts aloud. 'Okay, Xena. Time to be the warrior you are and have always been. Time to start acting to make things happen for you instead of reacting to everything around you."

Xena looked down at the fox and panther who gazed back at her in silent satisfaction. "Guess you two have been waiting for me to get with the program, huh?" She laughed lightly. "All right. The first thing I have to discover is how I got here. And to do that, I think I need to go back to where this all started for me."

She stood slowly, wincing until she stretched out the ache in her side. "I think I'll ask Ari if I can read her histories before I leave, though. I need to know what I've missed in eighteen hundred cycles... wait, what did Michael call them? Yips... years. That's it, years. C'mon guys." They started walking back.

"I guess if we're gonna stick together, I should have names to call you. I wish I knew what you called each other." The fox practically smirked at her and she shook her head at how much that expression reminded her of Gabrielle. "Then again," she chuckled, "it's probably a good thing I don't know, huh? C'mon, Red," speaking to the fox, jumping when she felt a nip against the back of her knee. "Hey," glaring down to meet equally brilliant eyes looking back at her. Xena shook her head in patent disbelief. Gabrielle had given her the same outraged look the few times she'd referred to her as 'Red'.

"Okay, then. Maybe not," Xena muttered as the trio resumed their trek across the prairie. "So, not Red... but what then?"

Xena looked back and forth between them as ideas began to run through her mind. *Light, Dark; Yin & Yang; Bard, Warrior;* Xena smiled when she realized where her thoughts were taking her. These two really did reflect so much of what she and Gabrielle had together.

She studied the pair as they sedately walked along beside her. "I know," she said finally, a genuine smile crossing her features. "Since the tribe has made you my spirit guides, I will give you spirit names." Xena turned her attention to the panther.

"I'll call you Etor Anapauo and you," looking at the fox, "will be known as Melo Meion." She paused. "Whaddya think?"

The animals stopped walking, communicating silently with one another before rubbing lightly against Xena's leg. Then they resumed their stride back to Ari and Michael's. At the rate they were going, it would be midday before they arrived.

Xena took their reaction as approval and nodded in acceptance. Then her thoughts turned back to her situation and her growing hunger. It was the blood hunger she felt slowly burning through her body that produced a new line of thought and brought Xena face to face with another fact she had studiously been avoiding up to this point.

Somehow, I have become a bacchae. It is the only explanation that makes sense for the bloodlust that burns like it does.

Her brow furrowed in thought. It's not the same as what I knew before; I haven't taken animal form and the bloodlust itself feels different... not like it felt with Gabrielle. So how and when did this happen and what can I do to change it?

Another thought occurred to her almost immediately. *If this is related to what happened to us with Bacchus, does that mean Gabrielle....* Her mind trailed off, knowing it almost certainly did. Especially remembering the times Gabrielle's bloodlust had come to the fore.

Then Xena stopped dead in her tracks as something else occurred to her. Wait just a damn minute... bacchae were immortal. Does that mean... could it be....

She scrubbed her hands over her face and through her hair in frantic thought. Okay, if we are immortal, then how come we kept dying? Then again... how come we kept coming back to life? And why didn't it work the last time and how in Tartarus did I end up here?

Wait... we couldn't be immortal. Gabrielle didn't drink from the chalice, did she? I know I didn't. Still doesn't explain our continued ability to return to life. AUGH!!!

She grabbed her head in both hands to stop the circular logic that was suddenly giving her a headache. I can worry about that later. I'm still betting my being here ties into the tribe somehow and I'll figure it out when I get back to them and can ask Hotassa some questions. I am still missing more pieces to this puzzle than I've got.

Xena resumed her walk, picking up the pace. She had a better understanding of things than she had even this morning and she'd figure the rest of it out soon enough. After all, if she was right about all this, she had all the

Blood Bond

17/02/2011 time in the world.

It took Xena nearly a month to go through the three history books Ari and Michael owned. She spent a good deal of time helping Michael around the farm, feeling a sort of indebtedness to them for their kindness to her. Besides, Ari had promised her a pair of trousers and a couple shirts if she would stay long enough to help Michael get in the crop. It was the first year in several that it looked like they would have a surplus and they didn't want to lose it to the coming fall weather.

Xena would have stayed anyway... she knew that her tribe would be moving back towards her soon to settle into their winter home. She was also glad to help Michael and Ari. They had been kind to her for no reason than it was the right thing for them to do and she was glad to return that favor. And to be honest with herself, she was looking forward to the clothes Ari had promised.

There were many interesting things in the histories. Most notable to Xena was the fact that there was no mention of her or her exploits in ancient Greece. In fact, very little about that time period received much notice, including Hercules. And the things that were recorded were skewered so as to be almost unrecognizable to someone who actually lived through them.

She read with great curiosity. Many things had happened in the years betwixt and between and Xena wanted to know about all of them.

So she studied and learned, realizing that the world was a very different place than it had been in her day and yet so much of it remained the same.

Most of her evenings were filled with reading and talking to Michael and Ari about the things she had read. They answered all of her questions they could and made it easy for her to understand the different progresses mankind had achieved and the setbacks that had befallen them.

"Michael, how did you learn all these things?" Xena asked one night after they had discussed the ramifications of the War for Independence. He smiled sadly at her.

"I s'pose that's a valid question. As an old man, I've gotten lazy 'bout a lotta things I used ta be p'ticl'r 'bout and really it don't help matters much round these parts to seem to be better'n yer neighbors. But when I was a boy, schooling was very import'nt ta me. I had ta fight long 'n hard ta be able to study, an' I coveted the time I got to do so. So I read 'n I studied ever' minute I could spare from chores. Even got to go to school fer a little bit, 'fore I had ta take care of the farm full time."

"And the books?" Xena asked, knowing from the care they received and the fact that there were so few of them that the printed word was greatly treasured.

Michael shrugged sheepishly. "It's my one vice and Ari indulges it because we can share. We put aside every spare penny we can to buy a new book now and then."

Xena noted again the fire in his eyes and how much his inflection changed when he spoke of books and learning. In that respect, he reminded her greatly of Gabrielle and their many and varied discussions of anything and everything that came to the bard's insatiable attention.

Finally Michael got the courage to ask something that had bugged him from the day Xena had stepped into their lives. He figured the worst she could do would be to refuse to answer.

"Yer not really Cheyenne, are ya?" Michael blurted, drawing both Ari's and Xena's startled eyes to his face. He flushed crimson.

"Michael!! That was rude!!"

Before the man could open his lips to retort, Xena laid a hand on Ari's arm.

"It's all right, Ari."

"But...."

"Really. It's okay and he's right. I wasn't born Cheyenne though they have become my family in this time and place."

An odd choice of words, but true nonetheless, Michael thought. He nodded.

"How did you know?" Xena asked, curious to know what had given her away.

"Little things, mostly. Yer clothing, yer weapons, yer reaction to my guns."

Xena nodded. Her clothing was different from what any of the Cheyenne Nation wore and she'd crafted her weapons in a more traditional Greek method which made the bindings and decorations on them a little more subtle.

The guns, though... that had been a learning experience on a very steep curve.

The noise had been horrendous and it had brought Xena running full throttle towards the sound. She skidded to a halt as Michael lifted the object to his shoulder and after a moment of stillness, thunder rolled across the air once more.

He turned to her then, aware of her presence and smiled. "She's a beaut, eh?" indicating the gun in his hands. "A little somethin' I put together myself. I've never missed with 'er."

Confusion was self evident on Xena's face and Michael walked closer. She reached out a hand and he obliged her by extending the gun for her to take. She did so gingerly, surprised by the weight of it.

"Never seen one 'fore, have ya?"

Xena shook her head while her eyes continued to examine the weapon she held almost negligently in her hands.

"Here," Michael said taking the gun from her. "Lemme show ya."

And he did, patiently explaining every nuance of the gun to Xena, making sure she understood everything about it. By the time he was finished, Xena could have put it together in her sleep and she was more than a little anxious to try to fire it.

He reloaded the gun and put it in her hands as he began explaining once more what she needed to do. Without hesitation, she raised the rifle to her shoulder, sighting a prairie hen in the grass. Michael started to caution her, as they were known for their ability to disappear quickly, but before he could open his mouth, a shot rand out and the hen went down in a heap.

Michael closed his mouth long enough to walk to where the hen had dropped, then his mouth fell open once more. Xena had taken the chicken's head clean off. He looked back at her in surprise, noting she had a pleased smirk on her face. Michael shook his head and collected the rest of the hunt, anxious to get home so Ari could fix up some fried chicken.

"I don't think I ever saw anybody take to a rifle like you did, Xena."

Xena smiled. "I have many skills," she purred and the couple was amazed at the difference the smile made in her demeanor. She had done it so rarely in her stay with them that it was enough of a novelty for them to sit up and take notice.

"How soon will you be leaving us, Xena?" Ari asked. Already the cool winds of October were blowing across the plains and no one wanted her caught alone on the prairie should an early blizzard blow through. But they both knew she was eager to get back to the Cheyenne, though they didn't know her motivation.

"Well, we're done with the harvest," Xena said slowly looking at Michael who nodded back at her. "So whenever you get done sewing, I guess, Ari."

Ari brought a paper wrapped package up from beside her chair. "They are done. You just need to try them on for fit."

Xena took the package carefully and smoothed her hand over the paper. "Thank you, Ari. I don't know how I will repay you."

"You won't," Ari said firmly. "It has been a joy to have you here with us this summer and we hope you won't forget us."

"It's true, Xena," Michael broke in. "I got a lot of things done that normally get put off because of your help. You have more than repaid our kindness."

Xena nodded and cleared her throat awkwardly. "Thank you both. I will head out in the morning then. But I will try to get back out to see you in the spring."

Ari's eyes lit up with her smile, but Michael rose from his place. "Here," said reaching behind the door. "I made this fer ya."

Xena reached up a trembling hand, knowing instinctively what it was.

"Michael, I can't."

"Hush," he said and she blinked at the authority no one except her mother and Gabrielle had ever executed towards her. "I made it for you. Ya'll have to break it in and I don't have much shot 'n powder ta spare. But we'll go ta town tamarra and get a little more so's you kin have some."

Xena's mouth opened to argue, but the look on Michael's face made it seem unwise to argue. So she nodded, reminded again of the many times she'd lost an argument with Gabrielle.

Michael smiled and nodded. "Good. It's settled. We'll go into town with ya in the mornin' then ya kin head out ta the Nation."

The morning held a bittersweet parting for the three and Ari chided Xena like a child as the reached the edge of town.

"Be careful, Xena and try to avoid trouble. The prairies are big and I don't want anything happening to you while you are traveling alone." She and Michael had offered to accompany her to the winter stead, but Xena had politely and firmly turned them down.

"I'll be all right Ari. And we'll come see ya in the spring."

"I will hold you to that," the older woman smiled.

She gave Xena a brief hug which was gently returned. Then Xena and Michael exchanged a handshake before the warrior turned her attention to the road in front of her and headed out to find some answers.

## Chapter XV

Time passes differently in the immortal realm than it does for the rest of humanity and it was very easy for Gabrielle to forget that fact. So it came as quite a surprise to her to find the many changes that had occurred during what to her had been a brief visit with Aphrodite.

The Roman Empire was crumbling. More and more rebellions were springing up, led by insurgents who had grown weary of the oppression of Rome and the whims of her inept emperors.

Still, the Empire had been around for centuries and her hold on the known world was deep and extensive. The rebels needed an edge.

Gabrielle closed up the journal as a cold wind blew across the deck of the ship, and she shivered involuntarily. It was a reminder that autumn was in full swing despite the warm sunshine and she realized for the first time that the sun was rapidly making its descent to the horizon.

Gabrielle rose, smiling to herself at the instant attentiveness of the crew. She nodded to them before removing herself to her stateroom to prepare for the evening meal.

Time has changed many things for me, Xena. I think of you now and wonder how you are adjusting to the differences that are facing you in the life you now suddenly and I imagine, rather abruptly, find yourself surrounded by. I know you will be all right... you're a survivor and it is in your nature to

adapt. Just as it is in my nature to worry about you.

I feel you stronger in my heart, in my very soul and I know that you are nearer to me than you have been for almost eighteen hundred years. I wonder how long it will take for me to find you in this New World, or for you to find me.

Gabrielle grinned at that thought, knowing for a certainty that Xena's Gabsense had rarely failed her. Studiously avoiding thinking of those few times it had, with catastrophic results for both of them.

She arrived at her stateroom and crossed to the bed, setting her journal down before unbuttoning her dress. It was the only non-conventional part of her attire... Gabrielle had all her clothes tailored so she could slip into and out of them with ease alone. She had discovered early on that she could not tolerate anyone in her personal space, even a lady's maid. So she had adjusted her clothing to accommodate her.

Now Gabrielle walked over to the armoire that held her clothing and hung up the dress as she considered what to wear for the evening. A smile crossed her face and she went back to the journal, opening it up to the place she'd left off. Then with a thoughtful look, she returned to the armoire, opening a draw and reverently lifting out the package of silk inside.

Because of Aphrodite's kindness, this particular bit of clothing never wore out, but Gabrielle rarely felt the desire to wear them. Though this bit of her past was very, very distant, Gabrielle's memories of the events that took place on Mt. Fuji were still too fresh and too painful and she was certain they always would be.

Still, they were the basis for what had happened next in her diary and she ran a loving hand along the silk before putting them away and retrieving another trouser set. Her tailor had raised quite an eyebrow before stitching them to her specifications without a word of protest.

Gabrielle slipped into them with a sense of decadent relief. Aside from her nakedness, nothing was as comfortable as the samurai clothing she wore... especially in today's somewhat restrictive society. She shook her head sadly. For ever bit of progress humanity made, it seemed to take step to revert to the stone age. There were things that had changed so drastically that Gabrielle could not believe that humans considered themselves advanced, progressive and civilized.

She looked at the clock, waiting for the expected knock. Every evening at 7:00, the steward would knock and ask where she intended to receive her evening meal. Now Gabrielle had long since grown beyond the need for food, but she never outgrew her enjoyment of it. So she always took a full meal when in the company of other human beings.

It had become quite the game for her to guess which crew member would be her acting steward. Thus far, in the twenty-four days they had been at sea, she had seen the third mate more than any other single crew member, though he was not the sole crewman who functioned as her steward. She wasn't sure if that meant he'd won or lost the dinar toss, though of course she had her suspicions.

She smiled to herself as the third mate's distinctive knock sounded just as the clock struck seven. Gabrielle had never adjusted to telling time by bells and took a small clock with her where ever she traveled.

"Come," she beckoned.

A blonde head poked in the door as soon as it was open far enough and the third mate smiled just slightly

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before he put the professional look on his face.

"Mistress Gabrielle?"

She rolled her eyes. She had tried for weeks to convince the boys of this crew that simply Gabrielle was quite acceptable and in fact preferred. What she didn't know was that the Captain had threatened them with all sorts of unspeakable punishment if he found them to be less than respectful to their passenger. They'd discovered Gabrielle would allow them to address her with a title, though she did tend to shake her head in amused exasperation. Still, it was much easier to live with her amused tolerance than with the Captain's threats, especially since he was more than capable of meting them out.

He knew by her relaxed pose and dress what the answer to his question was, but convention demanded he do her the courtesy of asking.

"Yes, John?"

"Would you like to take your meal in the dining room tonight?"

Gabrielle almost snorted at the formality of it all, remembering the many times she and Xena had sat casually around the campfire sharing a meal they had provided for themselves. A wave of nostalgia swept over her and she rode it out, losing sight of where and when she was for a very long moment. John waited patiently, having had it happen before and expecting it to happen again in the future. For all her beauty and refinement, the woman who now sat before him lost in her thoughts was an eccentric mystery.

The steward watched as the focus returned to her eyes. Gabrielle shook her head to clear it of its memories before she caught John's eye again. "I think I would prefer something light in here... a soup perhaps?"

The blonde man nodded his understanding. It was about what he'd expected. She was given to lighter meals and privacy in the evening, though she had dined with the Captain and crew on several occasions.

She hadn't been told, but the crew fought to be in the dining room when she did join them. Always she would regale them with fanciful stories... so real as to make one almost believe she had actually lived them. Her perspective of history was unique and thoroughly entertaining.

With much haste, the steward made his way to the galley to relay her request to the chief cook. The man didn't seem too surprised and in short order, John returned to Gabrielle's cabin with a laden tray. He was well aware of her preoccupation and quickly settled her in and then excused himself.

Gabrielle waited until the door was closed behind him before locking her door and retrieving her journal, intent on continuing her reading.

Though she would never openly admit it, she was darkly proud of her contribution to the demise of the Roman Empire. She was pretty sure Xena would have been too.

Gabrielle opened the pages of her diary to the place she had marked and her thoughts easily returned to a time fourteen hundred years prior, when the Roman Empire crumbled the first time.

It had been late summer when Gabrielle left Mount Olympus and by the time she reached the mountains of Germania, autumn had a firm hold on the land. In the mountains it was even colder and Gabrielle fully expected to see snow fall any day, though she had already trekked through several spots that appeared to have snow continuously.

She glanced down at herself. When she'd been ready to travel again, she and Aphrodite had set out to clothe and equip her comfortably and efficiently. Even with the changes to her carry bag, she still didn't have a lot of room for extras. The backpack she now bore carried two sets of silk trousers and shirts - one with no sleeves and the other with long. It also held a well oiled cloak and a fur lining she could tie into place when the weather warranted the need for added warmth.

Her sleeping furs had been something of a bulky problem, until together, she and Dite had created a bag she could snuggle down into and tie closed. Gabrielle found it to be quite comfortable, almost to the point of decadence, as Dite had added a bit of down filling. The bard smiled and shook her head. Dite looked out for her almost like Xena would have... seeing to her comfort as a kindness. Now she simply rolled the fur bag into a small bundle and tied it to the pack she carried on her back.

A few medical supplies and a bit of food and Gabrielle was set for her return to the mortal world.

Their parting was tearful, but not unhappy, because they had promised to keep in touch and since Gabrielle had no plans to go sailing, they both felt fairly confident about their ability to keep their promises this time around. So she set out to see what she could see in the mysterious Black Forest of the north.

Gabrielle found ample opportunity to help folks along the way and took the chances offered to her to assist people however she could. Though the greater good and Xena's redemption was no longer a focus of her life, the person she was demanded nothing less of her. She did pick and choose her battles carefully though and took her time moving from place to place.

The morning air was actually a cold that got down into the marrow of Gabrielle's bones and she was loathe to crawl out into it from the warmth of her sleeping bag. She knew it had to be done eventually, though ever her wide awake state wasn't reason enough to jump out of a nice warm bed on a freezing cold morning. Sleeping in, or at least snuggling down was one habit she still maintained after centuries. She had long since realized there was no real reason to jump out of bed before daylight. Everything would still be where it belonged even if she waited to see the sun.

This particular morning, however, found Gabrielle sliding silently out of her little nest well before dawn. The unnerving quiet had awakened her and the stillness had a menace that begged her to investigate.

So without a sound she crept from her bed and slipped into the shadows to discover what was stalking her.

Gabrielle extended her senses and discovered that there were six people surrounding her campsite, men from the scent and weight of their steps. She pulled herself into a high tree and watched as they approached, wondering what they were after.

They were covered in fur and reminded her of someone.... Gabrielle cast her mind back, grateful for the years she'd spent meditating learning to focus and center. She had learned to compartmentalize her life so as not to be overwhelmed by the memories she retained without having to lose them. Now she delved back into the

time she and Xena had been together.

The men were tall, broad-shouldered, like many of the warriors she'd encountered in their travels. They all had long hair and beards and wore animal hide and fur. Their weapons were massive, tending towards the battle axes and hammers that Gabrielle recalled from their time in the Norselands. But these men, especially the one who seemed to be the leader had the look of...

*Vercinix?* she mused. Their familiarity came home to her in a rush and she realized that these were probably his descendants still fighting to be free of Rome.

Okay, but why are they tracking me? Gabrielle overlooked the obvious answers of her trespassing and being an easy target. She knew she wasn't invincible, but after more than four hundred years of living, she found it easy to forget that everyone didn't see her the way she knew herself to be.

Word had come round to the clan that a lone woman had been seen traveling in their territory. This was actually a scouting expedition to find out who she was and what she wanted. They wouldn't put it past Rome to send in a female spy; they'd done it before.

So now they crept into her camp quietly, managing to muffle their exclamations on finding it empty of human life. Gabrielle watched with slowly rising anger as they riffled through her possessions. The lewd gestures as the largest of the men rubbed himself on her sleeping bag and inhaled deeply of her scent ticked her off. When they started digging into her backpack it made her growl and she felt her blood begin to boil. But it was not until they began fighting over her journal that Gabrielle let the rage burn hot and decided to take action.

She jumped from her perch in the tree, immediately on the offensive. The men, who only a moment before had been arguing and making bawdy comments and gestures, suddenly found themselves on the defensive from the warrior who now threatened them.

Bad enough it is gonna take me days of washing to get that smell out, Gabrielle thought as she swung at the man who had rubbed himself all over her sleeping bag. Do you know how long it took us to put that together and how long it will take it to dry? She swung hard, catching the tall man under the chin and dropping him like a rock. But you had to go and mess with my memories. Bad idea there, boys. I don't have anything else left right now and you're not gonna take them from me.

A second man tried to creep up behind her and she kicked back, her foot neatly landing in his mid-section. The 'oof' and whoosh of air the accompanied it made her fairly certain he was doubled over and she spun to face him, her knee striking him in the neck. He was retching as he fell to the ground.

The third assailant ran head first into the butt end of her sai when he tried to sneak up behind her and wrap strong arms around her torso. Gabrielle flung her fist back with the sai facing out and the man crumpled to the ground when his head made solid contact with it.

Unfortunately, his nose was broken in the process and the blood flowed swiftly. Though it had been a while since Gabrielle felt the burning of her blood, the scent that now wafted almost overpoweringly to her caused her eyes to dilate and her teeth began elongating.

The fierceness of her fighting became even more pronounced and it took less than a minute for two of the three remaining men to literally fall at her feet.

The final man, the one she'd pegged as the leader because of his resemblance to Vercinix stood stock still eyeing her warily. Gabrielle could only imagine the sight she made; she could still feel the burning so very close and her teeth were still very sharp as she let her tongue glide gently over them.

She felt his intake of breath when her eyes met his and she closed them, willing herself to calmness. In another moment, she felt her blood cool and she opened her eyes again, knowing by the confused look on the man's face that they were green once more.

Remembering where she was, Gabrielle dug into her plethora of knowledge and spoke to the man in what she hoped was his mother language.

"Who are you? Why are you bothering me?"

The man jutted his chin defiantly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Who are you?" he returned. "Where did you come from and why are you here?"

Without warning, Gabrielle reached out and jabbed him in the neck, effectively applying a pinch she rarely had the need to use anymore.

"I have just cut off the flow of blood to your brain. You answer my questions or I let you die. I am too damn old to put up with centaur manure from troublesome children like you."

The look on the man's face was priceless at her words and Gabrielle would have been quite amused had she not already been annoyed beyond belief.

"My name... is... Norix. We fight... with the people here against... the oppressors... of Rome, much... as our ancestors... did in... Gaul."

Gabrielle watched the blood trickle from Norix's nose with only the slightest flaring of her own nostrils before she released the pinch.

"You do understand I can put the pinch back on you at any time?" She waited for him to bob his head affirmatively. "Good, then you answer my questions and we'll be all right. You don't and I'll let you die. I got five more idiots to deal with here," Gabrielle replied, realizing she sounded a lot like Xena. She frowned and set the thought aside for later study.

Gabrielle cleared her throat. "Now, are you related to Vercinix?"

Norix's eyes blinked wide. "Yes. I am a direct descendant. We formed an alliance with the Germanic peoples to rid them and us of the Roman scourge."

"Why are you bothering me?"

"The Romans have been known to use women as spies. We saw you traveling alone and thought...." He let the thought trail off. "We have never seen a warrior like you, nor clothing like yours. Everything about you is different."

"Don't you think if I was a Roman spy I would of, I dunno... blended in, maybe?"

He had the grace to blush and look sheepish. Then he shrugged his shoulders diffidently. "You still don't belong here." He gestured to her clothing. "You look nothing like any of us."

"So you figured I was an easy target."

"Well, we didn't find what we were expecting at any rate."

Gabrielle snorted. "I'll bet."

"So now what?" Norix asked. "I mean...." He broke off, embarrassed, then cleared his throat and continued at her raised eyebrow questioning look. "Would you be willing to stay... maybe help us?"

"Why?" Gabrielle had her own reasons, of course, but she wanted to hear his justification for asking.

Norix blinked rapidly at the point blank question.

"Um, why what?"

"Why do you want me to help you? Why do you think I would?"

The moaning and groaning of men in pain behind them stopped the conversation for the moment. The two men whose heads she had bashed together rose almost as one, growling when they saw her and preparing to charge. Norix barked at them in a language Gabrielle didn't quite recognize and they halted, confusion sweeping over their faces. Another command and the pair dropped to the ground, cradling their heads in their hands.

"I want you to help us because you are obviously far more skilled than we are and I sense a distinct lack of love loss between yourself and the Roman Empire."

Gabrielle scrunched up her facial features. She couldn't imagine what she'd done or said to convey that impression, though it was undoubtedly true. Norix chuckled at her expression.

"Trust me. If I'd had a chance to see you this close before we attacked, we wouldn't have. There is something in your eyes when Rome is mentioned." He smiled as he saw it again. "It's hard to explain and I could be barking up the wrong tree," here he stroked his hand across his bearded chin. "But I don't think I am."

Gabrielle held his gaze and he was the first to look away.

"As to why I think you would..." he shrugged. "Call it instinct. But you remind me of someone who is part of our legends. Her name was never given that I recall, but she was described as a blonde warrior with the soul of a poet. An avenging angel who traveled with a fierce dark warrior... to right wrongs and bring justice to those who had no hope for justice before. By the stories that have been told, you could easily have been that blonde warrior, except for the fact that she would be about five hundred years old."

Gabrielle didn't blink. "I have done nothing to show you the soul of a poet." She motioned to the men who were scattered around the campsite nursing injuries of various degrees of severity.

"I disagree. You see, the legend also tells of the fact that the blonde warrior does not kill, unlike every other warrior, woman or not, I know of. Not that she can't, but that she chooses not to whenever possible. It was

said she was a bard, a writer and a teller of tales."

Gabrielle shook her head in wonder... knowing for a certainty she had killed by the time she and Xena had met Vercinix and wondering where he had come up with such notions about her. And she spared a brief thought for the innocent she had been even then.

"So you want me to help you based on the fact that I look like someone of legend? A legend that is five hundred years old?"

"No, I want you to help us based on your obvious skill," indicating the same men who were now stirring enough to begin resettling the campsite. Two still lay on the ground out cold. "The Romans are entrenched here. We need something to give us an edge over them and I think you were sent by the gods to give it to us."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. The only god who knew she was alive would never knowingly send her to fight. However....

"I'll make you a deal. I'll stick around for a day or two anyway and see if there is anything for me to contribute here. If it looks like I can help you, I'll stay. If not, I leave with safe passage from your lands. Deal?"

Norix looked at the strong forearm that was thrust towards him by a woman who was far more than she seemed to be. He nodded and accepted her offer.

"Deal," he said.

"Good," she replied as their grips loosened. She looked him over carefully. "I think the first order of business is gonna be to get you some new clothes."

He looked at her as though she'd grown two heads and made the most intelligent reply he could manage.

"Huh?"

The camp was a hive of activity and even the youngest children seemed to have work assigned to them. Gabrielle stood to one side as the men returned to their families and were welcomed with concern and questions.

Norix gathered the warriors to him with a look and a nod and it wasn't long before Gabrielle felt all their eyes turn in her direction. She bore their scrutiny stoically, dredging up from her memories the attitude she'd watched Xena don on occasions like this. Finally, Norix motioned her over realizing belatedly that he still didn't know her name. The largest man in the group chuckled when she approached.

"You really think a bitty thing like that can teach us how to fight, Norix? Maybe you're losing your edge, if she can whip your ass so easily." He hefted a battle axe. "Maybe we need different leadership."

Norix withdrew his sword from its sheath, but was easily moved aside when Gabrielle stepped in front of him with her sais drawn.

Without taking her eyes from the man in front of her Gabrielle said softly," Step aside Norix. I think he needs

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to be taught a lesson in manners."

The big man would have laughed in derision, except he was too busy watching his battle axe fly from his hands and embed itself in a nearby tree. With a snarl, he ran towards Gabrielle, arms outstretched and his large hands cupped to throttle her by the neck. Gabrielle simply sidestepped and stuck her foot out, quirking an eyebrow in amusement when he slid across the ground on his face. Then she stepped back and slid her sais into their place on her boots.

"I've done my part," she said to Norix. "I'm going down to the river to bathe. Let me know when you make a decision."

Without another word or a backwards glance, Gabrielle picked up her backpack and followed her nose to the water.

It was cold but refreshing and she was clean, dried and dressed by the time Norix came looking for her. She smiled at the amount of noise he made in his approach. Apparently he wanted her to know he was coming.

When he reached the break in the forest, he sighed unconsciously with relief. Gabrielle had made her point very nicely and earned both his respect and the respect of those in the camp, including Goram. Norix chuckled as he reviewed the conversation that had just taken place between the tribesmen. Once the big man had gotten past his shock and embarrassment of being bested by a small woman who had completely outclassed him, Goram had quickly become Gabrielle's most enthusiastic supporter.

"Um..." Norix ran a hand over his face. "I just realized I don't know your name."

"My name is Gabrielle."

Norix's face twitched, as though it reminded him of something familiar, then sighed. "Gabrielle, we would like to welcome you to our clan and if you are still willing, we'd like for you to teach us everything you know. We want to be like you."

Gabrielle couldn't control the flinch that traveled her body as her own words to Xena were given back to her, putting her in the role of teacher.

"Did I say something wrong?" Norix asked, his voice full of concern.

Gabrielle shook her head vehemently. "No. No. You just reminded me of something from so long ago, it feels like another lifetime. C'mon," she said before he could open his mouth to respond. Let's get back to camp. We've got work to do."

The men and women were surprised when the very first thing Gabrielle did had nothing to do with fighting. Rather, it was a sewing lesson. Not an easy task considering Gabrielle had never become proficient in the skill. But she was teacher enough to make them understand what they needed to do and within a few days, every warrior was adorned in a new pair of trousers.

There was some complaint about the inconvenience of some personal matters, but the majority quickly came to realize the advantage it gave them in up close and hand-to-hand combat. It was much easier to fight all out

when one was not worried about exposing themselves and they could all appreciate the added warmth and protection pants provided their bodies with from the cold.

Once they were all comfortable with their new, closer-fitting garments, Gabrielle began to educate them in a few of the many disciplines of fighting she had become proficient in during her years of traveling. They were quick to learn, already being warriors and she smiled in memory as she remembered the number of times she'd practiced certain things with her staff just to get it right.

Still can't do that flip though.

Snow began to fall in earnest, but the warriors continued to practice the skills Gabrielle was sharing with them. They were eager to be free men and women, out from under the influence of Rome. This desire made the grueling effort more than worth it.

For her part, Gabrielle watched and instructed, keeping her own council in the mornings and evenings and only joining them as a communal whole when invited. She was well aware that they had questions and she knew that they observed her early morning workouts with something that was a cross between worship and fascination. Still they left her alone in silent observation and Gabrielle was content to let them watch as long as they didn't try to interfere.

They left her alone for the most part when she was not teaching. Gabrielle had made it abundantly clear she valued her privacy greatly and the people tried to respect it. She was grateful, as it made her rare hunting expeditions quick and painless.

Her evenings were still dedicated to her writing. It was a habit she had developed early in her travels with Xena and she found it to be a comfort now... even if she only reread old entries or jotted down a few lines about her day.

So the winter passed slowly as the warriors grew stronger and more confident in their skills. And when spring came, they were ready to meet Rome on their terms.

"Are you sure you won't come with us, Gabrielle? We could use you."

"Norix, this is not my fight. No matter my personal feelings towards Cae... Rome, this is your fight. My work here is done."

Norix nodded. He knew it for the truth. There was something in Gabrielle's eyes that spoke of a reality he could only guess at.

"Can I ask you something?" They were walking to the longhouse together where a celebratory meal had been prepared to wish the warriors well in the upcoming battle.

"You can ask... I don't have to answer."

"Fair enough," he agreed. He stopped walking and turned to face her, wanting to see her eyes when she answered... or not.

"You remember I spoke to you about the legend... the one of the blonde warrior that traveled with a dark warrior?"

Gabrielle nodded warily, wondering where the conversation was leading.

"I did some checking. Not many of the old stories remain. With vandals and the Romans destroying everything they can get their hands on, it's been hard to keep written copies of anything and storytelling has become our way of passing down our folklore and legends."

Gabrielle waited, knowing there was a point being made and almost afraid of what the denouement would be.

"A few, however, have survived and they are kept by a chosen female, who reads them and teaches the stories to the next generation. She has the actual original documents that were written about that particular pair five hundred years ago. In it, the duo are named."

He paused, waiting for a reaction of some sort. When Gabrielle didn't even blink, he continued. "Their names were Xena and Gabrielle"

He felt her indrawn breath only because he was so tuned to her, anticipating a reaction. Otherwise, she gave no sign that anything was amiss.

"And your question?" she asked as the moments ticked by and nothing more was forthcoming.

"You are that Gabrielle, aren't you? Somehow, someway, you have found immortality."

She didn't answer him immediately, but turned and started walking towards the longhouse once again. "What makes you think that?" she finally asked.

He noted she did not deny the truth of his statement and nodded to himself. "Too many similarities," was all he said. "I am the only one who knows, Gabrielle and it will never be spoken of again. You deserve that much peace."

She didn't answer, but she didn't need to. Her lack of a denial had been confirmation enough.

## Chapter XVI

When the rebels achieved their first real victory against the Roman Empire, word spread rapidly to the other rebel clans. Norix was sought out for his secret and he shared the knowledge and skills Gabrielle had taught them. But he did not reveal the bard's participation or whereabouts. He'd promised and though the tribe didn't understand his reasons, they respected his directive and didn't speak of Gabrielle to anyone.

For her part, Gabrielle helped where she could and she watched as the rebels brought the Roman Empire to the point that part of it crumbled completely and the rest reorganized itself into what would become the Byzantine Empire.

She felt her presence before she saw her, but Gabrielle continued to sit and watch as the rebels collected the injured and dead. She would help tend to the wounded shortly, but for now....

Aphrodite watched her for a very long moment before she moved directly behind her and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Some things never change, huh?" Dite said, indicating the battlefield while turning her head to observe Gabrielle's profile. The shrug was slight, but felt nonetheless. "And others," Dite continued as though Gabrielle had answered, "have changed totally. I remember a time when you'd have been in the thick of the fight. When the greater good...."

Gabrielle interrupted. "I gave up the greater good for Lent," said with a sad chuckle.

Aphrodite turned and looked her full in the face. "Do I even wanna like, know?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "Probably not." She turned her attention back to the battlefield, her mind's eye focusing on a battlefield in a different time and place.

Aphrodite noted her absorption and realized where the scene below had taken her friend. Without thought and without consulting Gabrielle, Dite snapped her fingers and the two of them immediately rematerialized in what they referred to as Gabrielle's room.

Gabrielle blinked twice before her gaze focused on the room around them. Then she looked directly at the love goddess and fastened her with a piercing stare.

"Aphrodite?" motioning to the room, then crossed her arms over her chest and waited for an explanation.

"Whoa, babe! Anybody ever tell you you've got majorly killer eyes? Wow!"

Gabrielle simply raised a brow in impatient question and waited.

"Oh! Um... well, ya seemed, you know... totally bummed out there. I figured you were, like, reliving some bogus memories... so I thought, well, you know... especially after that greater good comment and all.... What was that all about anyway? I've never known you to stand aside and watch a fight without, you know, getting radically involved in it."

"I meant what I said... I gave it up for Lent." Gabrielle rushed on before Aphrodite could speak, though her mouth was open and poised to do so. "I still help. I teach people to fight for themselves. I tell stories and help heal the wounded. But I have to survive the next fourteen hundred years without drawing attention to myself."

She moved to the bed flopped down gracelessly. "Heroes are born and die on the battlefield, Aphrodite. And heroes become the things of legend. I won't become a hero. I won't risk calling attention to myself because of the greater good. I have suffered enough for that cause." Here her eyes sparkled with a fire that burned so hot, Dite wanted to check her skin for damage. Instead she held Gabrielle's gaze compassionately, understanding all too well what the greater good had done to her friend.

Gabrielle laid back and closed her eyes, covering them with her arm. 'Besides, I don't want to raise Ares' suspicions and I know he's been around."

"I'm sorry," Aphrodite said quietly.

Gabrielle rolled to her side and leaned up on an elbow. "About what?"

"About Ares. About the greater good. About the fact that you have to live through another fourteen hundred years or so before you can be whole again. About...."

Aphrodite would have gone on, but Gabrielle held up a hand to forestall her speech. "Dite, none of this is your fault and to be honest, it's not even mostly Ares' fault. There are some days that knowing you're here is all that keeps me from going insane. That and knowing that Xena \*is\* alive somewhere in my future and I'm gonna survive to find her and bring her home."

"Do you really believe you can?"

Fierce green eyes turned in Aphrodite's direction and she was once more impressed by the sheer, raw passion contained in the small package that stood before her. "You doubt me?"

"Nope, no ma'am. Not me. Not at all. Uh uh. No, I'm pretty sure Xena's in for a world of hurt when you do catch up with her. Love bites, ya know," chuckling when a knowing blush crept up Gabrielle's face.

"Yeah, I do," Gabrielle answered shyly with a smile. "Up close and personal like."

Aphrodite laughed aloud, glad that Gabrielle was over her funk, at least for the moment. She suspected there would be many more of them before her reunion with Xena. Before she could change the subject, Gabrielle spoke again.

"I really haven't given up the greater good. I've just changed my focus. I teach people what Xena and the Amazons taught me. I think it's better that way. They can take what I teach them and pass it on to others."

Dite nodded. She more than most knew Gabrielle could not completely give up helping others. It was too ingrained in her psyche... too much part and parcel of who she truly was. And she was glad that Gabrielle had found a way to share without going into battle after battle. She knew what Gabrielle had become in Alexandria and the depression she fell into when her Bacchae urges raged out of control. Battle brought the lust out full force and even the talisman Gabrielle wore could not restrain it fully when the hunger burned that hot.

"You want something to eat before I send you back?"

"No, I'm good, thanks, though I wouldn't mind some of those sweet bread rolls for later."

Aphrodite chuckled. "Another convert to the cult of luscious sticky buns. Um, umm," though she blushed a nice shade of pink, leading Gabrielle right down the path that the goddess' thoughts were following.

"Thanks, Aphrodite," Gabrielle muttered. "I'll never be able to eat these without going there again."

"There are worse places to go, ya know."

"Yeah, but I'm not real fond of going there alone. C'mon," she added, raking her hands through her hair.

"Send me back. I've got work to do." Gabrielle smiled to take the sting out of her words.

"Well, if you'd rather do that than go there with me, fine," said teasingly with a bright smile.

"Frankly... well, there are some days that staying here for the next fourteen centuries seems like a real good idea."

"But...."

"But I can't hide out here, Aphrodite. I've never been able to do things the easy way. You know that."

Aphrodite rolled her eyes comically. "Ain't that the truth, sistah! Ya know, you and that hard headed warrior babe partner of yours kept me up more than your share of nights with some of that radical WAY business ya'll kept experimenting with. And I'm not talking about the love stuff either," Dite continued, eyes twinkling.

"Dite!!"

"What?!" the goddess answered with a shrug of her slim shoulders. "It's not like I watched the love stuff." She muttered the last sotto voce. "That wouldn't have given me sleepless nights... well, not the pace-the-floor-in-worry kind, anyway," Dite added impishly.

"DITE!!!" Gabrielle scrubbed at her face, hoping to make the painfully red blush go away faster. She froze when Aphrodite's arms draped around her shoulders.

"Sweetie, do you remember that gnarly little talk we had the last time you were here? 'Bout the love you and Xena share?" Gabrielle nodded. "Hon, that's never gonna like, change, 'kay? But what I meant was well, you know... practically every radical thing ya'll did was done the hard way, \*including\* the falling in love biz. So I totally figured after a few hundred years doing things the hard way's gotta be like ingrained, ya know."

Gabrielle's shoulders shook.

"I'm making this worse, aren't I?" Dite sighed. "I'm sorry, Gab...." But she broke off when Gabrielle pulled back slightly and she could see that the shaking came from laughter and not tears. At least not tears of sorrow, because Gabrielle was wiping away tears of mirth as she pulled back from Dite's arms.

When she recovered her breath, she reached in and gave the love goddess a big hug. "Thank you, Aphrodite. I needed that."

She returned the embrace as fully as she dared. "Needed what, babe?" not sure what the bard referred to, but wanting to make a note for future reference in case it came up again.

"The pep talk, the reminder and the laugh. I really needed that."

"Well, cutie, glad I could oblige ya."

"Thank you, Aphrodite. I love you, ya know."

"Anytime, babe. I love you too." And with a snap of her fingers, Gabrielle was returned to the battlefield that was now empty and devoid of any sign of human occupation. With a sigh, Gabrielle picked up her backpack and headed in the direction she knew the rebel camp to be. It was time again to help pick up the pieces.

"Ya know, Xena," Gabrielle spoke aloud. "It was amazing what the introduction of trousers did for those who opposed Rome. I was actually amazed the Romans didn't pick up on it sooner."

Gabrielle turned back to her diary. "I spent a lot of time on the road then teaching. Healing and fighting skills mostly, but once in awhile I got to do the bard thing. That was always so nice. It reminded me of where I came from and it kept you close, though by then you were nothing more than a fanciful tale... a legend at best."

Gabrielle pushed her diary to one side, picking up the finished tray and placing it on the floor just outside the door. She knew John would walk the corridor periodically to check on her progress and if the tray was outside he would not disturb her, but simply remove it from sight.

She locked the door behind her with a resounding click before returning to the bed and curling up into it. She studied her journal carefully, noting that many of the entries for the next few hundred years were bits and pieces of things that had happened in her everyday life.

### Dear Xena,

I have settled for a bit here in a tiny town whose name is still unknown to me. It doesn't really matter. I can't stay too long in one place for fear of being discovered.

There is an illness running rampant through much of the continent which I think is due to the incessant fighting that continues to be waged on all those who oppose Rome. So, I travel a lot, bringing what comfort I can to those who are suffering.

I have helped establish several hospices and Hippocrates would be proud. They have adopted many of the techniques he advocated. Of course, he learned them from you, but people don't remember that and I don't feel the need to correct them.

Had an interesting thing happen today. I was busy working around the small cabin I have here. It was empty when I came to town and I managed to acquire it rather cheaply. It needed a little fixing up, but it's really very nice; something that would have been just perfect for the two of us, but....

Anyway, I was working outside, planting a few of the wildflowers I found in the nearby meadow around the porch. You know, to give the place a little character. And you can stop rolling your eyes at me now.

So here I am outside, all hot and sweaty because it is quite warm and muggy here right now, when the folks who live in this small town started converging on my home from every conceivable direction.

They didn't seem to be in a panic and were actually chatting and greeting one another jovially. I was at something of a loss, not knowing if this was gonna be trouble for me. Many of the men carried scythes and axes and the women, well... at the time I wasn't sure what they had in their hands.

Suddenly I found myself surrounded by neighbors. People who wanted to pitch in and lend a hand to help get me settled because it was the right thing to do. I have to admit that it was nice to be on the receiving end of that experience for a change.

I think I will make some good friends here, though I can already see that I am going to have to be careful. There has already been some indication of interest from a couple of the eligible men. (Don't ask) I have tried to make it clear that the return interest is not there, but we'll see how that goes.

It was a nice day though. Very different than what I have been used to. It is nice to be settled, even if only for a little while and it is even nicer to be welcomed as part of the community. I think you would have been happy here. I know we would have been, even if it was only temporary.

I love you Xena. Good night.

Dear Xena.

There seems to be a new religion popping up. I'm not sure I understand all the nuances, but to be very honest, I have given up religion as a concept. I know that there is a higher power... I have met several of them. But I don't like what religion tends to do to normal, thinking people.

This new prophet though, Muhammad, I think his name is? He's a very nice man. We have shared several enlightening conversations on a variety of subjects. He's very firm in his beliefs and yet he is open to discussion about them. He reminds me a lot of Eli in that respect.

I wonder if he will have the same sort of ending that Eli had. Seems like religion is full of martyrs and there are a lot of people out there who want Muhammad dead for his teachings.

Wonder how many holy wars this will start?

I love and miss you still.

Dear Xena,

I want a world wide god web of my own. Aphrodite has forbidden me access to hers for a while. This has got to be the most interesting thing I have ever seen.

I can't use it without her, of course. It's hers and set up under her accounts and passwords. Just as well, I suppose. It would totally bite if Ares figured out I was alive because of this gnarly thing.

I just went back and re-read that last sentence. I think I may have overstayed my welcome this time. I am so beginning to sound like Dite.

I needed a break so badly though. I never thought how hard it would be going from day to day, month to month, year to year with no roots, no real friends, no family to speak of. I can't visit our descendants. There is simply no logical way to explain who I am or how and why I feel the need to

visit. And it is difficult to make friends when my immortality forever forces me to move on before people start asking questions.

Anyway, back to the god web. They finally got at least part of the linking problem solved and we were able to talk to all the gods who monitor the web. This has been really nice for Dite as it allows her to keep in touch with her family in Rome much easier.

Given what she's said though, they may all be returning to Olympus sooner than later. Seems their support base in Rome is waning as well and they would all be more comfortable at home, which they all consider Greece to be.

I keep getting side-tracked. Sometimes I wonder if my age has caught up with my mind, if not my body. I suppose it was a good thing that I became an immortal so young. I would have hated to have it happen when I was old and unable to do for myself any more.

Still, it is hard to keep my mind on track some days. There are just so many memories, so much information running around in my brain that I have to decompress here for a while and with the god web, it's a lot of fun.

There are these chat rooms where all the gods go to talk together. That is actually interesting. Seems they all have the same problems, but this gives them a place to discuss solutions. Some of the conversations are so funny... they sound almost human.

It's made me realize that whether we want to admit it or not, the gods are a LOT like us. Too much, probably. The biggest difference between us and them is their immortality and powers. They still have questions, get confused, angry, hurt... they make mistakes and don't always do the right thing.

Their worst problem seems to be boredom. Until the god web finally let them connect a little more readily with each other, mankind was the biggest play toy they had. (Stop growling. I know how you feel about that and truthfully, so do I. But at least I have a better understanding about it now. Immortality is a lot harder to endure than you might imagine.)

So the god web has let them find other avenues of interest to pursue. Besides the chat rooms, they have all kinds of research avenues, games to play and lives to watch. They even have a monthly 'casino' night where they get together and gamble. I'm not sure that's a good idea, but it hasn't sparked any major wars... yet.

I have to go. Dite is knocking on the door. We are doing something she called a makeover today.

Love you always.

Dear Xena,

Never let a bored goddess near your hair. I haven't been this many hair colors in four hundred years.

You remember how my hair color seemed to change every few months during the first years we traveled together? It was blonde, then auburn, then gold, then platinum and finally back to blonde,

right? A lot of change, considering, but nothing too far out of the ordinary.

Well, Dite got adventuresome today. It was maroon, yellow, purple, green, blue, black, silver, chartreuse, flaming red and at one point, a complete rainbow.

She made it spiky, curly, long, shoulder length, barely there and some of the styles... I could have gone all my life without seeing what Dite termed a 'Mohawk'. That was so not me. It was good for a laugh or two though I'm not sure my hair will ever be the same. It's tired.

In point of fact though, so am I. I think it is time to get back on the road again to see what I can see. Wonder what has changed since I was out the last time.

Holding you close in my heart.

### Dear Xena.

I was walking up the road today when I heard a cry for help. A young boy was stuck in a tree and couldn't get his foot loose from the place he'd wedged it into. He was trying to collect some nuts and had wedged it into place to keep from slipping.

*Great idea until he was ready to get down and found himself stuck.* 

So I climbed up and helped him down. Then he took me home to his folks who fed me and put me up for the night as their way of saying thanks.

It's nice to be out on the road again. I've missed it more than I ever imagined I would. But not nearly as much as I continue to miss you.

#### Dear Xena.

This has just been one of those days. Not one thing has gone right. From being awakened this morning by bandits, to stepping in a hornets nest hidden in the ground, my day has gone steadily downhill.

It really did start with bandits trying to creep into my campsite before daybreak. You'd think they could figure out that bathing would help, but no... I could smell them almost as soon as I heard them. Great way to start my morning and it got the blood flowing a little too much. It made me twitchy.

Unfortunately, the need to get them turned in to the nearest constabulary made it impossible to take care of that need immediately and my distraction because of it is what probably caused the rest of my day to go bad.

There was actually a reward for those smelly men and I took it, knowing I could do some good with it... or at least thinking I could. Have you ever heard the saying about the best laid plans of mice and men?

Suffice it to say that after being chased across a field by an angry bull, stepping in the hornet's nest, nearly being flattened by a boulder and trying not to kill a blind man who tried to accost me when he thought I was stealing from him, I have taken a tiny bit of that reward money and used it on myself. Tomorrow, I will see about distributing the remainder to those in need here.

But tonight, I am sitting in a warm tub watching the hornet welts disappear, feeling the soreness in my muscles slowly dissolve. You would think at my age they wouldn't get sore anymore, but they do and I miss having you massage the kinks out after a day like today.

Anyway, my blood need has been satisfied, I have a hot meal and a comfortable bed to look forward to and we will hope that tomorrow is a much better day.

See you in my dreams.

Dear Xena,

I am going back to Chin... China as it is now referred to. There is still so much of that country I haven't seen. Who knows... maybe I'll walk that Great Wall they've got.

I have a ways to go before I get there and there are so many people to talk to and help along the way. Good thing I have plenty of time to do so.

Lao Ma's line has passed out of power from what I have heard and a family known as the T'ang dynasty is now the ruling house. They have brought prosperity to the nation, but I am not sure about their politics. I may have to be more careful. We'll see.

I miss you Xena. At least I'm almost halfway to you now.

Gabrielle's smile was melancholy as she returned back to the present. She remembered that trip very well. It was the first time a book was printed in mass quantities to be distributed for the reading enjoyment of all those who could. Gabrielle was thankful for the time Xena had spent patiently teaching her both the spoken and written languages of Lao Ma's people.

When she entered the land of China, Gabrielle was forced to don her samurai gear once more. It got her a few more fights, but it also settled any question of skill anyone had about her because she did have the skill and knowledge to back up her claim of samurai.

She felt herself fall back into the role of warrior with ease and found herself grudgingly accepted by the male dominated society. It was difficulty to argue with a woman who could separate your head from your body with a look, a word or the touch of her blade to your throat.

Slowly word spread of a female warrior, though description of her varied from place to place. Sometimes she C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

was as tall as the trees that grew in the deep forests. Others she was said to be a broad as the mountains that were in the North. Still others claimed she had eyes that flamed and hair of fire.

Gabrielle smirked when she heard that one. Given what Dite had done to her hair, anything was possible, though it had been enough years that it would have grown back to its natural color long before, even if Dite hadn't restored it before Gabrielle had taken her leave once again.

So Gabrielle walked through the streets unrecognized but unmolested because of the blade she wore at he back. She figured folks saw the blade first, last and always and the one who wielded it became secondary to it.

It was while she was in the marketplace that she made an amazing discovery.

A young man stood on a corner, offering pieces of what appeared to be several thin parchments or reeds of some sort to anyone who would take them. Not many did, the ability to read was not prevalent in this society, but Gabrielle's curiosity got the better of her.

She crossed the street and put out her hand for a packet. The young man squinted at her, looking her carefully up and down.

"Lady can read? Can read Chinese?"

Gabrielle bowed and nodded her head. "Hai. Several different dialects, in fact," she responded in his native tongue.

The man studied her skeptically the held up a scroll for her perusal. He pointed to the text. "Read," he commanded.

Gabrielle would have smirked but for her amazement at what she was seeing. Instead of being written out by hand, this paper, as Gabrielle could now see that it was, had actually been printed out by carved wooden blocks. She had of course heard of both the invention of this new paper as well as the use of blocks for printing instead of writing by hand, but this was her first opportunity to experience it first hand. Even more clever was the fact that it was some sort of flat book, instead of the more common scroll.

"Lady, you read now!" the youth impatiently instructed her.

Gabrielle had the overwhelming urge to smack him into next week. Instead, she held his eyes until he looked away, then reverently took the papers into her hands. "The Convocation of the Assembly," she began. "Thus I have heard. Upon a time when Buddha sojourned...."

She would have continued but the young man snatched the book from her. She looked at him quizzically.

"How is it you know such things?" he asked with slight accusation in his tone.

"I was taught many years ago, from the Book of Lao."

"You know of the book of Lao?"

"Hai. I learned great wisdom from its pages."

The man looked like he wanted to dispute her words, but she had already proven her reading skill. Instead, he stretched forth his hand and offered her the booklet. Gabrielle thanked him with a gracious nod and a bow of her head. Then she moved back into the crowd of the marketplace and disappeared.

Gabrielle was a little disappointed that it seemed to be mostly a religious text, though she appreciated several of its concepts. And she was completely enthralled with this new method of sharing stories and ideas. Books could be the wave of the future.

# Chapter XVII

"What are you thinking, Little Dragon Warrior?"

Gabrielle started at the unexpected voice and swiveled her head in the direction the sound came from. Then she openly stared at the beautiful woman who sat tranquilly beside her.

The woman returned her stare without blinking and Gabrielle saw many things in the brown, almond shaped eyes that gazed into her very soul. Finally, she turned away, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking out over the river at the great statue of Buddha. "It's just that I have not heard that name in a very long time."

"Almost an entire millennia, I believe. A very long time to have been alone."

Gabrielle's eyes hardened. "Do I know you?"

"No, Gabrielle. But we share a mutual friend." Gabrielle's brow rose in question and Ch'uang-Mu smiled at the recognized gesture. Aphrodite had spent considerable time sharing this particular tale with the goddess and Ch'uang-Mu had been fascinated by the story as it had unfolded. Nowhere else in the vast archives of the world wide god web had anything been as interesting to watch... or as painful to endure.

Now sitting face-to-face with one half of the personalities involved in that story, she could easily see why Aphrodite was so fascinated by them both. There was an underlying strength that lent character to Gabrielle's features and yet her beauty was wrapped in sensitivity as well. It was a rare combination and Ch'uang-Mu wished she could meet this soul's other half.

When she noticed the second brow rise to meet the first, Ch'uang-Mu realized she had been staring while Gabrielle waited for an answer. She bowed her head in muted apology.

"A thousand pardons, Gabrielle. Your story is simply amazing and I got lost thinking about it when I finally saw you face-to-face, as it were."

"Oookaaaaay," Gabrielle replied, drawing the word out. "That still doesn't explain anything to me nor does it tell me who you are."

"Hiya, Sweetcheeks! What's shakin'?"

Gabrielle looked at Aphrodite, then at Ch'uang-Mu and noted their close proximity to one another. "Let me guess... our mutual friend?"

Ch'uang-Mu flushed slightly and nodded, but did not move away from the love goddess from Greece. Gabrielle reached out to draw Aphrodite into a hug. Now the Chinese goddess stepped aside, knowing these two old friends needed to reconnect again. The embrace was long as it had been a little while since Gabrielle's last visit to Olympus. The Greek gods had begun spending more time there again and less in Rome and that made it harder for her to stay.

"I've missed you, Cutie," Aphrodite whispered with a kiss to the top of Gabrielle's head. "And one of these days you've gotta like, share your secret with me."

Gabrielle pulled back just enough to be able to look Dite in the eye. "What secret?" genuinely confused, but thoroughly glad to see Dite nonetheless.

Dite took a big sniff and grinned. "\*That\* secret. The 'you always smell great' secret," remembering all too well her own smelly experience with being all too human.

Gabrielle laughed and blushed, mindful that they still had an audience. "Dite, I don't always smell great. Especially after a long day of working, or fighting, or even just walking. You just happened to catch me right after a bath."

The goddess narrowed her eyes. "Uh huh. Sure. Tell it to somebody that hasn't smelled you for nearly a millennia, less a century or so. I think you've just got great pheromones."

"Dite!! I think you're just trying to embarrass me!" Bur Gabrielle couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up.

"Nope, I'm just trying to steal your secret." She wiggled her eyebrows rakishly. "Wanna share pheromones?"

Gabrielle didn't respond at first, except to simply cover her eyes and laugh. When she finally got herself under control, she looked at Dite seriously and said, "You need to get out more."

Ch'uang-Mu spoke up. "That is what \*I\* told her," with just the slimmest edge of jealousy. Gabrielle tilted her head slightly, as though trying to figure out the inflection and why it seemed to be directed at her. It was then that Ch'uang-Mu realized the truth and smiled gracefully. "Maybe now she'll believe me," said with a more genuine smile.

Dite planted her hands on her hips and pouted. "Ya'll are like, pickin' on me."

"Nah," Gabrielle replied saucily. "But I bet we could if we tried."

"Hmph. Maybe I shouldn't introduce the two of you. Might be radically dangerous for me."

"You might enjoy it," Ch'uang-Mu teased.

Dite looked between the two of them and leered. "Hmm... two beautiful babes. Oh yeah, the things I suffer through in the name of love."

Twin expressions, complete with a single raised brow faced her and Aphrodite chuckled. "You guys are so C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

totally priceless. Ch'uang-Mu, Chinese goddess of things in the bedroom, meet Gabrielle, bitchin' immortal bard, warrior and teacher."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Gabrielle. Aphrodite really has told me all about you."

"Oh?"

"Yep," Dite took up the conversation. "With it being so radically hard for you to get to Olympus these days, I figured it might be nice to have someone on this side of the world who you could talk to when I can't like, you know, get away. Ch'uang-Mu and I have been friends for a long time and since we both do the love thing, we talk a lot."

"Aphrodite shared your story with me, Gabrielle and I'd like to be your friend, if you'll let me. But I certainly won't impose if it makes you uncomfortable."

Gabrielle studied the two of them for a long moment. She saw nothing but an earnest desire for friendship coming from Ch'uang-Mu and a caring, hopeful expression on Dite's face.

"I'd like another friend," she said finally. "Immortality ain't all it's cracked up to be."

"Ah, truer words were never spoken," Ch'uang-Mu said, then chuckled. "Humans think we have it so easy and yet...." She looked at Gabrielle. "And somehow, I think it is worse for you than for us. We still have duties and responsibilities and of course, the god web." The last was added a bit impishly.

"Totally rockin', babes. Although," Dite added in an aside to Ch'uang that she made certain Gabrielle would hear. "Ya prob'ly shouldn't let that one on the god web alone," gesturing towards the bard. "You remember the great crash we had a while back...." Dite let her words trail off thought her eyes conveyed precisely what she was talking about.

Ch'uang's almond eyes grew almost comically round as she realized exactly what incident Aphrodite was referring to. "Oh my," she said as she focused on Gabrielle. "That was you?"

Gabrielle turned a shade of scarlet so deep, Ch'uang expected to see blood on the outside of her skin. And she remained that color longer than a human being should have been able to maintain it.

"I have to say, Gabrielle, it really was quite a work of art you managed. Not something I'd necessarily like to see again, but it was a masterpiece unto itself. I do not believe I have ever seen that many snarls on the network since its inception."

Gabrielle scrubbed her face. "It was an accident," she muttered.

Ch'uang placed a hand on the bard's shoulder. "Of that much, we were ALL sure. I don't think it could have been done intentionally. Do you know what you did?"

"Not exactly," she continued to mumbled, her eyes still on the ground. "I pushed the wrong button."

"Well, if you don't mind sharing, we can surf the god web together from time to time. I have to keep an eye on this one," jerking her thumb in Aphrodite's direction.

"HEY!!! I'm a good goddess, ya know!!"

"I know," Ch'uang smirked, feeling a bit playful now that her jealousy had been put aside. "That is why I have to keep an eye on you."

"Hmph," Dite pouted, but couldn't stop the smile or the twinkle that crossed her face. "C'mon. I'm hungry and I think the Little Dragon Warrior is prob'ly in need of sustenance by now as well."

"Please don't call me that," Gabrielle said unexpectedly. "I know you don't either one mean anything by it, but none of the memories I have of that name are good ones."

Both goddesses looked a little stunned at her pronouncement. They had only recently met face to face as it were and had been developing a real friendship and respect, though it was clear there would probably be more between them sooner rather than later. They had forgotten though that Gabrielle wasn't part of the little trysts that were common in their existence and that name especially reminded her of just how alone she was in the world.

"Sorry, babe," Aphrodite said in a subdued voice. "I just...." Dite broke off, not sure what else to say.

"I, too, apologize, Gabrielle. The name just seemed so suited to you. I did not stop to think how many unhappy memories you associated with it."

"It's all right, really," Gabrielle replied, feeling a little conspicuous about having reacted so strongly. "I just prefer Gabrielle, although 'Cutie' is kinda nice too."

Dite brightened considerably. "Gnarly, dudette. Now," as three stomachs growled in tandem. "Let's go eat. There is this majorly fab Sichuan place that has the most radical Gongbao chicken you have ever tasted."

Ch'uang-Mu nodded. "I know the place of which you speak... and they deliver." With a wave of her hand, the trio disappeared.

Aphrodite stayed around for a little while once they adjourned to Ch'uang's palace to insure that Gabrielle was secure in Ch'uang's company. Then made haste to get back to Greece, not wanting anyone to become suspicious of her absence and hoping like Tartarus she'd made the right decision in trusting the Chinese goddess.

Meanwhile, Gabrielle and Ch'uang were beginning to know one another and both discovered much to like and admire about the other. Gabrielle found Ch'uang reminded her greatly of Lao Ma and realized it was much easier to like her when Xena's past wasn't between them.

Ch'uang was much more reserved than Aphrodite, but Gabrielle discovered she had a very sly sense of humor. So a bit of time passed for Gabrielle as she and Ch'uang became acquainted and Gabrielle learned many things about the Chinese culture.

Finally, Ch'uang mentioned that the Chinese New Year was approaching and with the coming of a new millennium, the people were going all out to celebrate.

"Good grief!! I have been here over a century??" Gabrielle wasn't sure whether to be appalled, annoyed or amazed. It really hadn't seemed that long and she had learned so much about not only China, but many of the different lands surrounding the country.

She had taken many short field trips, going in and out of places like a spectre or wraith, but a goodly portion of her time had been spent in Ch'uang's palace reading and learning.

"I need to get out... go back on the road. The little side trips I've made aren't enough."

"Enough for what, Gabrielle? You're not seeking redemption... yours or Xena's. There is no reason you should have to suffer through any more of humanity's growing pains than necessary. Why do you feel the need to continually put yourself out there? You have a home here."

Gabrielle sighed almost silently. "Ch'uang, I am thankful for your hospitality and you giving me a place to be safe for a while. But this is not my home."

Ch'uang looked down at the floor, a crestfallen expression crossing her face. "I am sorry, Gabrielle. I am being selfish. Having you here has been so much fun for me... a breath of fresh air. You see and appreciate things that most of us take for granted or have forgotten about. It has been wonderful to experience things through your eyes."

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful, because I have really enjoyed my time here with you. This culture has been a joy to learn about and be a part of, but I really can't \*live\* here indefinitely." She paused to blow out a breath and ran her hands through her hair.

"It's hard to explain, especially to someone like you who actually needs to stay. There is a part of me that needs to be on the road helping people. Even in all the quick little side trips I took, I tried to take the time to help others." Gabrielle shrugged. "It's just part of who I am."

Ch'uang nodded. "I know... I watched you." She smiled tremulously at the bard and held out a hand. "I will miss having you here though. Now come," she said almost imperiously. "In all the time you have been with us, you have not gotten your zodiac reading. You must do that before the new millennium."

"How come?"

Ch'uang raised an eyebrow. "Because I said so." Then she chuckled. "Besides, it is a lot of fun. I think you will find it interesting. And afterward, we will go sit on the roof and watch the fireworks display." She hesitated then went on more softly. "Aphrodite promised to be here."

Gabrielle's eyes lit up. Nice as Ch'uang had been and though their circumstances had definitely grown a strong friendship between she and Gabrielle, the bard still missed Aphrodite's somewhat constant presence in her life.

The Greek/Roman gods had mostly fallen out of favor with people and though they were still alive, their powers were greatly diminished. Most of them had chosen to come home to Greece to live in comfort and relative boredom.

Aphrodite was still quite active and since she drew her strength for the power of love itself, she was also much stronger than all but Ares. Love and war seemed to be the two most constant, consistent forces in the

world and it enabled the two of them to continue to function more normally than the rest, though they could both feel a distinct difference in the potency of their powers.

So they still traveled and did what they could, though it wasn't at nearly the intensity that it had been in their heyday.

Aphrodite had gone to China twice in the time that Gabrielle had been there. Once she'd been gone mountain climbing in Tibet, though when Dite got a good look at the mountain, she had to wonder about the prudence of her actions, even if Gabrielle was an immortal. Seemed like an awful lot of work just to go to the top. But she was happy that Gabrielle was staying busy, since that more than anything besides Xena tended to make her happy.

The second time had been almost awkward for Dite, though she realized that feeling was all on her side and probably due to her own jealousy. Seeing Ch'uang and Gabrielle happy together, even though she knew there was nothing more than friendship between them, made the little green monster want to come out and play. But Dite remembered all too clearly what that particular emotion had done to Cupid and she deliberately set it aside. Then found that her feelings were completely ungrounded as she was welcomed heartily by both women. It had been the most fun she'd had in ages and Aphrodite was looking forward to returning for the millennium.

Gabrielle was happy and Ch'uang could clearly see the difference in the bard's demeanor at her pronouncement.

"I guess you have missed her?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah. We've been friends for a long time and I do miss getting to talk to her. The god web thing just isn't the same."

Ch'uang chuckled. "Agreed. I too am looking forward to her visit. She has a way of bringing her own fun."

Gabrielle laughed. "Oh yeah." Then the two of them meandered down towards the temple library.

"I cannot believe we haven't done this already. Did you read about the Chinese zodiac in all of your studying, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle scratched her forehead. "I think so, but I'm not remembering any of it clearly right now."

"Given the vastness of the library you've been reading the last hundred years or so, I do not doubt it. Our zodiac was established mostly to name the years to help delineate the passing of time. The people decided to get a bit of enjoyment out of it and took attributes from each of the animals that were chosen to be the year's mascots. Those traits are said to represent the personality of the person born to that year."

They entered the library together and Ch'uang led Gabrielle over to a small alcove that housed several beautifully woven tapestries. Each of them contained a different animal and the largest of them contained all twelve. Gabrielle stood in front of this one for a long moment, simply studying the delicate embroidery involved in creating such a work of art. She reached out a hand to touch it and hesitated, looking to Ch'uang for permission. The goddess nodded her head and gave Gabrielle a slight smile.

Gabrielle ran her hands gently along the silk fabric, marveling at the intricacy of the work and the richness of C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

detail involved in each aspect of the animals represented.

"This is amazing," Gabrielle finally commented. "I can't believe I missed this."

"Well, it's not like this is part of the open area of the temple," Ch'uang pointed out. "You really have to know it is here to look for it."

"So tell me about them."

"What year were you born, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle told her and Ch'uang laughed softly. "You really have aged very gracefully." Gabrielle blushed, even as she chuckled at the teasing. Before she could respond, Ch'uang went on... "Especially for a pig."

Gabrielle's brows flew into her hairline and she choked out, "Excuse me?"

Ch'uang motioned to the tapestry. "You were born in the year of the pig," she replied seriously, but her eyes held a teasing twinkle that made Gabrielle realize she was being tweaked just a little.

"Wonderful," she muttered. "Xena will have a field day with this."

"Well, the characteristics surrounding the pig are quite pleasant," Ch'uang replied. "And I'd be willing to wager, fairly accurate. According to my people, you are a splendid companion and an intellectual... someone who thinks deeply about things and sets difficult goals, prepared to carry them out. You are sincere, tolerant and honest. At one point, you were incredibly naive because you expected the same from others, but life and time have wrenched that ideal from your grasp. Now you simply maintain your own code of morality and adjust to deal with others who hold to a different code."

Gabrielle thought about that for a few moments, taking in all the nuances of what Ch'uang had said. "I can live with that I think," she said with a smile. Then added impishly, "So what does that make Xena?" giving Ch'uang the warrior's birth date and remembering just how hard it had been to pry that information out of Xena once upon a time.

"Hmm... your partner is a monkey."

"Heh... I could work with that," Gabrielle murmured to herself. "Wonder how she'd look with a tail." It took a moment of total silence before Gabrielle realized that in her contemplation of said picture, Ch'uang was regarding her with studied amusement.

"Ahem," she laughed softly. "Sorry about that. What are the monkey's attributes?"

Ch'uang's dark eyes sparkled with unveiled amusement. "Well, she is very intelligent with a deep desire for knowledge and a hidden, clever wit combined with an excellent memory. She is skillful and flexible, remarkably inventive and original. She can solve the most difficult problems with ease and has a magnetic personality, which is a good quality for a leader, but she is quite distrustful of other people."

"Amazing." Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you didn't study us first and just make that up?"

Ch'uang laughed, a clear, ringing sound. She walked over to the shelves and pulled out a particularly thick

C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

tome. "See for yourself."

She opened the volume to the spot that talked about the zodiac and Gabrielle rapidly began scanning the page.

"This is amazing," she said as she continued to read. "I know people who fit all these descriptions."

"As do I. It seems...." Whatever thought Ch'uang was going to add was dissipated by the unexpected arrival of the Greek goddess of love who showered the room with rose petals as she made her entrance.

"Yo babes! Whassup?"

She dropped an arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and kissed her head gently. "Hey, Cutie! I've missed ya."

Gabrielle returned the embrace fully. "Hi, Aphrodite. I've missed you too."

Dite smiled at her affectionately then turned to Ch'uang without releasing Gabrielle. She held out a hand which the Chinese goddess accepted. "And how are you, hon?"

Ch'uang-Mu squeezed Dite's hand. "I am well. Yourself?"

Dite hugged Gabrielle once more then let go of her. "Can't complain, I s'pose. Love is love everywhere and it keeps my juices flowing, ya know. I do kinda miss the old days, but at least I've still got the power, if you know what I mean. A lot of the gods are pretty much powerless, so I guess I'm one of the lucky ones."

Ch'uang took both of Aphrodite's hands in her own. "Well, I for one am glad you are lucky."

Gabrielle observed silently as the two of them spoke. The dynamic connecting them had changed and changed again. The lust that had burned so obviously between in their early relationship had deepened into true affection and friendship, but surprisingly, not love. Gabrielle was curious enough to wonder if they had ever consummated the lust, but her private belief was that they had not. Or if they had, it had been a very, very brief affair.

While she was thinking, Aphrodite and Ch'uang finished up their conversation and they turned to her. She looked up at them with a puzzled expression. "What?"

Dite shook her head. "Nothing. You just looked so totally involved in thinking that we decided to let you know, like finish first." She took a deep breath. "So tell me about this gnarly room. I've never seen this cool stuff before."

"Ah," Ch'uang answered smoothly. "We were doing a reading on Gabrielle... explaining her zodiacal symbol to her."

"Awesome! So what are ya, babe?"

"She is a pig," Ch'uang answered when Gabrielle covered her hand to hide the blush that suffused her face and groaned pathetically. Approdite howled in laughter.

"Oh my gods! Priceless!! I have blackmail material for years now."

"Be nice to me," Gabrielle growled from behind her hand.

"Why? This is bitchin'. And while I'm totally sure that what the Chinese define as piggish behavior is different from ours, the tweak factor on this is just so totally there."

"Yes, but you love me and don't want to make fun of me like that."

Dite was momentarily stunned by Gabrielle's words until she realized the context in which they were meant. Then she giggled.

"You're right, I do love ya, but I am gonna absolutely razz you about this. It is just way too precious."

Gabrielle sank into the chair and dropped her head on the desk. "I'm doomed," she moaned, eliciting laughter from both non-sympathetic deities.

A stirring in the vestibule made Ch'uang realize how close it was to the New Year. "Come. It is very nearly the New Year and we do not want to miss any of the fireworks. I understand that the planners have gone all out in their efforts to make this truly spectacular."

She whisked them to the roof of the palace moments before the festivities were scheduled to start. The two goddesses sat in comfortable chaises in the middle of the roof, while Gabrielle wandered to the edge to view the massive crowd gathered in the streets below.

They had a flagon of wine between them and several courtesans who made sure their glasses remained full and their plates were never empty. Gabrielle stood apart, feeling the differences between both herself and the throng which was congregated below and the goddesses who were mere feet behind her. Again she felt her solidarity in the world and her resolve firmed to go out again and try to find some meaning to her existence.

Behind her, Dite and Ch'uang kept a casual eye on her while watching the festivities taking place around them.

"You know she is leaving," Ch'uang commented to Dite.

Dite nodded. "I figured as much. She lasted way longer than I expected her to."

"I will miss her. She has become a good friend."

Dite nodded. "She always has been." She paused. "Do you know where she is going?"

"No, not definitely, thought I suspect she will walk the wall. It is the one thing we have talked about that she has yet to do. Do not fret, Aphrodite. I will keep an eye on her as I have always done for you." Ch'uang hesitated, then plunged forward. "She does not know, does she?"

Dite looked at her, seeing her truth mirrored in the brown eyes which regarded her. "No," she shook her head, "and she never will."

Ch'uang accepted that statement with a silent nod and turned her attention back towards the magnificent display of fireworks going on just above them.

Two days later, Gabrielle departed the palace.

Gabrielle couldn't believe how great it felt to be out and about roaming the streets again and mingling with people. Thus far, she had rescued a chicken, stopped two fights, pulled a child from the river and traded a story for her room and board. Now it was late on her first night back on the road and she found herself kept awake by the sheer excitement of traveling once more.

"I must be nuts," she said to herself. "I had everything at my fingertips and yet I prefer to be out here making my own way." She fell asleep to that thought with a smile on her face.

The next few days passed with minimal excitement, but Gabrielle found herself appreciating her life once more in a way she hadn't in a while. \*This\* was living, not reading about it in a palace library, though she was imminently grateful for the time she'd had to do that. She needed down time, but she had missed this.

The down side was that her blood need had to be satisfied a little more regularly here and she actually had to hunt for it. It was while she was on her first hunt that something totally unexpected happened. And for Gabrielle, it would change her world forever.

Gabrielle came back from her memories with a start. She set the diary to one side and rose from the bed, walking to the window and gazing out across the moonlit water. The stars were bright around the orb and Gabrielle stared at them for a long time, smiling in memory when she found the North Star.

"It's a bear, warrior."

## Chapter XVIII

Xena looked up at the night sky, easily finding the North Star. "I still say it's a dipper, Gabrielle," she said with a soft sigh. It was times like this especially that her sense of loneliness became almost overwhelming. She missed Gabrielle with a constant ache, but at night, under the stars, the ache became an acute pain.

She was still at least another full day's walk from where she expected her adopted family to be. Xena was looking forward to being back with the Cheyenne tribe. Not only had she missed them, but she was fairly certain now that the answer to how she had come to this place and time lay with them.

Without warning, an unearthly howl screamed across the landscape and sent chills skittering up Xena's spine. She rose from her bedroll and let her eyes wander the darkness. A second screech put her feet into action and she was running towards the noise before her mind had processed her intentions.

Her two animal companions had gone hunting in this direction and she wondered briefly if this was the sound of their prey. But her heart knew differently and she continued running full throttle to reach them.

When she arrived at the small glen where they were, Xena fell to her knees. On the ground before her lay the fox, bleeding profusely and gasping for air. Sad green eyes turned to her, conveying a truth she was not willing

to admit. She glanced to the panther and saw an agony so profound it cut through her with razor-like precision.

Gently, she picked up the fox and cradled it in her arms. She staunched the flow of blood and took off back towards her campsite at a frantic run. She and the panther arrived together and she placed the fox down on her pallet gently. The panther curled protectively around its mate as much as possibly and looked up at her with pleading eyes.

One handed, she reached for her medical kit, eternally gratefully for habits that were ingrained in her psyche. By feel alone she managed to extract gut and needle, then as quickly as she could manage she sewed the gashes that had been torn through the beautiful red coat and into the flesh and veins of the fox's body.

Xena's mind went back to the healing temple in Thessaly and bit her lips to keep the tears from spilling onto her face. The harsh rasp of breathing was so much like what Gabrielle had sounded like just before she had... died... that first time and the memories this stirred still burned as sharply as they had then.

"Too much blood loss..." she muttered, knowing there was little to be done for that and almost no hope of survival. A black paw came to rest on her knee and she turned her attention to the cat that looked back at her mournfully. And without a word, Xena understood exactly what the panther was asking of her.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Do you know what it will mean... for you both?" But even as she spoke, she felt her incisors grow to meet the need she felt emerging at the coppery scent surrounding her that she was now fully cognizant of.

In answer, the panther opened its mouth, exposing its own fangs and moving purposefully towards Xena's wrist.

"All right, Etor. I get the point." Xena sat sill for just an instant, then reached for the sharpest blade she had. She steeled herself and cut through her skin, immediately lifting her wrist to the fox's mouth and hoping there was enough strength left in the animal that it could drink from her.

She felt the fox's lips nuzzle her wrist and she monitored its swallowing until she was sure the fox was getting the sustenance it needed. When she began to feel lightheaded, Xena pulled away, binding the cut she could already feel closing.

"That's enough for now, Melo. Let's see about getting you cleaned up." She moved to stand but her legs refused to support her. Instead she sank back down to the ground and blindly searched through her kit. When she found the trail bar she'd been searching for, Xena snatched it up and began eating it. It wasn't what she needed, but it would suffice until she was strong enough to go on a hunt.

Unexpectedly, a plump jackrabbit fell into Xena's lap and she would have jumped had she not been quite so drained. She had heard the panther's approach, of course, but she was not anticipating this particular gift to be dumped in her lap.

Without thought, Xena sank her fangs into the bunny and drank until the animal was bled dry. It was not enough to replace what she had lost, but it did slake her hunger enough that she could function somewhat normally.

Xena set the animal aside momentarily, knowing both she and the panther would need its solid sustenance.

Then she put some water on to warm, to clean up both herself and the fox and she started preparing the rabbit for cooking.

She skinned the rabbit, then a large portion she cut off and set in front of the cat. She cut up the remainder and dumped it into a second pot, adding a small amount of spice and covering it with water before putting it on the fire and removing the first pot.

She reached for her medical kit again and removed some clean linen scraps, wetting them and gently cleaning away the blood that the fox was still covered in. Melo didn't move, but simply remained still to allow Xena to do the most careful and thorough job she could.

Once she was done, Xena looked into the fox's tired green eyes. "Rest now, Melo. Etor and I will keep you safe."

The panther resumed its protective position surrounding its mate and gently nuzzled the fox until the red furred chest moved in the deep, regular breath of sleep. Then blue eyes met again in anguished understanding and the cat began a careful grooming of the fox.

Xena stirred the stew that had started bubbling and leaned back, closing her eyes tiredly. She'd never allowed another creature to feed from her before and was more drained than she could possibly have imagined herself ever being. Xena concentrated on not falling asleep, knowing she needed to eat and replenish what she had lost before surrendering to the slumber that was pulling at her so desperately.

The prickle of a sharp claw on her leg brought Xena sharply out of the light doze she had fallen into and she realized that her stew was mostly ready. She looked down, fully expecting to see a black paw resting on her calf. Instead, Xena noted that the two animals were twined together in sleep and that the fox's breathing seemed to have gathered a little more strength. She smiled, believing for the first time that the small creature might actually survive.

She portioned herself a large quantity into her bowl and moved the rest off the heat. Then Xena ate quickly and methodically, idly noting that at least it was better than tolerable for a change. When she was finished, she rinsed the bowl with just a bit of water and turned the bowl over the remainder of the stew to keep it for the morning meal. Then she stretched back out on her furs and settled into sleep. Trusting to her instincts and the panther's that nothing would happen to them in the meantime.

Morning came far earlier than Xena would have liked, but much later than she expected. The sun was fully risen, though it was still early comparatively speaking. Blue eyes blinked into the sunlight as she tried to fathom why exactly she was still so exhausted.

Xena sat up and looked around, rubbing her hand across her face in an effort to jump start her brain. When she saw her companions still sleeping and completely entangled together, a sad smile crossed her face as she remembered the many mornings she and Gabrielle had done the same. The only real difference was that the panther was shielding the fox - Gabrielle tended to use Xena as her own personal body pillow.

"One day, Gabrielle," Xena whispered to herself. "One day we will have that again. I will find a way to get back to you."

The cat's eyes opened and with infinite care began grooming the fox again, gently encouraging the smaller animal's wakefulness. Reluctantly, the green eyes opened briefly, then the fox relaxed into the panther's ministrations and let sleep overtake it once again.

Xena moved the pot of stew closer to the fire to reheat a bit without cooking it too much; then she picked up her bit of towel and soap and moved to the tiny creek to bathe.

By the time she returned, her stew was slightly bubbling and the two animals were once again sleeping soundly together. She ate, then separated out two smaller portions, one which was mostly broth, correctly figuring that the fox would need to start rebuilding its reserves and knowing that it would need to ease back into eating. Even with the bacchae blood Xena had shared and the immortality it had been given, the fox had suffered some gruesome wounds and it was going to take a little time for it to heal.

Xena ran a hand along the soft fur, thankful that it was the natural red of the fox's coat and not the blood it had been covered with the night before. She idly wondered what had happened to cause the fox's injuries, then the green eyes opened again and Xena's attention focused on the animal beneath her fingertips.

She heard the growling and had to chuckle silently at just how much the panther reminded her of herself. Xena remembered the many times she had growled in just such a manner when she felt someone or something threaten Gabrielle, even long after she knew Gabrielle was more than capable of defending herself and making her own decisions.

Xena looked up into the blue eyes that were watching her carefully. "Etor, I'm not gonna hurt Melo. Go eat your breakfast," pointing over her shoulder towards the bowl of stew that she'd set aside for the panther. "I just need to make sure things are healing properly."

The cat held Xena's eyes for another very long moment, before its attention was drawn away by the fox. They communicated wordlessly, then the cat stretched and gave Xena a last look before moving towards the fire and its breakfast.

Xena smirked at the familiarity of the exchange, then turned back to Melo with serious eyes. "You know what's changed, don't you?" she said softly as she inspected the still damaged, though rapidly healing tissues. "You know you're like me now." Xena swallowed hard in an effort to keep the tears at bay. "I'm sorry, Melo. I wouldn't have had this happen to you... either of you... for all the world. But Etor asked and I couldn't say no."

Xena turned away, remembering all too clearly the pain she'd felt every time Gabrielle had been lost to her for whatever reason, but especially when she thought death had beaten her. She shook her shoulders, trying to rid herself of the feeling of guilt that wanted to settle so squarely there, knowing it was something that she would never fully escape.

A softness on her knee returned her attention to the fox and she noted again the intelligence and compassion that lurked in those eyes. *So much like Gabrielle*, was her one thought as she saw understanding and forgiveness come into them.

"I'm glad you came into my life, Melo. You and Etor have been good friends. I just hope you don't hate me for this later."

The look never changed and Xena found comfort in that fact. The fox closed its eyes and relaxed into Xena's C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

touch. The warrior kept up a soothing motion as she carefully explored the areas which only the night before had been ripped and raw. Already they were closed and the swelling had gone down remarkably.

"I think we'll stay here another day," Xena commented aloud when her examination was finished. "At the rate you are healing, you should be secure in moving before then, but I would definitely feel better with another day of rest."

It wasn't typical, but Xena knew both animals would understand her need to stay put. The fact that she admitted as much to them aloud showed precisely how badly she needed some recuperation time for herself.

The cat licked its bowl clean and moved back to its mate. The fox watched the panther's progress, resting securely against the black fur that snuggled up against its spine. Xena set the bowl of broth at an angle against the panther's paw, getting a look that could curdle milk in return.

"Yeah, yeah. Tell it to someone who doesn't know better, buddy." The look turned to one of resignation and Xena had to chuckle just slightly.

She watched patiently as the fox slowly ate the broth and then offered the animal some water. When Xena was satisfied that she'd done all she could for the moment, she picked up both bowls and waterskin and moved to the river. In a few short moments, her chores were done and she was back in camp.

Everything was tidy and her bladed weapons were as well honed as she could manage to make bone. She did not have enough ammunition for the gun to do much with it and truth be told, she was still exhausted from her experience the night before.

Xena heard another soft growl come from the panther and looked up to find herself pinned in place by rather baleful blue eyes. She felt her eyebrow rise in response.

"What?" feeling just like she did when Gabrielle looked at her that way and trying to figure out what exactly she had done to warrant that glare.

The panther stared at her rather pointedly then turned its attention to her empty pallet. Xena had made the fur and blankets up neatly when she'd decided to stay put another day. She followed the cat's gaze to her made up bed, then met the eyes squarely when they returned to focus on her. The panther let its lip curl just enough to show a hint of fang and Xena through her hands up in exasperation when a low growl emanated from the black chest.

"Fine!" she said, not realizing just how much like Gabrielle she sounded. "Nothing like being bullied into something!" She lay down and stretched out, unwilling to admit even to herself how badly she needed the rest. Her eyes closed and she almost mouned at how good it felt to simply rest. Then she sat up and pointed a finger at the cat.

"You keep watch!" Then she fluffed up the end she was using for a pillow and pulled the covers up to her shoulders, muttering and mumbling to herself the entire time. She was asleep before her head hit the fur.

The two animals exchanged a glance and a rumbling that could have easily been mistaken for laughter ran through them, the two sounds running counterpoint to one another to create its own music. Then the panther gently nudged the fox into closing its eyes again and with an exasperated sigh, the fox returned to its healing sleep. And steady blue eyes remained vigilant in the silent campsite.

It was morning again when Xena's eyes opened, although the only way she could tell was a very slight lightening of the eastern sky and the completely rested and refreshed way her body felt. She looked over to her companions, whose eyes were still closed in sleep. When she blinked, she found blue eyes staring back at her and marveled once more at just how much the two animal companions were like her and Gabrielle. Not just in their eyes and coloring, but in their mannerisms and very attitudes.

"I wish there was a way for her to meet you two. I think she would probably love the idea of mascots and adopt you both on the spot."

Xena stretched and groaned as her spine popped and shifted back into alignment. "I'm getting too old for this," she muttered as she rose from her pallet and moved to the other side of the fire. Bright green eyes blinked at her and Xena smiled in unconscious reflex before kneeling at the fox's side and running a gentle hand over the soft fur.

"Let me look, Melo," Xena said, easing the fox onto its back so she could check its chest. She ran her hands over the new, soft fur, unable to find even the slightest amount of damage. She unwrapped her wrist, finding no trace of the cut she had put there two nights before.

"Well," she commented, "I suppose there has to be some nice benefit to being a bacchae. Guess that answers the immortality question, huh?" She looked at Melo with sad blue eyes. "Sorry," she whispered.

"All right," she continued, scratching her hands through her hair as she stood. "I think we are ready to travel today. Lemme go clean up and we'll see if we can get to the winter camp."

It didn't take long and soon Xena was headed out into the prairie. The animals walked sedately beside her for a while, then the fox felt the need to explore. Without thought, it took off running and the panther growled as it ran to catch up. Never before had the fox been the one to take the lead and the cat wasn't sure what to make of it. With a patented glare in Xena's direction, the panther followed its mate across the open space. Xena just laughed.

"Oh Etor. You have no idea the trouble you're in for now," Xena commented absently with a grin. She remembered fondly her own experiences with Gabrielle as the bard had started coming into her own. Just the memories of what they'd shared and what Xena wanted desperately to recover lent wings to her own feet and soon she found that she was running simply because it made her feel like it brought her closer to her goal.

Her companions soon got into the spirit and it became something of a race. The panther had naturally resumed the lead, when without warning the fox leaped out in front and ran like the wind, becoming a blur. The cat stopped so quickly, it actually somersaulted on the ground before landing on its feet, eyes following its mate in disbelief.

The fox sensed the panther's regard and turned, racing back to the cat's side with great haste. The smaller animal had every intention of nuzzling its mate when a throaty growl from the panther made the fox stop short. The fox sat down and cocked its red head, gazing inquisitively at the panther, a look of curiosity crossing its features. Xena just stood back and watched the proceedings with interest.

The panther circled the fox, sniffing reflexively. Another throaty growl emanated from its throat before the cat C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

turned and moved away from the fox, wandering farther out into the prairie alone.

The fox turned its attention to Xena, gazing at the warrior with mournful eyes. Xena knelt down to be closer to eye level.

"I'm sorry, Melo. I don't know how to make this better. It's a warrior pride thing, I'm afraid and Etor will have to come to terms with it eventually. I just don't know how long eventually might take." She looked around, noting that the panther was moving slowly enough to keep them within both hearing and sight distance.

"C'mon," she said, standing up and beginning to walk in the panther's direction. "We've still got a ways to go yet."

The day progressed slowly with the panther always walking just far enough ahead of Xena and the fox to be separate. As the afternoon wore on, Xena detected a small cloud on the horizon and knew she was close to the winter camp.

It was nearly dark when Xena reached the outskirts of the camp with Melo beside her and she was warmly welcomed by many members of the tribe. Hotassa was the first to greet her.

"Va'ôhtama ma'pa'o, Zee-nah." She clasped the warrior's hands and Xena smiled broadly, glad to be back among people she considered friends and family. Hotassa motioned to Xena's new clothes with a grin.

"Hello, Hotassa," she responded automatically, then realized she was still thinking and speaking in the odd language Ari had so patiently taught her. The Indian woman's eyes widened and she spoke before Xena could apologize.

"Speak white now?" she asked brokenly though clearly enough that Xena understood.

Xena nodded

"Good," Hotassa said firmly, somewhat surprising to Xena with her vehemence. "Make things easier for you." The older woman looked around, noting that the fox remained at Xena's side while the panther had already settled itself by the fire and appeared to be sulking. Hotassa looked back at Xena questioningly. Xena waved her off, but Hotassa understood the answer all to well and laughed. "Is way of love. Come," she said with a wave and led Xena over to her fire.

The shaman was already seated and indicated for her to take a seat. Xena set her travel bags on the ground behind her and sat, a little surprised when the fox sat beside her and laid its head in her lap. Almost unconsciously, Xena began stroking the soft, red fur beneath her fingertips, feeling Melo relax under her touch and feeling the same peace steal over her.

They sat silently for a bit, then the shaman gestured first to the fox and then to the panther. "Fight?"

Xena shook her head. "No, Keto. More like pride."

The elder shaman looked back and forth between the two animals and grunted. "Figures," he muttered so low that even Xena was unsure of just exactly what he'd said. Quiet fell between them again as Hotassa served up their evening meals. Xena made a move to protest when a solid squeeze on her shoulder stopped her words

before they could be formed, much less spoken. So she accepted the bowl and welcomed the warmth and flavors the food provided her with.

"Good hunt?" Keto asked when he was finished and had set his empty bowl aside. He withdrew a pipe from his pouch and pulled the tobacco out as well, packing it tightly and lighting it from a small twig he'd caught for just that purpose. He puffed a few moments and that gave Xena time to carefully formulate her answer.

She was fairly certain that if she was mentioned by name, Ari would be recognized. In fact she suspected that Hotassa already knew that Xena had met Ari. She couldn't explain it as more than a feeling, but she'd learned to trust her gut and decided to speak to Hotassa about it privately. Meanwhile, she turned her attention back to Keto.

"Yes," she finally responded. "I think I will stay here through the winter though. Start fresh again in the spring."

"Good," he replied, taking a deep drag off his pipe and handing it to her. Xena accepted it and took a lighter pull, allowing her thoughts to wander. Eventually, she felt herself slip into a restful haze and spoke the words that had been teasing her for several days, but had only just been given the opportunity to slip out.

"Keto, will you take me on a vision quest? I think my answers may be closer than I thought. I think they may be here."

The shaman continued to puff on his pipe as he considered her words... both spoken and otherwise. He had wondered if she would ask; he had seen things in his own recent vision quest that she would need to know. This would probably be the best way for her to find out.

It was unusual, though not completely unheard of for a woman to take a vision quest. The male ceremony was different from the female however and due to her status as a warrior within the community, Xena would need to take the male ceremony to find the answers she sought.

Finally the pipe was empty and Keto knocked the few ashes left in it on the ground. Then he turned to face Xena, who returned his stare measure for measure. He smiled, liking what he saw in her soul and nodded.

"I will," was all he said at last.

Now Xena allowed her own brief smile, the relief flowing through her in palpable waves. "Thank you, Keto," was all she said aloud, though the shaman could feel just how much it meant to her. She moved to stand and he placed a hand on her knee, halting her movement. She looked at him again, questioning.

Keto gestured first to the fox and then to its mate some distance away beside Xena's tent. "Fix."

A dark brow rose in mute question.

He motioned between them again. "Fix. Fix first. Need them on quest."

It was the most words Xena had heard him put together at one time and she nodded gravely. "I will, Keto," she said as she stood, moving away from him with a nod back to her own tent. Only then did she mutter to herself, "As soon as I figure out how to." Then she ducked in her doorway, grateful that the clan had been prepared for her return. She made a mental note to ask Keto about it when they spoke again.

Xena crossed to the furs already laid out for her use and stretched out with a contented sigh. She laid there for a while, slipping in and out of sleep when a rustle attracted her attention. Xena opened her eyes to mere slits and kept her eyes half closed as she watched the proceedings at the door.

The fox had followed her inside the small dwelling, content to stretch itself out near the doorway. The panther remained unmoving outside the door and the fox gazed at the entryway longingly before a sigh escaped and the green eyes closed.

Time passed and when everything was still and quiet, the panther crept in and stood beside the fox, gazing sorrowfully its mate. It didn't move or touch the smaller animal until the green eyes opened. With a mere look, the fox gave the panther the assurance it was seeking and the cat immediately settled into its place near the fox, curling its larger body protectively around its diminutive mate and beginning a gentle grooming. The fox closed its eyes in contentment and Xena smiled.

"And sometimes," she whispered to herself, "you just get damned lucky."

Then she closed her eyes and let her dreams take her to a place where she and Gabrielle were still together in life.

The early morning darkness was broken by the raucous noise of raiders. It wasn't clear who the marauders were, but it didn't really matter. The fact that they were causing mayhem and chaos was clear enough.

Xena scrambled from her tent and was instantly in the thick of the battle. Immediately, she missed her sword and chakram, but adjusted her fighting easily to use whatever weapons came to hand.

She was in the thick of the battle, demolishing enemies left and right when a commotion caught her attention out of the corner of her eye. She held up her hand abruptly and the man she was fighting was so stunned by the action that he froze and turned his attention to the tableau that Xena was now moving towards intently.

Xena strode forward purposefully, knocking men out of her way with blows that killed or maimed, depending on where they landed. She had seen it all happen and was hoping beyond hope she had misunderstood.

In the few seconds it took her to cross from one side of the compound to the other, the fighting became a distant focus and the silence that fell in her ears was loud in its very stillness. Harsh breathing could be heard and Xena closed her eyes as she reached the spot where her animal companions had fallen.

The panther was crouched over the fox, a low keening vibrating from its chest as agonized eyes tracked to Xena's own. Gently, she moved the cat to one side, realizing immediately that the fox had stepped between the panther and the knife that was now embedded in its own red-furred chest. A swift glance around showed Xena the knife-wielder had died painfully under the cat's sharp fangs. It also showed her clan beginning to clean up the bodies of their fallen and those the few raiders that had escaped left behind.

Xena tenderly lifted the fox into her arms and headed for her tent, the panther literally stuck to her knee. She ducked through the doorway and placed the small animal on the furs, quickly rummaging for the supplies she needed to close what would be a gaping wound when she removed the blade.

Skilled fingertips ran along the fur, glad to note there was no other damage. Xena looked seriously into green

eyes dulled with pain. "I know why you did it, Melo and I can't fault your reasoning. But you've gotta learn to get outta the way a little faster. You may be immortal now, but you're not invincible and this is gonna hurt like Hades own fire."

The fox closed its eyes in concession to a truth it already understood too well and Xena opened the wineskin. She pulled the knife out and poured the alcohol in, hoping to kill any infection before the wound closed over. The fox barely flinched, though its breathing sped up exponentially in proportion to the sheer misery it felt. Xena moved to the water skin she kept warming near the fire and poured a goodly amount of that over the blood-soaked fur. In bare minutes, it was impossible to tell just how injured the fox had been, save for the open but now unbleeding cut on its chest.

"Melo, I'm gonna have to sew this up."

A sigh was the only indication that the softly spoken words were heard and Xena rapidly pulled the gut and needle out of her kit and through the torn flesh. In moments, the only hint of the damage that had been wrought was a thin red line that cut through the fox's fur at an odd angle.

"Now, I want you to rest and take it easy the remainder of the day. We'll say it was just a scratch, but you've gotta be more careful. What we are makes us different and even here in a community of acceptance, it can make us hunted because we're seen as a threat." The sadness in her eyes was reflected back to her from the fox's.

"Etor...." But her directive was unneeded. Already the panther had curled around its mate and begun the gentle grooming that allowed the fox to relax into sleep. Xena smile slightly at the picture the two of them made together, then stepped from her dwelling to provide whatever assistance she could to the tribe.

Surprisingly, there was very little real damage. Most of the dead were raiders who'd been killed by her hands as she'd moved to Melo's side. Otherwise, there were a few injuries and some collateral damage, but nothing that couldn't be repaired fairly easily. It occurred to Xena just how peculiar that was, then she was being called to assist in setting a broken bone and the thought went to the wayside.

By mid-afternoon, the compound was clean and orderly once more. All the wounded had been taken care of and the dead raiders had been cleared out. Xena was checking on Melo, when a soft knock at her doorway drew her attention.

"Yes?" she asked and waited for the flap to be pushed aside.

Hotassa crossed the threshold with a large bowl of something hot and fragrant. Xena's stomach rumbled in reaction to the scents it was exuding and Hotassa chuckled in sympathy. She nodded towards the two animals still wrapped tightly around one another.

"Better now?"

Xena took the bowl that was being extended and began eating. She'd long since given up trying to share. That wasn't the way things were done in this society and she always, ALWAYS remembered her status as a guest here, no matter how accepted she was.

"Yes," she said around her food as she continued to eat.

"Good," came the answer as Hotassa watched them wake up together and start to nuzzle one another gently. "Keto says begin quest tonight. So Zee-nah rest now."

The warrior nodded and put her half-full bowl in front of the fox and panther. Then she moved to her pallet and stretched out, allowing her mind to float free and take her into a dozing state. Hotassa watched the proceedings with interest, noting that Xena's spirit guides finished their meal simultaneously and settled back down into slumber almost immediately. The older woman brushed the hair back from Xena's face and pulled the fur up to cover her before retrieving the bowl and stepping back out into the cold October wind.

Night fell and Xena awakened and started preparing herself for the ritual. She bathed in the lukewarm water provided for her, then dressing in the breechcloth that she had been given. The moon was nearly at its zenith when she wrapped herself in her buffalo robe and stepped from her dwelling with her two companions matching her step for step.

People stepped away from her respectfully, realizing her intent. When she reached Keto's fire, she waited for his invitation to join him. Instead, he rose to meet her and began chanting in a low tone, cleansing her with smoke from both the fire and the pipe he held lit in his hands.

Xena kept her eyes straight ahead, figuring this was part of the ritual. Finally, when Keto was done, he lowered his voice even farther, until it was a mere whisper of sound. He explained to her very simply what she needed to do and handed her a small skin of tobacco and a pipe, then led her to the sweat hut. Here she would be left alone to seek her vision until she came out seeking guidance.

Hotassa handed her a full water skin. This would be replenished regularly until Xena stepped out of the hut when her quest was complete. Other than that, there was no nourishment provided for her use.

Just as Xena was ready to cross the threshold to begin her journey, she looked up into the night sky. A streaming light caught her eye and at first glance she thought it was a shooting star. But as she stood and watched it slowly move across the sky, she realized it was something more. Then she stepped into the sweat hut, hoping to find the answers she needed to make it back home to Gabrielle.

## Chapter XIX

Gabrielle watched as the comet began another night of its trailing journey across the heavens, wondering idly just how many times she'd seen it in her lifetime and curious as to what Xena thought of the whole phenomenon. If she'd figured right, it would just be becoming visible in the United States. Her travels west would allow her to see it for an extended period of time.

As she watched, her mind turned back to her travels in China and her first encounter with a most welcome and unexpected face from her past.

Her steps were stealthy and sure; her tracking skills had been honed to an art form after hundreds of years of practice. Even not having used them for almost a hundred years did nothing to dispel her hard-earned knowledge and she fell back into familiar patterns easily.

Now she closed in on her prey with sure skill and was just ready to go for the kill when she felt more than anything else another presence in the woods with her. She waited, still, to discover the intent of the being that suddenly seemed to share her hunt. Badly as she needed the nutriment the animal would provide her with, she could less afford to expose herself to the mortals around her. Though they couldn't really kill her, dryads having gone to dust centuries before, they could make things unbearable for her to remain. And Gabrielle really wanted the chance to walk the wall before she left China.

She waited for what seemed an eternity to her blood-starved senses before the impression of another human nearby faded from her awareness. Her prey remained oblivious to her presence and Gabrielle took what she needed swiftly and mercifully. The animal felt no pain and Gabrielle gave thanks even as she drained its life force.

When she was done, she bowed her head in sadness. Of all the different facets of immortality she suffered with, this was probably the one she disdained the most. It made her feel guilty and ashamed, even though her mind knew that it was beyond her choice and her control. She couldn't stop the way it made her heart ache.

The hair on the nape of her neck stood up suddenly and she realized immediately she was no longer alone again. She looked around, her newly heightened senses enabling her to pinpoint the intruder's whereabouts directly. She stared into the spot where nothing had been mere moments before and focused her fierce gaze intently. Gabrielle knew that if the human being could see the burning in her eyes, they would run screaming in terror and willed herself to a still calmness.

She felt her blood cool and her eyes began to take on their natural green before the shadow became a shape and form she recognized. With a glad little cry, Gabrielle ran headlong into arms that opened wide to receive her.

"Cecrops!!"

The big man laughed heartily and hugged her to him as tightly as he dared without fear of harming her.

"Ah, Little One," he said as he set her back on her feet and reached out a hand to wipe a smudge of blood from her lips. "It seems we have much to discuss. But," he added as her eyes dropped from his and he cupped her chin and raised her face, tapping her cheek gently until her eyes met his once more. "I have missed you," he added honestly. "I have missed many things. Will you share camp with me? I cook a pretty mean rabbit stew," gesturing to the animal that now lay abandoned by the wayside.

Gabrielle couldn't stop the impish smile that crossed her face. "No seafood then?"

Cecrops laughed again. "Not if I can help it."

She chuckled with him and led him to her well-laid out campsite. He snagged the rabbit in his grasp as he walked by and made short work of preparing it once they reached Gabrielle's camp. In what seemed mere moments, the appetizing scent of rabbit stew was wafting through the air and both immortals sniffed appreciatively.

"You know," Cecrops commented casually, "eating is one of the mortal attributes I appreciate most as an immortal. I don't really need to, but I do so enjoy it."

"Mmm," Gabrielle agreed. "So do I. It is one of the few things that remind me I was a normal human being once upon a time."

Cecrops heard the many layers of her words and could see the weight of years and experience in her eyes. He \*knew\* what being an immortal could do to the soul and he wondered what it had taken to tarnish the soul she had been in her youth. Of course, he mused, it could have a lot to do with a certain warrior who was so obviously missing from her life.

Cecrops cleared his throat. "I can't tell you how surprised I was to see you. I had heard stories of a fierce warrior, teacher and healer and came to find this paragon for myself. Some of the descriptions sounded like someone I had known, but the odds of it being who it reminded me of were impossible." He chuckled. "At least I thought they were."

"But you didn't expect to find me, did you?" she asked quietly.

"Not alone, no," he replied soberly. "You want to tell me about it, Little One?"

Gabrielle sighed. Even after more than a thousand years of being a bacchae, this wasn't something she was entirely comfortable living with and certainly not with sharing it. It was like exposing herself to the world and she fidgeted slightly.

Cecrops brought his large hands up to cover her own. "Gabrielle," he burred and the blonde head rose at the odd salutation. He had rarely ever called her by name. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I thought that sharing with someone who almost understands... who \*does\* understand at least part of what you are going through might help. You can share as much or as little as you like. Or nothing at all... it's up to you. If nothing else, we can swap stories of things we have seen and heard since we parted company. That by itself should take us a few months."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Oh, at least. You know how I can get going if I have a good story to tell."

Cecrops laughed heartily, glad to see Gabrielle's mood lightening. "I tell you what, Little One... I'll go first then. Have you been through Europe lately?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "Not in several hundred years, I don't think. Time tends to blur a bit after a while. I would have missed the millennium if not for Ch'uang Mu's prompting."

"Ch'uang Mu... Chinese love goddess?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Among other things, yes."

"My, my, my, Little One. You do travel in some interesting circles." He raised a brow at her. "Part of your long story?"

"Uh huh."

"Well then, let me tell you about my experience introducing the barbarians of Europe to the art of crop rotation."

Gabrielle said nothing, but leaned back and motioned for him to continue.

".... so you can just imagine me up to my hips in muck trying to explain to this farmer that you can't rotate pigs." Cecrops laughed aloud at the memory and Gabrielle laughed at his story, which had been his intent. He reached to refill both their bowls with the last of the rabbit stew. "I can't tell you how long it took me to round up those damned pigs."

Gabrielle covered her mouth with her hand to keep from absolutely howling and wiped the tears from her eyes with her other hand before accepting the bowl Cecrops offered her.

"Gods, that has got to be the funniest thing I have heard in a while," Gabrielle said when she finally trusted herself enough to speak. "Although I could tell you stories...."

"Please do," Cecrops urged. "After all, it is your turn."

Gabrielle nodded her head silently. "I guess it is. She paused and stared at the stars for a long moment, hoping to find an answer there, then sighing reluctantly and placed her uneaten bowl of stew to one side. She clasped her hands together and spoke softly. "It would probably be best if I started at the beginning." She sighed again and looked down at her intertwined hands.

"Gabrielle," Cecrops said softly as he clasped her hands in reassurance once more.

She withdrew one hand and patted his then covered them gently. "I'm sorry. This is just so hard... still... and so personal for me. I've... I've never had to... share... this with anyone before and certainly no one has ever been in a position to... understand my story at all. Especially from an immortal point of view... or a bacchae one," she muttered the last under her breath, but Cecrops heard it clearly.

"I take it was an unwelcome, unpleasant surprise," he stated calmly, hoping to put Gabrielle at ease. He'd never seen her so flustered, even when she knew she was stuck on a cursed ship forever, sea-sickness, raw squid and all.

"Well, it certainly wasn't something I was expecting to hear, especially given the circumstances." She frowned at his crinkled brow. "Just let me tell you the story from the beginning. It'll be much easier to understand."

He nodded and filled their cups with steaming tea before leaning back and gesturing for her to proceed.

"Now, you have to understand that we probably would have faced the truth eventually, but at the time, it was easy to put it down to battle bloodlust. It wasn't until our fateful, disastrous trip to Japa that everything came to a head and was pushed into the forefront of our lives...."

"So you never suspected you were immortal?" She could see he wanted to ask about the rest, but he was too C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

much of a gentleman with hundreds of years of self control under his belt to bring it up. For that she was thankful, because what she and Xena had shared between them had always been intensely private. When the bloodlust had taken over, that intensity had taken on a fierceness that even now, sitting here sedately by the fire with her lover still hundreds of years from her, made a familiar burning flare in Gabrielle's blood.

"No. As many times as we died, why would I?"

He nodded sagely, understanding her point very well. He'd always known he was immortal, from the time Athena had gifted him. It wasn't something he discovered by trial and error.

He sat quietly while she finished of her now cold stew and drank her tea. He studied her carefully, noting the maturity that distinguished her features and body language and spared a passing thought for the young woman he had known.

"You have been through much, Little One. And to be alone.... Tell me, what do you do for companionship?" A very bold question, but only the chance not taken was one to mourn.

Gabrielle looked at him, startled. "Excuse me?"

"Come, Gabrielle... you're a woman of the world. You can't tell me you don't have needs, desires...."

Gabrielle jumped from her spot by the fire to pace. "Yes, I do, but until I find Xena, those needs and desires are mine alone to deal with." She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, unaware of the picture she made highlighted by the firelight and not seeing the flaring of Cecrops' nostrils as he warred with his own hidden desires.

She turned her back to the fire and faced the forest, focusing on the darkness beyond her vision. "What we shared together was... indescribable and I won't settle for less than that. I can't give less than everything and I can't give that to anyone but Xena. It's not fair to me and it's not fair to anyone else for me to try."

Gabrielle's shoulders slumped, then stiffened as Cecrops placed his hands lightly on them. 'I'm sorry, Little One. I knew that what you shared together was strong, but I had no idea it was so all-encompassing. My apologies for making you so unhappy."

She turned in his arms for a hug and he embraced her firmly, but tenderly. "You didn't," she replied softly. "I am so glad you're here with me, even if it is only for a little while."

"So am I, Little One. And if you'll forgive an old man for upsetting you, I'd like to hang around awhile. It's been a long time since I've seen a friendly face."

Gabrielle wondered at his comment, being fairly sure that the friendly faces her referred to were immortal ones and rare in the extreme. She didn't mention it though, too relieved at the conversation being over at this point. She felt raw from having exposed so much of herself and completely exhausted in a way she hadn't been in years. All she really wanted right now was to sleep.

Cecrops noted her fatigue easily and lifted her into his arms above her protest. "Shh, Little One. It doesn't happen to us often, but when it does, we have to let it run its course. This time it is my fault, so let me do what I can to fix it, all right?"

He was already at her side of the fire and gently placed her on her readily prepared furs. He covered her, then stepped back to his own side, to give her what privacy he could afford her. For a very long time that night, he gazed into the fire and set aside dreams he now knew would never be more. When he finally closed his eyes, it was with a bit of sadness and melancholy, but also with a peace he'd not know in a very long time. Friendship was something he treasured highly and he was glad to have found this one again, however unexpectedly and painful the circumstances.

The sun was high in the sky when Gabrielle finally blinked her eyes open. The camp was quiet and when she looked around, Gabrielle realized she was alone. She scrubbed her eyes and wondered if her encounter with Cecrops had been nothing more than a very vivid dream, until she heard a strong male voice singing a ribald sailor's song she had first learned aboard Cecrops' cursed ship.

She chuckled and spared a thought for her innocent self who had turned beet red when she realized exactly what the men had been referring to when they'd been singing about oysters, pearls and clams. It was the fastest sex education course she'd ever had and it had guaranteed a laugh from Xena every time it came up for discussion... a feat the warrior managed on a regular, though not too often, teasing basis.

Gabrielle blinked her eyes again and now she noticed that tea was steeping next to the crackling fire, steaming hot water sat on a heating rock and some sort of bird was roasting. Gabrielle inhaled deeply and smiled. She was glad Cecrops had retained this facet of his mortality much as she had and it smelled like he was an old hand at cooking as well.

She pushed the covering from her body and rose with a stretch. Then she folded her bedding neatly and headed to the river to wash up.

Cecrops was in the water swimming lazily as Gabrielle approached. She turned away from him as he rose from the water, though she did get enough of a glance to realize he was still an extremely attractive man who was in excellent shape, *especially when one took into account the fact that he was over a thousand years old*, Gabrielle conceded to herself with a smirk.

A hand fell on her shoulder to let her know he was dressed and she turned around to see deep brown eyes sparkling with life looking back at her.

"Don't be too long," he said with a smile as he headed back towards the camp. "That pheasant should be almost ready to eat."

Gabrielle nodded and he passed out of sight and she quickly got down to the business of bathing. The bird smelled really good and she was looking forward to sharing breakfast, *or lunch*, she thought, given the time, with a friend.

Gabrielle returned to the camp still drying her hair. Cecrops chuckled silently at the way the blonde hair managed to stick straight up... something of a sight given the length. Gabrielle glared at him then fetched her comb to bring some order to the unruly locks. When she was satisfied it was completely untangled, she braided it and tied it off.

"Better?" she asked with a smirk.

"Well," the gravelly voice answered. "More mature looking. You reminded me of a child before."

"Cecrops," Gabrielle responded with a hint of exasperation. "I have \*always\* reminded you of a kid."

Cecrops didn't answer as he plated the pheasant and passed Gabrielle a goodly portion. She took the plate and tasted a bit, a smile and light moan accompanying her actions.

"I'm so glad I can still enjoy this part of mortality."

Cecrops grinned, nodding his head. "It's good to know I can go without if I have to, but I have to admit to truly enjoying a fine meal. And there is something about camping out that just makes me ravenous... the fresh air maybe, or the constant exercise." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Whatever it is, it is wonderful to feel hunger and be able to satiate it."

Gabrielle looked at him sharply, wondering if there was a hidden meaning in his words. But the man continued to eat and she let the comment pass with one of her own.

"I agree. It's one of the things the gods just don't understand. They eat from habit, but not because they need to or they enjoy it. I just enjoy it," she added with a small laugh.

Quiet settled over the camp as they savored their meal, but when they began to cleanup, conversation turned to other things.

"So what brought you to China, Cecrops?" They had decided to remain camped a day longer since it was already early afternoon. It wasn't like they had a schedule to keep and there was just something about starting out fresh is thing in the morning that appealed to both their natures. So they tidied up the area and sat back to talk.

Cecrops shrugged. "A few things, I suppose. I like the expanse of this country and it was time to move out of Europe again. You know how it gets." He looked at Gabrielle and she nodded solemnly. The only reason she'd remained in China as long as she had this time was because of Ch'uang's hospitality to her.

"So anyway," he continued, knowing very well what caused the shadows to chase across her face. "I was in the farthest western province when stories of a great, fierce warrior started filtering around. The descriptions were so varied that the people asked me to come check it out... to see what sort of threat they were facing."

"So you didn't expect to see me." A flat statement.

Cecrops laughed. "No... I hadn't heard you were an immortal and given the descriptions that were going around, I wasn't sure I expected a human being."

Gabrielle chuckled in response. "Hmm... I have heard some of them, so I can understand your confusion." She placed a hand on his arm and studied him seriously. "You can't let anyone know I am immortal, though."

"Gabrielle, that's not something I would want shared around about myself because of how people would react, so I do understand."

She shook her head at him. "No, it's more than that for me." She removed her hand and crossed her arms over her chest. "See, if people took the time to study their history and that of other cultures, they would find your name and your story. They probably wouldn't believe it, thinking you were simply a descendant of the famous arbiter, but the fact is, your immortality is out there for all who want to see it. Kinda like Hercules," she continued. "His story is well-known."

"Right, but... Little One, I'm not seeing your point here. We're all still immortal. Not something we really want shared around."

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Aside from myself, you are one of one three people who know I am an immortal and the other two are goddesses." Cecrops nodded his understanding, but the confused look never left his eyes.

"No one else knows and there are no stories implying I \*might\* be immortal or I \*could\* be immortal and it has to stay that way. If Ares knew I was immortal and why, he could easily figure out that Xena is as well and he would start looking for ways to tempt her again."

"Surely you don't think she would succumb? And could he honestly get to her more quickly than you? The Chronos stone is gone. He has to live through the passage of time as well."

"After her actions in Japan, I'm not sure what I think. But I'm not gonna give Ares any advantage. To him it's a game, but it's my life, dammit and I am OVER being a pawn!" The temper flared so quickly, Cecrops was caught by surprise and he sat quietly as her eyes closed and she willed her mind back to a state of calmness.

"I'm sorry, Little One. I didn't know the stakes were quite so high for you," Cecrops apologized softly.

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't take out a thousand years' worth of frustration out on you."

Cecrops laughed heartily. "Ah, Gabrielle... if \*anyone\* in the world can understand a thousand years worth of frustration, it'd be me."

She smiled sympathetically. "I guess so. So there's no one special in your life either?"

Cecrops shrugged. "There have been a few here and there, but it's hard to... invest... everything into a relationship you know going into it is short term for you."

Gabrielle nodded and silence fell for a bit. Cecrops voice startled her when he spoke again.

"I envy you, you know."

She cut her eyes in his direction. "Excuse me?" Knowing the circumstances that surrounded her position in life and the price she continued to pay for her immortality, she failed to see what exactly there was in her situation for him to covet.

"What you and Xena had... have... together is so strong you are able to survive to get back to her. And you have a firm hope of reuniting with her again. I don't have that." He looked away as tears filled his eyes. "Not that bond or that hope."

Gabrielle moved to sit beside him and wrapped a hand around his bicep before laying her head on his shoulder in a gesture of comfort.

"Well, I can't offer you that kind of bond, but I can offer friendship and a traveling companion for as long as you like."

He looked at her and smiled, patting her hands. "I would like. I really... well, let's just say you remind me of better days and happier times. It would be nice to remember those with someone who can remember with me."

"So it's settled... tomorrow, we will begin our journey together. Today, however, I think I'm gonna go fishing."

Cecrops laughed and the sound of it reminded Gabrielle how much she missed having laughter in her life. She looked at him questioningly.

He slowed his chuckles enough to speak. "I would have thought your squid experience would have made you give up seafood."

Now Gabrielle chortled. "Um, no. It made me realize just how many ways there are to cook it, but as Xena reminded me, the fish that comes from lakes and rivers is not technically seafood."

"Heh. Good point."

They rose together and headed back down the path to the river. "So," Cecrops continued. "Do you have a favorite recipe you might like to share?" He looked in vain for evidence of a pole or a spear.

Gabrielle sat and removed her boots and socks, then rolled her trousers above her knees. "One thing I never had to do when traveling with Xena," she commented as she stepped lightly into the water.

"What? Roll up your pants legs?" he joked.

"Well, that too," she replied. "No, I never had to catch the fish. Xena always did that. It was something she really enjoyed."

"Um, Little One... not to seem stupid, but humor an old man and tell me how you intend to catch fish. I don't see anything but your bare hands. Don't you need a pole, spear, net... \*something\*?"

She wiggled her fingers at him. "Nope. Xena taught me how to catch them barehanded."

"No way."

"Yep. I can't tell you how long it took me to learn either."

Cecrops flung himself on the ground and leaned back on his elbows. "This I gotta see."

He watched appreciatively as the blonde head turned slightly and the lithe body stood stock still. He leaned further up and instantly regretted the decision as in a flurry of motion he was suddenly and deliberately attacked by a rather large fish that was hurled in his direction.

"Hey!!" was all the challenge he was allowed before a second and then a third hit him squarely in the chest as he stood.

Gabrielle managed to contain her mirth, though her eyes twinkled mischievously. That glimpse of the young woman he had known kept him from retaliating, though he did glare hard at her with his hands planted on his hips.

"You know, I did just take a bath this morning. Now I smell like fish."

Gabrielle smirked as she stepped from the water. "Not like a little morewater is gonna make you melt. Enjoy it," she said as she picked up the three fish. "I'll clean these and see what I can find to go with them." Then she was gone. Cecrops looked up at the sky.

"Some days, you've just GOT to wonder WHY ME?" Then he stripped off his clothing and jumped into the water, taking his shirt with him.

He sloshed water over himself, acknowledging there was only so much clean-up he could do without soap. When he got out, he noticed a towel and a small cake of soap by his clothing and wondered when Gabrielle had stopped by and how it was he hadn't noticed her. Shrugging, he walked back into the water and scrubbed both himself and the shirt, then he stepped out and wrapped the towel around himself. He located a convenient rock and stretched out on it, hanging his shirt on a nearby bush to dry.

"I can see traveling with you is going to be an interesting experience, Little One," he mused aloud before he let the warmth of the afternoon pull him into a light doze.

He couldn't be sure if it was the chill of the setting sun or the scent of cooking fishing wafting to his nose from the campfire that woke him, but Cecrops quickly awakened and dressed and headed back towards their camp.

Gabrielle had a pot of something bubbling on one side of the fire and was carefully turning the fish in the skillet. He could see a pot of tea brewing and it looked suspiciously like she'd found some sort of berry or other as well.

"I can see you do this a lot."

Gabrielle turned towards him as he spoke. "Is that a good thing?"

"Yes. I enjoy competence and you are exceptionally proficient."

She smiled. "LOTS of practice."

He picked up the large bag she had leaned against the small stack of firewood. "This is intriguing," he noted, eveing all the different pockets and carry spaces. "A result of your practice?" He set the bag back down.

"Yep. Dite and I worked hard to make something that would carry what I needed without making me bend under the weight."

"Well, it's very clever and dinner smells wonderful."

"Thank you. It's ready... just need to dish it up. Did you have a good swim?"

"Yes, I did, thank you. And sometime, you'll have to share with me just how you managed to sneak in and out like that without my noticing you. Do you know how long it's been since anyone could do that to me?" He accepted the plate from her hands and took a bite of the fish.

He chewed slowly, savoring the taste. "Oh my... you may never get rid of me now," he said with a twinkling smile.

"Glad you like it," she said as she took her own plate to the other side of the fire and sat on her bedding. "It's always more fun to cook for someone else. Makes it worth the effort, ya know."

"Yes, I do. And this is worth that second bath."

Gabrielle chuckled, but just kept eating.

The fire had died down and everything was cleaned and put away in anticipation of an early start the following morning. Gabrielle was gazing at the stars, lost in thoughts of times spent with Xena just like this when a streak of light making its way across the speckled black background caught her attention. She retrieved her diary and writing materials from her pack, then noted the appearance and the date. It wasn't the first time she'd seen the odd characteristic appear in the night sky and she knew if it held true to form, it would be around for several weeks.

"You keeping an eye on that?" Cecrops rumbled lowly into the darkness.

"Yeah. It got my attention years ago and I'm just keeping a record of when and where I see it. Another way to mark the passing time, I guess," she added with a shrug.

"Well, sometime we'll have to compare notes, but for now, I'm gonna call it a night. Goodnight, Little One."

"Goodnight, Cecrops." Gabrielle looked back at the sky and returned her eyes to the comet's slow path. "Goodnight, Xena."

## Chapter XX

"So where... ex... ugh... exactly... oomph... are we... headed?"

Cecrops was panting hard as he moved the boulder into place. In all his many, MANY years on earth, he couldn't recall a time he had worked so hard. Certainly it had been an eternity since a pair of beautiful eyes and a cute smile had been able to coax so much effort from him with a simple please.

"Ya know, old man," he muttered to himself. "You could be in \*real\* trouble here."

"Problem?" Gabrielle queried as she passed by him carrying a large sack of sand. They were helping some villagers shore up a dam. The rains they'd had in this province had threatened their very existence and Gabrielle and Cecrops had volunteered to help them.

Or more accurately, Gabrielle had volunteered and then cajoled Cecrops into assisting the villagers as well.

"Nope," he groaned as he lifted another huge rock into place. "No problem here."

Gabrielle dropped her bag into place and wiped her brow. "Well, at least we're almost done and Daoning has invited us to stay for a bit."

"Why?" Cecrops asked as he dropped the boulder in place. "They need us to raise a barn or something?"

Gabrielle looked at him a long moment before answering. "No. We're the guests of honor at a celebration feast."

Cecrops had the decency to look abashed at her tone and he looked away from her stare. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle. I think I'm just tired. I haven't worked this hard in a very long time."

The blonde head nodded solemnly. "Cecrops, if you really don't want to do this...."

She stopped speaking when his hands covered hers. "No. I just sometimes have to be reminded about what's important in life. I get complacent sometimes and forget how the rest of mankind suffers to survive. Thank you for reminding me of my humanity and the responsibility I have to it."

Gabrielle squeezed his fingers. "That's one of the reasons I still do this. It reminds me of who I was and who I am."

Cecrops released her hands and placed his on the small of his back, stretching and moaning as his spine popped back into alignment. "At least this will be something we will be able to look back on in another thousand years and remember that we helped make it possible. When will the stone masons begin their work?"

"Um, tomorrow, I think," Gabrielle answered as she ran her dirty hands through her equally dirty hair. "Ugh. In the meantime, I think I need a bath."

Cecrops pushed a blob of mud from his forearm. "You and me both, Little One. I feel like I could soak for days and not get rid of all the mud."

Gabrielle laughed. "I think the only time I've felt worse was after days crossing the desert and walking through a sandstorm, but it doesn't beat the mud by much."

Cecrops scrunched up his face. "Oh, that sounds almost painful," but a glimpse at her face made him realize she was no longer listening and he wondered what memories their conversation had conjured up for her. He watched her for a few moments before turning at a soft touch on his arm and being escorted towards the baths.

Gabrielle remained lost in her thoughts as she slowly made her way to the small sleeping room Daoning had offered her for the duration of her stay. It wasn't large, though it was more than adequate for her needs. A

knock on the bamboo frame brought her out of her musings.

"Yes?"

"Bath, Lady Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle laughed aloud at the title. "Just plain Gabrielle, Dao." She looked at her mud coated skin and winced. "And yeah, a bath would be great."

"Come. Private bath all prepared for you."

A dirty blonde brow rose to an equally dirty blonde hairline. She was well aware of the custom of communal bathing and though not particularly fond of it, had developed a tolerance for its necessity. Dao giggled at the comical sight the bard made with her muddy face, standing hair and stern, questioning demeanor.

"Apologies, Little Dragon Warrior, but you...." her voice trailed off uncertainly.

Gabrielle's expression changed so rapidly and her head snapped so hard to one side that it was amazing it simply didn't pop off and glare at Daoning of its own accord. Dao caught the furious look and her eyes widened in shock as she took a step back.

Gabrielle noted the unconscious reaction and rubbed her hand across her forehead, smearing the mud a little more.

"Now I'm sorry, Dao. Where, um... where did you hear that name?"

Daoning picked up the large towels and cake of soap she'd brought with her and gestured Gabrielle to follow. Then she began speaking.

"Many years ago, there was woman called by such name who traveled through land. She was fierce warrior who defended weak, who took time to help those in need. She became hero and myth to my people. History describes her much like you, though she never spoke. We have heard of way you and your friend have helped many villages here. You have been so kind to us that we wanted to honor you. This was most fitting way we could do so."

Dao slid back the partition to the small bathing room she'd prepared for Gabrielle and motioned her towards the steaming water. "Besides, you bear mark. I will return shortly with clean clothing." Then she stepped back out of the room and closed the door shut behind her before Gabrielle could say a word.

Gabrielle ran her hand through her hair again, flinching at the dirt that scattered at her feet with the motion. "Take whatever small blessing you can find, Gabrielle," she coached herself, before stripping out of her ruined filthy clothing and stepping into the bliss of clean, hot water.

It wouldn't have taken much coaxing for Gabrielle to have simply fallen asleep in the tub, but she was all too aware of the tattoo which could so easily betray her secret to the people who know her story, even if they were ignorant of the fact that it was indeed hers.

So she bathed quickly and wrapped herself in one towel, draping the second over her head to cover her shoulders. She dropped her dirty clothes into the still warm water to soak and sat back on the bench to watch

the small flames in the fire pit.

Dao was surprised to find Gabrielle already finished with her bath and waiting on her clean clothing. She handed the small pile to the bard and deliberately turned her back to afford Gabrielle as much privacy as she could. Dao reached for the clothing and began scrubbing it.

"I can do that, Dao," Gabrielle said as she slipped cool silk over her shoulders and reached for the matching trousers. The woman had thoughtfully included a comb and Gabrielle returned to the bench to work out the snarls.

"Yes, you can," the Chinese woman replied, "but I do best."

Gabrielle's eyebrows rose. "Are you implying I am laundry incompetent?"

Dao thought about the words a moment before answering. When she did so, it was with a smile. "No. But this I know well - three sons, one husband, big muddy river."

Gabrielle laughed. "I see your point." She paused in her combing and took a deep breath. "Dao, why did I rate a private bath? And don't tell me it is because I remind you of some mythical savior from old legends. Everyone out there today worked hard and yet I'll bet no one else got privacy like this," motioning around the nearly empty hut.

"You wear mark of goddess. Is respect."

Gabrielle studied herself, trying to figure out what sign of which goddess Dao was referring to. The Chinese woman saw the look confusion that crossed Gabrielle's face and rose from her spot by the tub. She dried her hands on one of the discarded towels before reaching for Gabrielle's hand.

Gabrielle gazed at her own hand curiously before Dao brought her attention to her bracelet. For the first time, she realized that a mark had been added and wondered when it had come to be there and how she had missed it up to that point. Then again, it wasn't like she took the metal gauntlets off and studied them at every opportunity either.

Gabrielle looked a little more closely at the symbol, then turned her attention to Dao. "What does it mean?" realizing that it was one she'd never seen before.

Daoning shrugged. "Mark of goddess. Ch'uang-Mu's blessing of chosen." Dao peered into the green eyes. "Do you know goddess? Do you serve her?"

Gabrielle hesitated, unwilling to share the whole truth. "I visited the temple for a while and I studied many of the texts there."

Dao looked at her a little disbelievingly, but let the comment pass. No matter what, Gabrielle bore the image that marked her as a Chosen and it was not for Dao to challenge that; especially as Gabrielle had proven herself knowledgeable in both their customs and their folklore and deities, to say nothing of her general knowledge of the workings of the world.

"Come," Dao beckoned as she stood again. "Time for feast."

Gabrielle smiled. She appreciated the gesture and she would appreciate the food and the good company that would go with it.

"You're being very quiet tonight," Cecrops said softly as they focused on the entertainment. There were several children performing some interesting acrobatics and it was quite fascinating to watch. At the moment, they were spinning plates on poles and Gabrielle secretly wondered how many plates they dropped before becoming so proficient.

"Am I? Sorry... just thinking." Gabrielle absently chewed her thumbnail.

Cecrops turned his attention to her fully. "Does your thinking have anything to do with your avoiding my question this afternoon, or is it something else entirely?"

"Huh?" It wasn't the most articulate reply, but it was all she could manage at the moment. The look of pure confusion that crossed her face assured Cecrops that Gabrielle was totally clueless about what he was referring to.

"This afternoon... I asked you where we were headed. You never answered."

"I never heard the question. All I got was you mumbling to yourself about being old," Gabrielle teased.

"Little One, I \*am\* old. After today, I just feel it... ALL of it." Cecrops smiled though and Gabrielle accepted his repartee easily. "So what's the answer?" he finally prompted when it became clear she wasn't going to reply.

"Oh, sorry. I'd like to walk the wall, actually."

Cecrops put a hand to his forehead to make sure his eyebrows didn't actually pop off in surprised reaction. "The wall? The Great Wall? All four thousand miles?"

"Yep. It is about the only thing I have left to do here and I'd really like to see the country from its perspective."

"You know, it is still pretty active militarily. The Chinese may have a problem with a couple Greeks just waltzing up expecting to use it as some sort of common road."

"Maybe, but apparently, I've been marked for protection as one of Ch'uang-Mu's chosen. Surely they will leave us alone. And if not, it's not like we can't kick butt and take names. We've done it before."

The plate bearers finished their performance and a small group of tumblers came out. Dao offered both Gabrielle and Cecrops a bit of wine and both accepted, then sat back to enjoy the small cakes that were served as dessert as they watched the acrobats.

Cecrops contemplated the best way to say what was troubling him and finally just decided on the direct approach.

"That probably isn't a wise idea, Little One. Already I have heard the rumors and legends of your existence a C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

thousand years ago and it was the stories of this trip that brought me to your side now." He sighed. "If you don't want people to discover your secret, you have to be a little more discreet."

Gabrielle's shoulders slumped. "How do I help people if I am busy worrying about what stories are being told about me?"

He clasped her hand gently. "We'll work on it together. At least with there being two of us, the stories will be different." He paused, hesitating. "Do you, um... do you still have the tattoo?"

Her head swung around swiftly and she realized with a sense of ironic black humor that it was fortunate indeed that she was an immortal. Her head would have easily popped off otherwise at this point.

"How did you...?" She was fairly certain he had respected her privacy as she had his, but this was the first time since Xena's death that she'd traveled with anyone and she was a bit disconcerted at his question.

"The stories and legends mention it. It is one reason you were originally given the nickname Little Dragon Warrior." Cecrops didn't mention the opportunity he had taken to see it for himself. It was a harmless indulgence, but he was ashamed enough of his weakness and scared enough of her wrath that he kept that little detail to himself.

Gabrielle blanched. She was beginning to feel haunted by her past.

"Excuse me," she mumbled before standing and walking out of the light and into the darkness that surrounded the village.

She found a lone tree a short distance from the village set on a hill high enough that she could still observe the festivities. Right now, though, unseeing eyes gazed sightlessly at the panorama spread below her and focused instead on the ache she felt in her very soul.

"Oh, Xena," she whispered. "I am so tired." Gabrielle turned her attention to the stars she could see so clearly above her. "I miss you so much. I don't know how much longer I can do this alone."

"You're not alone, Gabrielle."

The bard didn't even flinch at the sound of the voice right next to her. She kept her eyes glued to the heavens, not willing to let anyone, not even a friendly goddess, see the depths of her despair.

"Yes I am, Ch'uang. In many ways I am and will always be until Xena and I are reunited. There are places in me so deep that only she can fill...." Gabrielle drew a shuddering breath. "I know I have friends and I do appreciate all of you, but it isn't the same thing."

Ch'uang lightly grasped Gabrielle's arm. "I know... and I am sorry. Never have I met a human who has endured like you have, Gabrielle. Your fortitude and strength of spirit are astounding. It is natural that the fight to maintain wears on you." The goddess paused. "I know there is little I can do to ease the ache of separation, but I can assure you if you want to walk the wall, your way will be free and clear as far as the guardians are concerned."

Gabrielle looked at Ch'uang questioningly and the Chinese goddess continued. "Helping others is a large part of who you are. I gave you my mark so you could continue to do so without censure or question."

Gabrielle nodded, her pain and fatigue making her still unsure of what she was being offered.

"Gabrielle, as long as you desire to help my people, I will grant you whatever protection I can afford you to keep your identity a secret. And if you ever feel like it is becoming too much to bear again, all you have to do is call me and I will come. Whether it is to listen or just to sit together as friends or to offer you a place to rejuvenate... it is yours for the asking." Ch'uang took another deep breath. She had missed Gabrielle greatly since the bard had left the palace and she was again unused to speaking so much. "You have come so far."

"And still have so far to go."

"And still have so much good to share," Ch'uang corrected gently. "You will find your soul's other half, I promise you."

"Do you really believe that, Ch'uang?"

The goddess nodded her dark head firmly. "Oh yes. I really do."

Gabrielle smiled, heartened by someone else's belief in them. She reached over and embraced the goddess in a firm, brief hug.

"Thank you, Ch'uang. I needed to hear that."

Ch'uang-Mu smiled. "I am glad I could be of service. Would that all my requests were so easy to grant."

"Sometimes, it's nice to know I'm not crazy trying to get back to her." Gabrielle scratched her head. "Or catch up to her... or whatever." She chuckled self-consciously.

"Can I tell you a secret, just between us girls?" the goddess asked conspiratorially.

Gabrielle's brows jumped. "Uh, sure," wondering where this was going.

"I envy you."

Gabrielle scrubbed her face, sure she'd misunderstood. "I beg your pardon?"

Brown eyes twinkled as they returned the green regard. "I envy you. I know you do not believe me, but it is true nonetheless." She held up a hand to forestall any questions. "Wait. You have something so powerful, so strong that it will see you through to the end of your search. It is not just your bond with Xena, but something inside yourself. Something that compels you to succeed. Something that makes its own legacy. Something that the gods have never been privy to."

Gabrielle blinked, stunned by the revelation.

"May I ask you a question?" Ch'uang said, trying to get some sort of response. Slowly, Gabrielle's head turned to face her and the goddess wanted to chuckle over the completely bewildered expression Gabrielle wore. Instead, she waited patiently for the bard to nod.

"Why did you come this way? You were not that far from the wall when you left the palace years ago and yet C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

you have not begun your walk yet. Why is that?"

Gabrielle swallowed. This was something she could answer without thought or hesitation. "Well, in truth I wanted to start at the beginning and walk to the end. And along the way there has always been someone to help, someone in need. I guess that took more time than I expected."

Ch'uang smile, thoroughly pleased with the response. "Relish your humanity, Gabrielle. It is one of the most beautiful things about you."

Gabrielle blushed and rose. "I need to get back, but thank you for... well, everything, Ch'uang. I'm glad you stopped by to chat."

Ch'uang nodded and stood as well, though she did not reveal to Gabrielle that the pleading ache in her voice as she spoke to her long missing lover nearly undid her resolve for secrecy. She simply said, "I, too am glad, Gabrielle. I miss talking to you." She gave the bard a strong embrace. "Remember that you need merely call me if you are in need of anything, even if it is just a little girl talk." She tapped the bracelet. "You are among my chosen, you know."

"Thank you Ch'uang. That was quite a surprise for me."

"And keep an eye on your traveling companion," the goddess added with a waving finger. "He is a good man, but he cares too deeply. This can be a good or bad thing, depending on you."

Gabrielle sighed. "Why me?"

Ch'uang laughed, a full out belly laugh that caused Gabrielle to join her. "Think back Gabrielle. It is in the nature of things... for both you and Xena. It doesn't stop because you are temporarily separated. It just makes the focus sharper."

Gabrielle held her head in her hands and shook it back and forth. "Maybe I should try Xena's remedy."

Ch'uang cocked a brow in inquiry and Gabrielle chuckled in memory.

"No personal hygiene or grooming... then we decided that would probably attract worse."

"Oh my, yes. At least you attract a nice decent sort now. And you have never had a problem explaining the error of their ways to them. Why tempt Fate?"

Gabrielle nodded, knowing the Fates would do her little kindness after she'd destroyed the loom, even if her actions did right the wrong that had been done to them.

"Now," Ch'uang continued, "go back to the festivities before you are missed by everyone and they start hunting for you. I will be around. Enjoy your walk." And she was gone a silently as she'd come.

Gabrielle turned her steps back to the village, glad to see that the party had continued in spite of her absence. Cecrops crooked his head in her direction, glad to see a slight smile on her lips.

"Are you all right, Little One? I didn't mean...."

"I'm fine. I just REALLY don't like that nickname."

"Well, you won't hear it from me again. I didn't know...."

Gabrielle held up her hands, not really wanting to have this conversation yet again. "It's all right, Cecrops, really. Not like I gave you a list or anything. So what'd I miss?" directing his attention back to the entertainers.

"Oh, um..." he stuttered, trying to get his mind back on the performance going on on the stage. "The, um... the rest of the acrobats and the dancing bear."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. The storytellers are up next."

Gabrielle continued to look at him for a long moment after the first bard was introduced. Then she moved her attention back to the stage, only to stifle a groan at the raconteur's choice of tales. Cecrops leaned over to whisper in her ear, though he remained out of touch.

"I did tell you there were myths and legends of you out here, hero."

Gabrielle drummed her fingers on her knees in agitation as the teller continued with his tales. It was the only sign of the struggle she was having to stay quiet. The man finished to great applause and several more followed, all with tales of the woman known as Little Dragon Warrior. When the last man was done, Gabrielle rose.

Dao's husband Kuang was the village headman and he motioned for her to speak. She bowed her thanks.

"If it pleases you, I have been known to share a tale or two in my day. If I could...."

Kuang nodded enthusiastically and Gabrielle took the small stage to a round of appreciative applause for her willingness and a sea of expectant faces.

"It's been a while since I've done this, so please bear with me. You've all told some wonderful stories about a mythical warrior woman who roamed your land helping others. I would like to tell you about a real warrior woman who sought her redemption the same way. A woman whose story is near and dear to my heart. A woman I would be proud to call friend."

Gabrielle paused and cleared her throat.

"I sing to you of Xena, a Warrior Princess born to greatness. A warrior whose strength and compassion were just as potent as the sword she wielded so fearlessly."

The audience became swept up in the telling, never once noticing the tears that slipped silently down Gabrielle's cheeks.

"When it was over, the ambrosia had worked and the warrior was restored to live and fight another day."

Silence at first, as though the villagers could not believe the tale was told. Then as one body, they rose and clapped and stomped and cheered. Gabrielle wiped her eyes and laughed joyously. It had been forever since

she'd been a bard and for the first time in centuries, she felt \*alive\* again.

It was late when she finally shed the last of her admirers and made it back to her small room alone. She was exhausted in a good kind of way and looking forward to beginning her wall walk the following day.

The wall was actually interesting. It was built in several different styles, depending on the location and the materials available during its construction. It was hard work climbing the countless steps and walking the many miles. But as Ch'uang had promised, no one stopped their progress and they diverted numerous times to help people along their route.

It was with their arrival in Mongolia at the end of their four thousand mile walk that things began to change.

## Chapter XXI

"Please Cecrops. Don't make this any worse than it has to be."

"But...."

"No." Her voice was hard and firm. "I don't need this and I'm not gonna put up with it anymore." She blew out a breath. "I respect the fact that you're lonely. Hell, I understand it in a way no one else on earth possibly could."

"Exactly, so...." She went on as though he had not spoken.

"But you don't seem to respect the fact that I cannot, will not be more than your friend. EVER. Now, I am telling you to leave before we can't even be friends."

The sadness in her tone undercut the anger he felt radiating from her and he was filled with remorse. He had pushed and pushed until he pushed her away and suddenly he realized he was on the verge of losing something he had come to value greatly.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle. I had hoped.... Anyway, I want you to know that if you ever need me, need a friend, all you need to do is send word to me. I will come without question or hesitation. And I will never... well, I hope one day to be worthy of your respect again. Forgive an old man his foolishness."

She nodded, but said nothing, trying to contain the rage she felt. Then she watched as he walked out of her life and her shoulders sagged as her soul mourned the loss of a friend.

"Are you sure this is a good idea Little One? He's known to be somewhat of a ruthless warlord tyrant."

Gabrielle smirked at Cecrops' sedate description of the man whose encampment they were rapidly approaching. He sometimes had a serious misplaced gift for understating the obvious.

"I'm aware of his reputation, Cecrops. That's why we are here now."

"Why do I get the feeling there is more to this story than I am conscious of?"

Gabrielle sighed. "Probably because there is. Do you remember when we parted company?" She waited for him to search his memories and nod before continuing. He had returned to her side at her behest now and he had better control of his feelings and a far more profound respect for hers.

"Well, I stumbled into a camp like this and met a man who called himself Genghis Khan. We had the opportunity to talk at length."

Cecrops tilted his head. "All right. So why are we here now?"

"Because he made promises to me and I intend to see that he keeps them."

Nearly black eyes opened wide in shock. "He made promises to you??"

Gabrielle cuffed him on the back of the head and he looked at her in startlement. "Not those kinds of promises, Cecrops. You should know better than that."

"I do, Little One and I apologize for how that sounded. But I know how the culture here works."

"True. I did have to prove myself a warrior before he would talk to the bard."

"And what did he promise the bard?"

"Consideration."

"Huh?" Cecrops had the distinct feeling he was missing valuable pieces to the puzzle he'd been handed. He knew that Khan was known as a vicious marauder, killing all who opposed him and eradicating whole towns of people that sided against him. "Gabrielle, you can't take someone like that and make them a kinder, gentler ruler with only your words."

Gabrielle merely returned his look, knowing the truth from her own personal experience. Cecrops had the grace to blush, amazing considering the depth of his skin tone, but apparent to Gabrielle nonetheless.

"I didn't ask him to stop being a warlord, Cecrops. That's not something one human being can determine for another. I just ask him to think about how he could improve his rule and offered him some suggestions."

"Did he listen?"

"I dunno. That's why we're here."

"That's why \*you're\* here. Why did you invite me along?"

"I thought that if he didn't listen to me, perhaps he might listen to you."

"Because I am a man?"

Blood Bond

17/02/2011 "Yep."

Cecrops shrugged. "All right. I don't mind being a back-up plan, especially since it allowed me the chance to finally apologize to you for being a pig."

Gabrielle blushed and Cecrops wondered what was behind it. She nodded. "Please don't use that phrase."

"All right," he responded, the confusion plain in his voice, but Gabrielle did nothing to enlighten him. "Anyway, I'm glad to be back."

Gabrielle patted his arm. "I'm glad you are too. I missed having a friend to talk to." She didn't mention that the goddesses had both come around for a short while once he left. She didn't figure he needed to know how close he'd come to an extended painful existence. Gabrielle hoped he'd learned his lesson by being sent away, because they had promised all sorts of untold misfortune if he behaved that way towards the bard again.

Gabrielle found it charming to the point of flattering and not a little embarrassing. This one thing she was glad Xena was not around to witness. She would have found a way to make Cecrops a dead man and would have teased Gabrielle mercilessly about her two godly protectors. Though in fairness, Xena had gradually been coming to terms with the fact that Gabrielle was a more than competent adult, capable of taking care of herself handily. She had always just tended to forget that little fact when it looked like someone was making a move on her bard.

Gabrielle chuckled silently, then it became a sad smile. Never thought I'd miss that possessive streak.

Cecrops didn't know exactly what incident put the melancholy in Gabrielle's expression, but he was fully cognizant of WHO was behind it. So he waited patiently for Gabrielle to return to the present, having learned the hard way not to push when she grew pensive like this.

Gabrielle shook herself from her reverie. "C'mon," she said at last. "Let's not keep him waiting."

It took a bit of doing to begin with, but by the time they had reached the third set of guards, Gabrielle was being welcomed like an old friend. They waited patiently in front of the large command tent while their presence was announced, then they were being presented to the Universal ruler, Genghis Khan.

Khan rose as Gabrielle approached and Cecrops hung back just slightly, taking in the events unfolding as if he were simply an interested bystander. Cecrops stood straight, following Gabrielle's lead and waited for Khan to walk forward to greet them. Cecrops was startled by the relative small size of the man who stood before him and he met the Chinese ruler's appraising gaze evenly. Only when he saw Gabrielle bow did Cecrops observe the courtesy. Khan regarded him a moment longer before turning and bowing to Gabrielle with a flourish.

"Ah, my bardic warrior friend. Is good to see you again and so well. Introduce me to your glowering shadow and then we will talk, yes? And perhaps you favor me with a bit of sparring?"

"Khan, this is Ce...."

"My name is Semelo and Gabrielle has shared much about you. It is an honor to meet you." Cecrops bowed then extended his hand in greeting.

Khan looked more than slightly bewildered at this sudden change of attitude on the part of the tall, dark Greek. Gabrielle felt the confusion wash over her features, but managed a completely stoic look by the time Khan turned to face her.

"You were right about many things, Gabrielle," Khan commented as he seated her and motioned for refreshments to be served. "And the changes you advised me to make have helped my kingdom thrive."

"May I ask what you advised?" Cecrops rumbled lowly.

Khan held up a hand. "Allow me, my friend." He turned to face Cecrops squarely. "Gabrielle came in and after, ahem, much convincing on her part, persuaded me to see the value of reading. She taught many of my army the rudimentary skills enabling them to do so. I also have a message exchange system that lets me keep in touch with all areas of my kingdom regularly and not just at tribute time. Makes my rule immensely easier and surprisingly less bloody."

"Really?"

Gabrielle sat quietly eating her snack watching the interplay between the two men and silently chuckling at their posturing. She was more than a little stunned by the fact that Khan had indeed taken many of her suggestions to heart and implemented them into his rule.

Some things she couldn't change and the fact that he was a brutal warlord was one of them. But she could help make things better and that she had done. She blinked and came back to the present with a start when she realized both men were looking at her curiously.

"I'm sorry," she apologized as she hastily swallowed her mouthful. "My mind had wandered back to my first visit. Did I miss something?"

"Yes," Khan responded with a smile. "I was giving Semelo your views on our discussion on religion and he was asking you for confirmation."

"Ah," Gabrielle responded with a small blush. Ce... um, Semelo and I have never really talked about religion aside from ancient Greek mythology. It's never really come up for discussion."

Khan cast a curious eye between them, then shrugged his mental shoulders in an act of dismissal. What they did or did not talk about was really none of his concern, though it did tickle his curiosity.

"Well then," he said without missing a beat. "I told Semelo here that you were the one who taught me respect for all religions. Ruling the world is not a holy war; it is simply my destiny. Making it into something it is not only causes it to become messy."

Gabrielle gave an embarrassed chuckle. "Well, now... I didn't say all that. I merely said that respecting everyone's right to worship in their way wasn't a bad idea."

"And you were correct," Khan affirmed. "It has saved countless lives."

"One wonders, though, how history will remember Genghis Khan," Cecrops spoke softly. "Will they remember the reforms? The advancements he made? Or will they only remember the killing and fighting? His ferocity and heartlessness in battle?"

"That depends on who does the writing," Gabrielle said and both men turned to look at her directly before she continued

"History belongs to the victor. Their storytellers and historians are the ones who decide what details are written and which ones are those best forgotten."

"Sounds like you speak from experience, Gabrielle," Khan commented as he refreshed his tea and hers.

"More than you know, Genghis. More than you know." She added honey to her tea and took a sip before continuing. "And it's amazing how some of the things that get left out can come back and bite you in the ass."

"It's happened to you?" Cecrops asked, intrigued. There were still so many things he didn't know about Gabrielle or her life with Xena.

Gabrielle gave a rueful chuckle, her encounter with the nomad tribes of the desert far enough behind her to offer her a broader perspective of what had happened, though it didn't change the sadness she felt at Korah's death.

"Oh yes. Stories condition people to expect one thing. If they get something different, well, the results are not always happy ones."

"Well, then I shall endeavor to make sure that people get what they expect," Khan said. "Now, do you feel up to sparring, or would you like to rest a bit and start fresh tomorrow?"

Gabrielle rose and removed her outer jacket, leaving her in a silk sleeveless tunic and trousers. Wordlessly, she began stretching out and Khan took that as his cue to start his own warm-up routine. This went on for several minutes and Cecrops made himself comfortable as he watched in fascination.

Nothing was said, but by unspoken consent the two came together with blades drawn, engaging in moves that resembled a dance more than it did a fight. The lamplight wavered before the two changed from blades to staffs... Gabrielle wielded a full length staff while Khan used two shorter sticks joined by a thick chain.

Both opponents were sweating profusely and Khan was winded, but their attacks did not slow and occasionally, one would wince in pain as a hit landed. Khan was more marked than Gabrielle and as they switched to hand-to-hand combat, Cecrops wondered at the older man's stamina.

Then he saw the change come over Gabrielle's face and understood in that minute that she had been being polite to their host. It was a flurry of motion and even though his eyes never left the two competitors, Cecrops was never exactly sure what happened. All he knew was that one minute Khan and Gabrielle were facing off and the next minute, Gabrielle was kneeling on Khan's chest, hands at shoulder level ready to administer the pinch.

Sweat rolled down her temple and dropped from her chin onto Khan's chest and the man did not move. He signaled his surrender of her victory and waited for her to return to herself and slide from his body before he relaxed and dropped his head to the ground.

Gabrielle rose and took a towel from the young woman who offered them and patted her face and arms dry. That was the only sound in the room aside from the heavy breathing coming from Khan who remained on the

floor where Gabrielle had left him.

Cecrops eyes were wide. It suddenly occurred to him exactly how merciful Gabrielle had been to him. Given what he had just witnessed, she could have easily done serious damage to even his immortal body and he was fairly certain that wasn't something he wanted to live through. Cecrops got up and stood over Khan, extending his hand and offering him help up.

Khan noted the twinkle in the dark eyes regarding him and accepted the hand with a muffled chuckle.

"I have yet to come close to defeating her. I do not know who her teacher was, but he must have been incredible," the Chinese leader mumbled almost under his breath. Cecrops opened his mouth to answer when he was cut off by Gabrielle's voice.

"Actually, she was the greatest warrior Greece ever produced. The stuff legends are made of," Gabrielle said before turning her back and walking out into the evening air.

Khan exchanged a glance with Cecrops.

"Semelo, did I say something wrong?"

"No, Khan. I think the exercise triggered some old memories. I'm sure the words did."

Khan wiped the sweat from himself with the towel the girl had provided him with, then made a move to follow Gabrielle. "Perhaps I should...." A hand on his arm halted both his words and steps and he looked up to see the ebony head give a negative shake.

"Let her be."

Khan pulled away from Cecrops' grip with a bit of a snatch. "I think I know...."

When Cecrops resumed his grip on Khan's arm, he did so with formidable strength and the smaller man found he could not break Cecrops' hold. "I think you don't. Leave her alone."

Khan looked up at Cecrops with all the venom he could muster. "Release me, before I have you executed."

Cecrops merely tightened his grip and pulled Khan closer to him until he towered over the Chinese man. He leaned over until their foreheads were nearly touching. "Let me make myself perfectly clear to you, little man. You may be the ruler of all you survey, but you are not my master and I will not be commanded like a dog. Better men than you have tried to kill me and yet here I stand."

Khan stood stunned. No one had ever spoken to him with such disregard for his title and position of leadership since the coup attempt early in his career. With a hand motion he signaled the few honor guard who'd stepped forward and stopped at his first motion. Now they returned to their corners to carefully watch the drama before them play out.

"Now, I'm going to say this to you one more time." Cecrops whisper was fierce but effective. "Leave. Gabrielle. Alone."

Khan searched Cecrop eyes for a very long moment before discovering the truth. "You love her."

"I care for her deeply. She is my oldest and dearest friend."

"There is more to it than that, Semelo. I have seen the look before."

Cecrops released Khan's arm. "I care for her deeply. That is enough."

Suddenly understanding far more than was being said with words, Khan clapped Cecrops on the shoulder. "Come, my friend. I believe we understand one another now. Let us have some wine and then we'll see if we can find a bath and some lovely companionship for supper."

Cecrops smiled and accepted the proffered cup. Then he followed Khan in search of a bath.

Gabrielle was already being attended to by the time the men made it to the bathing area as they could tell by the screen that had been set up to allow her some privacy. The two men continued their conversation in normal tones to let her know they had arrived.

She smiled at their consideration and continued to bathe herself, sliding beneath the water to rinse the soap from her hair. She had dismissed the attendant, so she rose and let the water drip for a long moment before stepping from the tub and grabbing the towel to dry herself with. Then Gabrielle combed out her hair as she listened to the nonsensical argument coming from the other side of the screen.

She laughed silently as she recognized the argument, then her ears picked a more intriguing conversation.

"I am telling you, Khan... not only is it a bear, but the earth really is round."

"Semelo, even if I accept your argument that what is so obviously a dipper is a bear, which I don't," he added with a grin. Cecrops nodded his understanding. "That is still not a good basis for your round world theory."

"Ah, but I have been around it."

Complete silence greeted his words as though he had stunned his listener. Finally the tableau was broken by the rustle of fabric on the other side of the screen. Khan blinked and drew a deep breath.

"Very interesting," he said at last. "How did you manage it?"

"Have you heard of an explorer from the Norselands known as Leif Erikson?"

"No. Where are these Norselands you speak of, Semelo?"

"Beyond your western borders and far to the north." Cecrops waited for Khan to process the information and nod, motioning for him to continue. Cecrops took a deep breath.

"A few years ago, I was traveling in that area, when I came across a tribe that seemed to be preparing for a very long journey. I fell in with them, hunting, fishing," he gestured with his hands. "You know." Genghis Khan nodded again. "Anyway, we got to talking about different sea experiences we'd had and in the course of the discussion, they invited me to join their quest."

"Which was?"

"New lands to conquer," Cecrops answered dryly. "But my curiosity was great, so I joined them. And we found another land... many days journey to the west."

"What was it like?" Gabrielle strained to hear because it was the question she'd wanted to ask.

"Beautiful... wild and untamed. The native peoples there live off the land and take only what the need." Cecrops' gaze went inward, thinking back to his relatively brief time in that place. "I could have settled there very easily."

"So why didn't you?" Khan asked reasonably.

"Curiosity," Cecrops answered frankly. "I wanted to see where the road led... what was over the next hill."

The two men had finished bathing and stepped from the water to dry of briskly. "And what did you find?" the Chinese leader asked as they started dressing.

"Many things, but mostly I found that the road led in a circle."

"I do not understand. When you reach the eastern border of my land, you hit water and everyone knows that the world drops off out of sight there."

"But it doesn't, Khan. That's what I'm telling you. I walked many days journey across this new land. I saw mountains, plains, a desert... animals and plants I have seen nowhere else and when I reached the end of the land, I was met by sand and ocean. That ocean brought me back to this land."

"Is that possible, Semelo?" Khan asked, intrigued but skeptical.

"Not only is it possible, it's the truth. It is a very long journey, but if you go far enough to the east, it is really there."

"How very intriguing," Khan said after a moment's thought. Then he slapped Cecrops on the back. "Come, we can continue this discussion at dinner, but I am hungry and we do not want to keep Gabrielle or my wives waiting."

"Wives?" Cecrops repeated under his breath as they left the bathing room. Who needed more than one for the gods' sake?

Gabrielle stood from the bench where she'd seated herself to listen to Cecrops' story. Suddenly, she felt she knew exactly where she would find Xena.

"Intriguing indeed," she muttered before turning to make her way to dinner.

"So, Gabrielle, what plans do you have when you leave here?"

Gabrielle chewed and swallowed, glad she'd mastered the art of chopsticks hundreds of years before. The Chinese rarely offered her a knife or spoon and though she had managed to craft a utensil that allowed her to pick up food on several tines, she felt conspicuous bringing it out in front of others.

Now she paused, chopsticks empty and looked at Khan who regarded her with an expectant air. Then she realized that everyone at the table was waiting for her answer and blushed. She was trying not to call attention to herself, remembering both Ch'uang's and Cecrops' words to her on that very subject about discretion.

Not that she'd ever deliberately drawn attention to herself, but the fact was there were stories out there about her. And if she wasn't careful, someone who took the time to listen and put the facts together would eventually come up with the truth. Even as unbelievable and improbable as it seemed, it was more risk than she was willing to accept. Gabrielle knew that was all too true and had since done her best to downplay her public activity, allowing and encouraging others to assume authority for her efforts. Having Ares discover her at this stage would be a bad thing, so it was easy for her to step into the shadows.

"I honestly don't know. Maybe I will go visit some old friends off the coast," thinking of the Amazons. "I haven't really thought about it yet, but I haven't seen them in a while." She smiled. "Actually, I think I will. Thanks for the idea." She resumed eating.

"Well," Khan answered. "I'm glad I could help. Can you share a little more about them? Semelo was telling me the most interesting story of a land off the coast. Perhaps you have been there?"

"Um, I don't think so." Gabrielle turned her attention to Cecrops. "Where is this land?"

"A long journey to the east, past the land of the rising sun."

The flinch was barely perceptible in her eyes, but Cecrops saw it and immediately regretted his words. Gabrielle gave a small smile and shook her head.

"I have never been there, though one day...." She left the thought unfinished. "My friends are to the south."

"Tell us about them, please Gabrielle," Khan's head wife spoke. "You and Semelo are so well traveled. I remember the stories you shared with us the last time you were here."

"Yes, please, Gabrielle. Unless you are hiding a long lost lover in there somewhere that you need to keep hidden," Khan said with a bit of a tease, not expecting the response he got.

A flash of pain before a tremulous smile and Gabrielle looked at him fully with slightly twinkling eyes. "Khan, if I had a long lost lover, there'd be no need to keep them hidden, now would there? They would be lost. Why go to all the trouble of hiding them?"

Khan chortled, amused by the unexpectedly wry humor in her voice. "You make your point well, my bardic friend. So tell us about the people to the south."

"Not much to tell, honestly. Just a place I stumbled across accidentally before my trip to China. Beautiful country and friendly people. I stayed for a bit and we traded stories and such. Then I came here." *Nothing like leaving out a few details, huh, Bard?* 

"Well, that sounds... interesting," Khan commented, wondering what she was skirting around. The subject C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

was obviously making her uncomfortable. He shrugged his mental shoulders. Gabrielle had been nothing but helpful and honest. She was entitled to a bit of privacy.

The next few weeks passed pleasantly. Genghis Khan was between campaigns and he and Gabrielle spent a bit of time sparring, though the conversation never returned to her teacher. Cecrops was content to watch and learn, though he was introduced to a young woman who had caught his fancy and he spent a bit of time with her as well.

As Gabrielle was packing up her things to leave, Cecrops finally found some time to speak with her privately. He dropped onto her bed and relaxed back, watching as she continued to sort through her belongings as she put them into her backpack.

"You're really going to leave, then?"

Gabrielle nodded. "It's for the best. I can't really stay in one place extensively. And I really do want to go see the Amazons. It's been too long."

Cecrops nodded his understanding.

"You gonna stay here?" Gabrielle asked, knowing the answer, but feeling that Cecrops needed to say it aloud.

"Yes, for now at any rate. Zhao is... well, I like her company. I'd like to enjoy that feeling again, just for a little while."

Gabrielle nodded, understanding the feeling all too well, even if she didn't agree with what she perceived as selfishness on his part. "Is that why you took a different name?"

He rose and went to the doorway, standing silently and watching life continue to pass around him uninhibited. "Yes," he said finally. "I am tired of being associated with immortality and people seem to enjoy that tale... at least enough to remember my name. Am I wrong to want to be like everyone else? To share in life like they do?"

Gabrielle finished her packing and set her bag to the side, taking a seat on the bed and looking sadly at the stiff back facing her.

"Wrong to want it? No, not really. I can understand that desire. Wrong to try it, though... to perpetuate the myth that you are just like everyone else?" She shrugged and though Cecrops couldn't see the gesture, he felt it just the same. "I dunno. I don't think I can decide that for you. You're the one that has to live with whatever consequences come along."

"What would you do?"

"Cecrops, we are two completely different people with two completely different goals." She rose and walked to stand beside him. "But whatever you decide, I'm glad we had a chance to spend some time together again. Even with our ups and downs, it's been nice to be with a friend who really does understand our, um... unique circumstances."

Cecrops turned then and lifted Gabrielle into his arms for a bone crushing hug.

"I'm gonna miss you, Little One."

Gabrielle returned the embrace fully. "I'm gonna miss you, too, my friend. Take care of yourself, okay?"

Cecrops smiled. "I will and you do the same."

"You know it. Maybe we'll run into each other again," Gabrielle said, hefting her pack.

"Count on it."

Gabrielle moved back from the window and resumed her place on the bed. She assumed a meditative pose and relaxed, reaching across time and space for her heart's desire.

How long she remained focused in one position she couldn't have said, but the sudden warmth that flooded her system had her in motion before her eyes were even opened. She stood at the window watching the comet move, relishing the connection she felt in the depths of her soul.

"Xena?"

## Chapter XXII

"Gabrielle?"

The warmth that suddenly pervaded Xena's soul was unmistakable and for the first time Xena felt an aching poignancy in the gentle familiarity of Gabrielle's soul reaching out to touch her own.

Xena didn't know how much time had passed. The interior of the hut was blue with smoky haze and the water skin had been refilled several times that she was conscious of. Now, however, her entire focus was on Gabrielle and the tentative bond she could feel between them once again. So lost was she in the emotions flowing through her that she never realized when she fell into a meditative trance.

Several items became clear to her mind, the last of them being a scroll. When the images stopped, Xena fell into a deep sleep. She slept all of one night and into the middle of the following day. When she woke up, it was to the accompaniment of Gabrielle's heart beating in her chest and the feeling brought a smile to her face.

Xena rose on shaky legs and walked slowly to the portal of the hut, snapping her eyes closed as she moved aside the door and was immediately blinded by the bright sunshine. She stood still until she could blink her eyes open, then continued to blink furiously as she made her way to Keto's and Hotassa's fire. No one made a move to help her, but all watched in reverent silence until she reached her destination.

She stood wrapped in her buffalo robe, thankful for its warmth as a cold wind blew across the plain. Xena waited until Keto motioned for her to take a seat, then did so with alacrity. It was shaping up to be a long, cold winter and after days in the sweat hut, it was bone-chilling. She was happy to sit and let the warmth of

the fire seep through her robe and soak into her body.

"So," Keto intoned solemnly.

Silence fell again until Hotassa served them a meal of hot soup and a bit of hot tea. Then they ate in contemplative peace until Xena set aside her unfinished portion for her animal companions and leaned back to sip her tea while Keto ate the remainder of his meal. Only when he too sat back and pulled his pipe from his coat was the silence broken.

"I saw, Keto, but I do not understand the meaning of my vision."

"Tell me."

"There are six items. Things that are... familiar... to me, but not how I remember them. In each part of the vision, I see myself holding them, touching them, but I don't know to what purpose." She drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

"The first thing I saw was a staff... well crafted and balanced. Reminded me a little of Gab... well, it was very familiar. Then there was an Amazon war mask... looked like the mask of the Queen." Xena cleared her throat slightly. "There was a bone fishhook, the Dagger of Helios and my chakram. The last thing I saw was a scroll. A very old scroll in a cave with markings."

"I know not Hee-lee-oes or shock-rum."

Xena extended her arm and drew pictures of the two items in question. She figured that was easier than trying to explain what they were with words.

Keto's eyes had widened perceptibly with each item she named off and bulged when her drawings were completed. He offered up a brief prayer for his son, knowing Xena was likely to kill Kya when Keto instructed her on the meaning of her vision.

"Legend says that qualities of great warrior are alive in totems. Each totem is different trait warrior needed for greatness." Keto cleared his throat and took a deep breath. He rarely had to do this much talking over the course of an entire day.

"Scroll is for knowledge. It tells of each totem and where to find. Other five represent strength, stealth, skill, cunning and balance."

"What about courage?" Xena asked, thinking that was a key component to being a warrior.

"Whole ritual test of courage."

They sat quietly for a time while Xena thought about this test. Finally she broke the silence. "So how do I find these things and what will they get me?"

Keto remained silent so long Xena thought he was refusing to answer her question. But she stilled herself to patience and waited.

"Scroll is first key. Must go to cave and find scroll. Will tell how to find other totems. What happens after C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

that," Keto shrugged. "Up to you."

Xena nodded. "I'll start out at first light. Do you know where this cave is, or will I need to find it on my own?"

"I can tell you of cave. Need to find scroll alone."

Xena nodded again. It reminded her of the old days and she felt a burst of enthusiasm flow through her veins at the prospect not only a new adventure, but the possibility of it bringing her closer to Gabrielle.

Keto waited, knowing he had not answered all of her questions. He winced internally, knowing that some of them could be much more painful than others.

Xena brought her vision back from whatever distant point it had been focused on and looked back to Keto. "Has anyone ever succeeded in this quest?"

"Not as expected, no."

Xena turned a piercing gaze on the shaman and crooked an eyebrow. "You wanna explain that, Keto?"

The shaman hesitated, then drew a deep breath. "Kya," Keto hesitated again when Xena growled. "Kya tried. Something not right."

Keto waited. Xena waited longer. Keto bowed to the inevitable as gracefully as he could.

"During time of my father's father, traveler came to our tribe from east. He had staff that interested namêšeme. Hercules was willing to trade walking stick for bearskin coat and after vision quest, namêšeme agreed."

Xena put a hand out to stop the flow of words. "Who??"

"My namêšeme? He was...."

"No. The traveler... you said his name was Hercules?"

"Yes. You know?"

Xena took a deep breath, knowing her reaction was unwarranted as far as Keto was concerned for someone who was a part of the past that neither of them had ever met. "His name... reminded me of someone I once knew." Not mentioning the fact the Hercules she was acquainted with was an immortal and very likely one in the same with the Hercules that had passed through the tribe two generations before.

Keto nodded, seeing the truth of that statement clearly in her eyes. He cleared his throat. "Staff became part of shaman lore... said to channel warrior strength. Never lost battle with it."

Xena said nothing, motioning for him to continue.

"Moons after Hercules, we got knife in bet with strange man..." Keto trailed off thoughtfully.

"Why strange?"

Keto motioned to his face. "Funny hair. Not like usual white man."

Xena nodded. She'd noted that most white men had full facial hair, or in the case of a very few... none at all. She wondered what this man did to appear 'strange'. She brought her attention back to Keto as he resumed speaking.

"Odd knife... not much use... unusual with crooked blade. Is why namêšeme kept. For many years, objects kept as part of shaman's holdings. Considered good for tribe."

Keto took a deep breath and lifted his mug, grimacing when the lukewarm tea hit his tongue. Hotassa noticed from her place near the doorway and moved to offer them both a bit more hot tea. Keto accepted; Xena didn't. And when his cup was refilled, he cleared his throat and continued talking.

"When neho'eehe went through rite of passage, he found scroll and knowing of staff and knife, started search for other totems. For many years he hunted, shirking duties as shaman to find ultimate warrior." Keto's tone was bitter with remembrance. "I became shaman when my father's father went to his fathers. My father failed in hunt and at his death, my heške put things away."

Another sigh from the shaman and Xena could feel the frustration rolling of Keto in waves. "When Kya came of age," he continued in a flat voice, "he found the scroll. And the four other totems my neho'eehe found."

"Wait," Xena finally interrupted. "He found all but one totem?"

"Yes," Keto confirmed with a vigorous nod of his head. "All but one you called shock-rum."

Xena's eyes widened with the knowledge. She knew if she had to find the original chakram her search had just become infinitely more difficult. The last time she'd seen her chakram, Gabrielle had been wearing it. Her eyes closed in remembered pain and she focused her concentration on the warmth she still felt in her soul. Keto noted her distress and waited for her to return from whatever unpleasantness she was reliving.

"So what happened?" she asked calmly when she opened her eyes.

"Kya searched for many moons, finally deciding he found last totem. Right shape, but...." He shrugged. "Was not where scroll said."

"So the scroll tells where to look as well as what to look for?"

"Gives clues," Keto answered.

"So what happened?" Xena pressed, seeing Keto cringe at the asking.

"Scroll gives ritual for gaining power of ultimate warrior. Kya followed ritual, but failed."

"Failed... how?" Xena asked slowly with sudden understanding.

Keto swallowed, knowing she needed the truth. "Ritual brought you to this place."

"Excuse me?" she said low and dangerously. "Keto, I'm not from anywhere remotely near here, in any way, shape or form." Never denying the part of being the ultimate warrior.

"I know. We are at loss to say how and why."

Xena swallowed and breathed, content for the moment to simply focus on the basics. Anything beyond that and people would start dying. Her rage was overwhelming and it had been a long time since she'd had to exercise such self-control over it.

"Will the scroll give me directions, a ritual, for returning me home?"

"What has been done can be undone," Keto said cryptically. "But first must retrieve totems."

Xena nodded. "I'll do that. Tell me of the cave. The sooner I get started, the sooner I can get home."

Keto explained to Xena where the cave of rituals was, drawing a crude map in the dirt with his finger to give her a rough picture of the path she needed to follow.

"There are pictures on walls. They tell story of people; also give directions to scroll. Will take two or three days travel to reach cave. After that...." Keto shrugged again. "Up to you. We think totems return to origins."

Xena shook her head. *This just gets more and more complicated*, she thought with a scowl. "All right," she said as she looked around the compound, noting for the first time that the sun was beginning to set. "I'll start out at first light."

"But...."

"Keto, I appreciate the home and family the people have given me here. The welcome I've had means more to me than you can know. But if I can get home, to my ti... to my family... to Gabrielle, then I will do whatever it takes as fast as I can to get back there."

The fierceness in her response and the fire in her eyes compelled him to ask. "You have regrets then?"

"Yes," she replied without hesitation and he wondered what caused the tears that sat in her eyes while she refused to let them fall.

"Then go with haste and my blessing. I will meet you at rise of sun."

"You don't...."

He held up a hand. "Is my duty."

She nodded her acceptance. "In the morning, then." And she rose from her place at his fire and walked to her own, accompanied by both panther and fox.

Keto watched until she entered her dwelling, then turned his own attention to the fire, thinking.

The sun had not yet begun to color the sky when Xena stepped from her tepee. On either side of her walked her animal companions. Keto smiled at the picture they made. Somehow, their presence reassured him that

she would be successful in her quest, not that he could explain his reasoning behind the thought. It was simply a gut instinct he had learned long ago to respect.

Without warning, Kya rushed to his side as Xena drew closer. It was easy to see his agitation and even easier to guess the meaning behind it.

"Neho'e! She cannot. This my quest!"

"Sit!"

Kya was surprised at his father's harsh tone and sank to his knees beside the fire watching the warrior's approach. He shivered when her blue eyes passed over him, certain that the flame of the fire before him could not warm the depth of his soul that had iced over at her cold look.

Keto stood, knowing well why Xena wore a look of disdain now and not blaming her. Kya had started out wrong with her and nothing the young shaman had done since bringing Xena to them had alleviated the impression of ineptitude she had of him. His proprietary manner had only served to make the situation worse and her humiliation of him had been the final straw in making them bitter enemies.

Well, it made Kya bitter. Xena had simply dismissed the young shaman as an idiot. At the moment however, her fury at his part in her present situation made her a threat to him and even the animals at her side easily picked up on her anger. Both looked at Kya with fangs slightly bared and growled. It was that that made Kya realize he was completely out of his league with her - in all aspects of life. And for some reason, that made him want to stake a claim even harder.

"Neho'e!" he began to protest again, but was cut off with a single word.

"Silence!" Keto roared and Xena bit her lip to prevent the smirk that wanted to form. "This no longer your quest, if ever was. You leave Zee-nah alone. Her search now."

"But...."

"NO! I let you be fool long enough. Over now!"

Kya looked at his father defiantly for a long moment before turning his eyes away and stomping off.

"He's gonna try again, you know," Xena commented softly as Keto lit his pipe.

"Heehe'e," the shaman nodded. "Yes, but you will fix. I have seen."

Xena's brow creased at the pronouncement and she wondered what was in store for her. Then she put it out of her mind as Keto began chanting around her, waving his pipe in a ritual cleansing motion. Finally it was over and he kissed her forehead as though she were a beloved daughter and pressed a map and a small sack of food into her hands.

"Go with blessing."

Xena nodded solemnly. "Thank you, Keto." Then she picked up her staff and she and the animals walked with purpose towards the hills that looked closer than they really were.

The day had been well-spent walking though it did seem to Xena that the caves retreated before her advance. They didn't seem to be any nearer their goal than when they had left before daylight that morning. Worse, Kya was following them closely enough to keep both her and the animals on edge. She wondered if he was just naturally stupid, or if hers was a special case for him. The panther growled again, low in its throat.

"I know, Etor," Xena said softly as the cat circled her legs. "He can't think to sneak up on us out here. There's nowhere to hide... for him or for us. C'mon, we need to find a place to make camp."

Eventually, just before dark, Xena reached the small stream that Keto had told her would guide her to the mouth of the cave she was searching for. She was tempted to press forward but recognized the fact that the panther at least needed rest among them, even if she and the fox did not. So she settled next to the trickle of water that flowed sluggishly in the late fall weather, wondering if the winter snows and spring rains would swell it to become a raging flood.

She smiled, her musings reminding her so easily of Gabrielle and the numerous talks they would have on a myriad of subjects in the evenings as they settled into camp. One thing Gabrielle had never been was boring and Xena never quite knew what to expect the conversation to be about.

Xena went about her tasks almost by rote and in short order, a well-laid camp had been set. She moved to the stream, pleased to note the numerous fish available in its shallow water. She stepped in and waded to the middle, not surprised that the water didn't even reach mid-thigh here or that is was bone chillingly cold. She forced that fact from her awareness and concentrated instead on the life flowing in the water around her. Almost immediately she held two good sized fish in her hands and was making her way back to the shore when it happened.

Kya had been furious that what had been his quest... his birthright... had not only been taken away from him, but blessed by his father for another. The fact that it was the woman warrior who thwarted his plans at every turn simply made it unbearable. Even though she had never done a thing to lord it over him, Xena's evident disdain of him had made Kya a laughingstock among his tribesmen. Now it was time to fix it.

He ran screaming from the tall grasses, knife raised, hoping to catch her off guard. What he caught was a fox on his wrist, a cat at his neck and one very pissed of human being that snapped the bone of the leg that kicked out at her.

Kya's screaming went from war-cry to pain in a matter of seconds. He dropped the knife under the fox's bite and fell to the ground in one swift motion. The panther jumped on his chest and pushed Kya into a completely prostrate position, hovering dangerously close to the young shaman's neck with an open mouth.

"I could've handled it alone, but thanks, guys."

Kya began to shake, a combination of pain and nerves. He'd never expected this end. He was destined for great things. Xena just shook her head.

"Ya know, Kya," she began conversationally, motioning the two animals away. They took up sentinel positions at Kya's head to assure he remained a non-threat while Xena treated him.

"I never took you for stupid until now. Young, brash, naïve, but not stupid. Apparently," she continued as she put the pressure points on his leg, watching him watch her warily as he started to relax from the pain, "I was mistaken. You are stupid."

He lunged for her and immediately she released the nerve blocks she'd set for him. Kya shrieked in pain and fell back to the ground whimpering, clutching at his leg. Xena gave him a no nonsense look.

"Ready to behave now?"

He nodded furiously and she reset the blocks on his leg. She set his leg carefully, straightening the bone until it snapped back into place. She looked regretfully at the staff she carried. It was the only wood for miles and she really had no choice.

"Let me explain something to you, Kya," she said calmly as she broke the thick stick in half with her bare hands. Kya's eyes grew wide and he suddenly realized just how foolhardy he had been. "This is my quest... my hunt. I will do whatever is necessary to survive it and overcome any challenges that are put in front of me."

She placed the sticks on either side of the break and took the supply of bandages from her kit and bound the leg tightly.

"However," she continued conversationally. "If you get in my way again, I will break both your legs and I won't stop to fix them. Ya got me?"

The words were said at a near whisper, but Kya's head nodded rapidly at the truth that burned like fire in her eyes. He had no doubt she'd do just exactly like she said.

"Good. I've got to release the block but it won't hurt as much now that the bone is in place." Xena undid the pinch and Kya flinched then relaxed as the pain leveled off. He looked at her with a mixture of awe and unease. Xena just rolled her eyes and blew out a breath. "We'll have to figure out how to get you home later. You may have to wait here a day or two until I get back from the caves."

Kya's eyes grew big. "You would leave me?"

"In a heartbeat," came the short answer. It put a kibosh on any further conversation between them.

Xena retrieved the two fish she had already caught and stepped back into the cold water to catch one more. Kya watched in silence, amazed at her reflexes. Then in darkness, she lit the chip fire she'd laid when she set up camp and started preparing the fish for dinner.

Xena wasn't surprised at the approach of a small party an hour or so later. She suspected Keto knew precisely what would happen and had let events play out to their logical conclusion before stepping in. The look in his eyes as he drew near her and Kya and his lack of surprise at his son's condition only served to further confirm that idea in her mind

Keto waited until she invited him to her fire with a nod, then he and his small band joined Xena.

"I don't have anything...." she started, having just cleaned up the remains of their dinner.

"No need," the shaman said with his hand upraised. "We have," pulling trail rations from his pocket. The men with him did the same and all sat silently eating while cast covert glances in Kya's direction. Keto had not explained anything to them; merely commanded them to join him on a hunt. They wondered what had happened and why it seemed like Kya was the prey.

"May we share fire tonight, Zee-nah? Will make new start tomorrow."

Xena nodded. She hadn't expected them to return to the compound in the dark, but she was glad Keto had done her the courtesy of asking. It would reinforce her position within the tribe and perhaps solve any linger doubts. If it prevented any more scenes like the one she'd had with Kya, she'd be happy.

Soon, quiet settled around the camp as everyone settled down to sleep. The morrow would bring new challenges.

Reassured by Keto words the previous evening and satisfied that Kya would indeed be taken care of by his people, Xena left before dawn. She couldn't explain her anxiousness, though she knew it was due to her desire to reunite with Gabrielle... whether it was here in the future or together in their past. She considered part of it to be the unknown she was going into. As far as her logical mind went, it had been a very long time since she'd adventured alone and she wasn't anticipating doing it this time. Especially not knowing anything going into it and expecting it to take several years of travel and hunting to accomplish the first part of her task.

Etor and Melo disappeared around midday. Xena wasn't too concerned; they were mates and they'd had very little time alone just to be mates in a while. She turned to daydreaming, remembering the times she and Gabrielle had snuck off from the Amazons on their rare visits. Even if it was just to sit by the water and watch the sun sparkle off the surface, everyday they'd made sure to take a little time for themselves. It was something they found imperative.

Knowing how closely the two animals had come to losing one another recently made the need even more understandable. Every time she or Gabrielle had died, or come close, they had always taken a day or two to confirm the reality of their lives and love together. And considering how close Melo had come to losing Etor to Kya's rage the previous evening....

Xena shivered in memory. She didn't think the panther knew how close it had come to death, but the fox did. She had seen the near despair in the green eyes late into the night and was fairly certain she knew what the outcome of their time alone together would be.

Near dusk, the two returned to her, both looking drained but at peace. She looked at them carefully, then set a bowl of broth between them to share, not surprised to find the bowl empty and them asleep wrapped around one another scant minutes later.

"I sure hope you guys know what you're doing," Xena mumbled to herself as she settled into her own blankets for the night. "But gods know I'll be glad to have you both around for the rest of my life."

And Xena went to sleep feeling just a little bit better, knowing that they would have each other for eternity as well.

Just after daybreak on the third morning, Xena crossed the threshold of the cave and almost immediately was plunged into darkness. She found her flint and striker and lit a torch, glad Keto had told her where to find them just inside. She stood for a moment orienting herself, impressed with the number of pictographs on the walls and amazed by the story they told.

As she read the pictures, she realized that they told they story of the people and hidden in that story was the story of the scroll. It took some time and a bit of deciphering, but finally Xena was satisfied with her translation and moved through the cavern with swift, sure steps.

It took almost half an hour of climbing and maneuvering before she reached the place the wall story sent her and with a bit of searching, Xena found the scroll's hiding place.

Reverently she slid it from the hole, its texture and feel bringing back some bittersweet memories. She tucked the scroll carefully in her bag and slowly made her way back to the main cave. Once she stepped outside, she was amazed to see how late it had grown. Although it had seemed like mere minutes, in actuality hours had passed and it was well into late afternoon.

Conscientiously Xena extinguished the torch and left it for the next traveler, then quickly made her way to the campsite she'd left only that morning.

Xena sat and carefully unrolled the aged parchment knowing it would be a necessary companion on her journey. She noted with faint surprise that the writing was unfamiliar. She had honestly expected to see Gabrielle's firm, familiar script filling the page. The cadence and the wording, however, were as well-known to her as the reflection she faced in the streams and rivers of the area. Gabrielle may not have written it, but her style and form had definitely influenced whoever did put pen to paper.

Slowly Xena read through the items, noting the description as well as the clues that had been put in place to help find them. *Well, they appear to be the genuine articles*, noting that it was the Dagger of Helios as well as her chakram that were described so accurately on the page. *Wonder who figured all this out?* 

Then she shrugged and began making plans to find the staff... which if she understood the riddle correctly, meant she would soon be running into an old friend.

Xena made her way back to the encampment, hoping to get a little information before traveling to the northeast. It looked as though she wouldn't be spending the winter with the Nation after all. She was much too anxious to begin her pursuit.

She was a little surprised at the respect she was accorded when she returned from the cave. Xena learned from Hotassa that her sparing of Kya and subsequent treatment of one who could have been treated as an enemy was highly regarded.

"I couldn't do less for him, Hotassa. He's still young and has lots to learn."

Hotassa nodded. "Yes. Thank you for giving him chance."

Xena gave her a crooked smile. "I had too. People have given me chances."

Hotassa nodded, not knowing that the people Xena referred to were not only the Cheyenne, but Gabrielle, Hercules and countless others she had known in her lifetime. Hotassa was helping Xena pack for her trip into the far north and Xena was reminded of something.

"Hotassa?"

The older woman looked at her in question, but continued her packing.

"Do you know someone named Ari?"

Xena saw the hesitation, though she could hardly have missed it when Hotassa stopped what she was doing and looked directly into her eyes.

"Yes," she said succinctly. She took a deep breath. "Daughter. Left with trader many moons ago. Why?"

Xena shrugged, not realizing the trouble she'd stumbled on by asking the question. "She is the one who took me in. Taught me the white man's language."

"She is well?"

"Yes and happy," Xena added, thinking to ease the strain so apparent on Hotassa's face. "You don't get to see her?"

Hotassa shook her head. "No. Keto say she choose white. She need live as white."

"That's wrong."

"Yes, but is his way. He good father. Broke heart when she left."

Xena shook her head and hoisted her pack. "I'll never understand people," she muttered, not surprised when Hotassa agreed with her pronouncement.

Hotassa gathered a sack from beside her fire and pressed it into Xena's hands. "Some food to start journey. Last few days."

"Thank you, Hotassa. I'll be back to visit as soon as I can."

Hotassa cradled Xena's face in her hands and pulled her down to kiss her forehead. "Travel well," she whispered, then patted Xena's shoulder before releasing her. Each of the people of the tribe came forward and offered her a small token and a blessing and for a moment, Xena was overwhelmed with gratitude. She'd never expected a send-off, much less one like this. Finally, only Keto was left.

"Good journey," he said before kissing her forehead like Hotassa had.

She looked into his eyes and saw success there and smiled at him. "I'll return," she said solemly. "Be well until I do."

Keto nodded, then faced her towards the northeast and watched until she became a mere speck on the horizon.

Her first night out, her gaze returned to the heavens, looking for the star that seemed to be shooting across the sky in slow motion. Xena gazed on it, almost able to hear Gabrielle's conversation about it - questioning, commenting, tickling Xena's otherwise stoic sensibilities with her insights and thoughts.

"I miss you, Gabrielle, but I'm gonna find my way back to you. Somehow, I think this star may lead me to the home that is you for me."

With that thought, she closed her eyes and slept.

## Chapter XXIII

Gabrielle opened her eyes as dawn peeked in her window. She had long ago schooled herself to sleep when others did as a matter of course when she could. It reminded her of her humanity and made her continue to function somewhat normally.

She stretched slowly then hugged the pillow to her, remembering the warmth of Xena's presence in her dreams.

"Good morning, Xena. I miss you, but every new day brings me closer to you again."

She put a robe over her nakedness, knowing that the steward would be knocking shortly to bring in hot water for her bath. It was one of the luxuries she allowed herself and her mind went back to a time when it had still be a luxury that was rarely managed.

"Hey, Sweetcheeks! What's shakin'?"

Gabrielle turned from where she was putting things away. The boat she had hired wasn't long gone from the dock and though the Captain was somewhat skeptical of Gabrielle's directions, she and her crew were being well-paid to go where they were told.

Gabrielle had hired all the staterooms and though she really didn't need the space, she was happy with the privacy it afforded her. She fairly squealed when she heard the voice and rushed into Dite's arms with a glad cry.

Dite returned the embrace fervently, concerned by the reaction, but enjoying the hug nonetheless. She kissed the top of the blonde head. "You okay there, Gab?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah. I've just missed you... a lot. Seems like forever since we've had some girl talk."

A knock at the door caused them to pull away from one another slightly. "Yes?" Gabrielle called out as she turned towards the door.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Mistress," a female voice said through the closed door. "But I thought I heard you scream." Gabrielle released her hold on Dite and fully faced the door.

"Everything's fine," Gabrielle answered, knowing without looking that Aphrodite was smirking at her back. "Thank you for your concern though."

"You're welcome, Mistress," was the response, though the doubt could be clearly heard through the closed door. "Do you require anything?"

"No, thank you," came the polite but firm reply.

"Very well, Mistress," the voice said, though it took another full minute before footsteps sounded leading away from Gabrielle's door.

Gabrielle turned around then and faced the full-fledged grin Aphrodite was sporting.

"Mistress, huh? Wow, babe, you're totally moving up in this radical little world. I so didn't know you were like, into that kinda thing."

Even though Gabrielle was truly a woman of the world, having seen, done or heard about just about everything in her exceptionally long lifetime, she had managed to retain the kernel of who she had always been. And it was the shy sheepherder from Poteidaia that blushed thoroughly at the love goddess's implication.

"Not that kind of mistress," Gabrielle grumbled as she scrubbed her face from embarrassment and crossed back over to the bed to finish her unpacking. "The crew didn't feel comfortable addressing me as Gabrielle. They chose 'Mistress' instead."

"Even though you're not comfortable with it?" Dite asked somewhat seriously.

"Yes. The Captain feels it's bad for discipline for them to address me by name."

Dite looked perplexed. "Why?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "Beats me, but she is the Captain. I'm gonna work on it though. I really don't want them calling me Mistress when we reach the Amazons."

Dite chuckled. "Oh yeah. Those rockin' babes would have a totally bitchin' time with that, wouldn't they? You could just teach them to call you 'My Queen'."

The look Gabrielle cast Aphrodite then would have frozen hot butter on a summer day.

"Hmm... guess not. Though if they're becoming Amazons, won't they like call you that eventually anyway?"

"I hope not. I'm not an Amazon Queen anymore, Aphrodite."

"Hon, haven't you like, heard that old adage? Once a Queen...."

"Besides," Gabrielle continued, overriding Dite's words. "There is no guarantee these women will become C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

Blood Bond

17/02/2011 Amazons."

Aphrodite actually snorted. "C'mon, babe. Do you really think they \*won't\*? That's why they were chosen to go with you, isn't it?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "I dunno. I feel so out of touch with things these days."

A wave of sympathetic understanding washed over Aphrodite at those words and she took Gabrielle's hand, leading her towards the small bed. "I can totally understand that. C'mon," she added, sitting on the edge of the bed and tugging Gabrielle down beside her. "Let's sit and have a little of that girl talk we've been missing."

Gabrielle sat back on the smallish bed and wriggled around until she was comfortably reclined against the headboard. Dite took a clue from her and squirmed up beside her, both of them breaking out into giggles when Dite nearly fell off the bed when the ship suddenly lurched forward.

"So tell me what's up with you, Cutie. Seems like I haven't seen you in forever," Aphrodite said as she settled herself more firmly in the bed. They were sitting almost close enough to touch. Dite took a clue from Gabrielle and tried to brace herself, forgetting that the bard was braced against a corner.

Finally she gave an exasperated sigh and popped a padded railing up beside the bed. "There!" she exclaimed with not a little satisfaction. Gabrielle chuckled silently then leaned in and gave Dite another solid hug.

"Thank you, Aphrodite."

Confusion washed over the goddess's face. "Kay... for...?"

"For being here." Gabrielle sighed and loosened her hold. "I know I seem to be depressed every time you visit and I appreciate your coming anyway."

"Babe, if \*ANYONE\* in the \*entire world\* TOTALLLY understands your depression and, you know, the reasons behind it, it'd be me. I mean, I've still got most of my family...." Dite paused in thought. "Although that in and of itself is sooo depressing some days. Anyway," catching Gabrielle's smile out of the corner of her eye and feeling inordinately pleased with herself for causing it.

"Like I was saying, even with the family around, I still get down. I miss the old days."

Silence fell then, Dite having become unexpectedly solemn at the turn in the conversation.

"I miss Xena," Gabrielle whispered, her eyes fixed on something Aphrodite could only guess at.

"Oh, babe," the goddess consoled, gathering the bard into her arms and gently stroking her hair and arms. "I know you do. I cannot like, tell you how awesome it was to see the two of you together. And ya wanna know a secret?" Dite waited until the blonde head nodded against her chest. "The only person looking forward to this reunion more than me is you. I get chills just thinking about it. The really good kind."

Gabrielle laughed softly. "Me too," then blushed. "Thanks, Dite. I'm glad I don't have to do this alone."

Aphrodite didn't answer immediately, just continued her gentle stroking for a few more minutes. Then she kissed the top of Gabrielle's head. "So, do you like, wanna hear the latest on Cecrops? I talked to Ch'uang

before I came here."

It wasn't long before the two of them were catching up on all the gossip.

The weeks on board ship passed pleasantly enough. Mornings Gabrielle continued to dedicate to physical exercise and she was trained in enough disciplines and weapons to make for interesting, varied workouts. Several of the women on board asked to learn and she agreed, as long as they dropped the title Mistress and simply stuck with Gabrielle. It was an arrangement they were all happy with.

Afternoons she spent meditating or reading, though again, her teaching skills were called upon. She found it inconceivable that even in the fourteenth century, literacy was such a struggle for the masses. And she was happy to eliminate illiteracy whenever the opportunity to do so arose.

Evenings she spent alone, or with Aphrodite when she could get away, which was more often than Gabrielle expected. Apparently her being away from the mainland made it harder for the gods to discover her.

Finally, though, they were within sight of their goal and Gabrielle sighed. She hadn't been this nervous in centuries, to tell the truth. Not since she'd felt forced to leave the comfort of her Amazon home. She wondered many things, not the least of which was what the acceptance level of the Amazons would be towards her.

Now as they approached the dock, she could see many changes had taken place during her self-imposed exile. The small fleet was well-maintained and she could see an outpost cum shipyard. As the ship came to a stop, a contingent of armed, masked women waited with not-quite-hostile curiosity.

A gangplank was lowered and Gabrielle walked down first, holding her arms up in the ancient symbol of peace. The leader among the Amazons stepped forward with a hand upraised and spoke with a muffled voice from beneath her mask.

"Halt, stranger. You know of our signs, but you are not known to us. Who are you and what business do you have with the Amazons?"

"I am Gabrielle and I come home to my sisters in peace."

A gasp was heard from beneath a mask. The leader gave a brief hand signal without removing her eyes from Gabrielle's face.

"Impossible. Queen Gabrielle and her immortality are nothing but a legend... a fable for our children at night."

Gabrielle sighed. She'd known this wouldn't be easy, but she had hoped....

She removed the long Chinese robe she'd wrapped around herself. When it dropped, every Amazon present dropped to her knees.

Gone were the bard, the woman of the world and the traveler. In their place stood an Amazon Queen, easily recognized by her regalia, her signet ring and the tattoo she still bore. Gabrielle moved until she stood directly in front of the leader.

"I am no myth, no legend. I am a real flesh and blood human being."

The head was already bowed and it seemed to shrink further within herself at Gabrielle's soft words. Gabrielle placed gentle fingers under the woman's chin.

"You did the right thing, though, in questioning. Not like immortality happens to that many people," Gabrielle smiled, feeling the woman relax at her words. "Now, rise and walk with me. And please," reaching for her robe and donning it again, "take off the mask and introduce yourself."

"Yes, my Queen," came the expected response as the woman removed the mask. Blonde curly hair was revealed first and Gabrielle found her knees weaken as a face from the past met her present. The Amazon dropped her mask just as Gabrielle's knees unbuckled, catching the Queen before she hit the ground.

Gabrielle reached up a shaky hand to the woman's familiar face.

"Ephiny?"

"Yes, my Queen?"

Then conversation stopped when Gabrielle lost her fight with conscious thought.

There comes a point when the mind simply cannot handle any more impossible, inconceivable ideas... especially a mind that has been exposed to new ideas for more than a millennium. It is a self-defense mechanism more than anything else. It gives the mind a chance to process the impossibilities without allowing conscious thought to interfere.

That is what happened to Gabrielle when the spitting image of a woman she knew to be long dead suddenly stood in front of her again, answering to the same name. Gabrielle had been surprised to see Eponin, but it was well within the realm of possibilities for her to imagine. Cecrops had been a surprise as well, but once again, well within the scope of imagined possibilities.

Ephiny though... Gabrielle had never thought to see her again as flesh and blood. And this new Amazon... this spitting image of the woman who had at first disdained her presence, whom she had finally won over and been proud to call friend, the sight of her had rocked Gabrielle to the core. She had been alone, without true friends for so very long and the harsh reminder standing very real and alive in front of her was overwhelming. She welcomed the darkness when it came, simply for the momentary respite it provided her.

She never knew the chaos her reaction caused in the Amazons around her.

"MY QUEEN!!" Ephiny yelled as Gabrielle crumpled. The Amazon caught her before she hit the dock. Ephiny sank to her knees with Gabrielle in her grasp, unable to lift the Queen into her arms. For her size, Gabrielle was quite a heavyweight, being nothing but pure muscle and Ephiny had been unprepared for the Queen's reaction to her.

The ship's Captain motioned for her own crew to retrieve a cot and without further ado, they quickly ran down the gangplank and made for Gabrielle. The amazons bristled and surrounded the two women. Ephiny sighed shakily. This wasn't the way her day was supposed to go.

"Amazons, stand aside. They offer aid."

The merest hesitation, then the Amazons formed a double line for the sailors to pass through. Two took the ends of the cot and held it steady, while the third and fourth woman reached out to help Ephiny lift Gabrielle onto it. Then everyone stopped and waited for Ephiny to speak.

"Well," she said scratching her forehead. "Ask the Captain to join us. You were kind enough to bring our Queen home. The least we can do is show you some Amazon hospitality."

One of the women scrambled away, to be followed back a moment later by not only the Captain, but the rest of the crew. The two groups of women took one another's measure, each liking what they found. With a nod, they moved forward as one into the Amazon outpost village.

It wasn't much as villages went. There was a mess hall, complete with a garden; a bathing hut; a blacksmith/armory, two barracks and a single hut that served as the healer's hut as well as the village office. Aside from the shipyard, that was it. Enough to make it a functional workplace, but no frills.

Rotations took place in six month increments and everyone except the regent served on a regular basis. Usually every five years.

All activity within the village ceased as the procession made its way through the village, stopping only when they reached the single hut.

"Ckay, there's not room in here for everyone." Ephiny pulled open the door to let the cot bearers inside. "Katrina, go find the healer. Captain if you and your crew would follow Tisha and Morrin to the mess hall, I will meet with you as soon as I speak to the healer. Janus, you and Lissa take up posts at the door."

Women started moving as Ephiny spoke and the Captain nodded her acceptance of the directive. Gabrielle had spent some of their crossing explaining Amazon society as she remembered it and the Captain was willing to give it a go. It didn't hurt that she found Ephiny cute.

"So you're our immortal Queen Gabrielle, huh?" Ephiny commented to the still silent figure now resting comfortably on the lone bed. She brushed the hair back off Gabrielle's forehead. "Funny, the scrolls don't mention your beauty. Nor your strength."

She might have said more, but at that moment, Nora crossed the threshold and cast a cursory glance in Ephiny's direction before turning her full attention to the patient that now lay on the bed.

"So?"

Ephiny shrugged. "This is Queen Gabrielle... THE Queen Gabrielle." Nora turned disbelieving eyes her way. Ephiny nodded. "That was my reaction, too. But it's her. The tattoo is the clincher, though she still has her leathers and signet ring."

"So what happened?"

"I dunno. She took a look at my face, whispered my name, then keeled over. Don't laugh, Nora," Ephiny scolded the smirking woman.

"Aw, c'mon Eph. How many women have you got falling at your feet? You oughta be used to it by now."

"I'm gonna have to hurt you," Ephiny growled. "Look, just keep an eye on her, all right? I need to go talk to the newcomers and get the full story. I'll leave Janus and Lissa at the doors just in case you need something. I'll be back when I get some answers."

Nora waved her out. "Go on. I'll send someone for you if she wakens, but if it's what I think it is, you'll be back before she opens her eyes again."

Ephiny nodded, then left with a single backwards glance.

The time spent with the Captain and crew was beneficial to both sides and the Amazons realized that they would soon be welcoming new members into their Nation at the next induction ceremony. Ephiny smiled to herself. Gabrielle had taught them well and Ephiny for one was thankful. The Captain, Elizabeth, was... interesting, to say the least.

It was fully dark when she made her way back to the healer's hut. Nora hadn't sent for her, so she could only assume that Gabrielle was still not awake.

Just as she reached the door, Ephiny was nearly knocked flat by Nora who was coming out.

"Oh, Ephiny, good," the healer said when they'd both recovered from their backward stumble. "Gab... Queen Gabrielle seems to be stirring. I expect her to come around very shortly."

"Thanks, Nora. Why don't you go get some dinner? I'll sit with her a while."

"Thanks, Eph. How'd things go with the visitors?" Nora asked as they both stepped inside the hut. Ephiny took a seat by the bed and Nora moved to wash-up for dinner.

"Very well," Ephiny said thoughtfully. "We'll be adding to the tribe soon."

"Good! Now if you'll excuse me...."

Ephiny nodded her head and Nora took her leave. Ephiny returned her attention to the figure reclined on the bed. She watched for many minutes, not consciously realizing when Nora came back from dinner to check on them both.

Gabrielle was slowly stirring and from her bits of conversation, she was relieving a time in her life long passed. Ephiny found herself growing anxious to talk to the Queen, curious to speak to the woman who had known her ancestors.

Without warning, Gabrielle shot upright in the bed. She uttered no sound, save for the heavy breathing caused by whatever disturbing dreams she'd been experiencing. Ephiny had stood at her very first motion and now remained silent while Gabrielle took in her surroundings.

Finally Gabrielle's focus came to rest on Ephiny's form and she took in every single detail very carefully. She recognized as she examined the young Amazon that there were indeed slight differences between herself and the ancestor she'd been named for.

It took Ephiny a moment to grasp the fact that the two of them had been staring at one another and she began to look away. Instead, Gabrielle reached out a shaky hand to her, which Ephiny readily accepted. Then Gabrielle tugged lightly and Ephiny assumed a position sitting on the edge of the bed.

Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, then cleared her throat. Ephiny reached for the small cup Nora had placed by the bedside and stuck the wooden straw between Gabrielle's lips. "Suck," she commanded softly, then added, "drink slowly. I think Nora may have added more than water to this," said with a slight grin.

Nora had indeed and the concoction was cool and tingly and very refreshing. Gabrielle swallowed a few mouthfuls before turning her head away. Ephiny removed the cup and set it back down.

"My apologies, my Queen. I didn't mean to...." Ephiny started, eyes still focused on the cup. The touch of Gabrielle's hands on her own again brought her to a quick halt. Gabrielle raised one hand and cupped Ephiny's face, urging her to meet Gabrielle's eyes.

"My name is Gabrielle, Ephiny and you have nothing to apologize for, my young friend," Gabrielle replied with a small smile. "I doubt you know just how much you look like the ancestor you were named for."

Ephiny shook her curly head.

Gabrielle chuckled. "Have you ever heard the term spitting image?" Now the curls bounced affirmatively. "Good, because you are. So I apologize... for dropping out on you... like that. It's just that...."

This time, it was Ephiny who halted the hesitant speech. "No apologies, my Queen. I doubt it is everyday that you come across a living part of a past that is long dead."

Ephiny winced at the flash of pain her words caused, but Gabrielle spoke before she could draw breath.

"No, but once my mind got wrapped around the idea, it really was quite welcome." Gabrielle gave a tremulous smile that became a genuine one when Ephiny returned it fully. "I'll make a deal with you. You give me a history of the amazons since I was here last and I'll share some tales of your ancestors with you."

"You still tell stories?! You bet it's a deal!" The scrolls Gabrielle had left were a favorite among the Amazons and to be able to hear fresh stories right from the source was an offer Ephiny wasn't about to turn down. A closer look at her Queen though toned down her enthusiasm in a hurry.

"However, it will wait until tomorrow. You need to recover." Ephiny rose from the bed and firmly tucked Gabrielle in. "Do you need anything? Something to eat perhaps?"

The mention of food reminded Gabrielle how long it had been since she'd fed and the thought stirred the burning in her blood. She shook her head.

"No thanks. I think I mostly need to rest tonight. Funny since I slept most of the day away, but I think all that processing my mind did just exhausted it."

Ephiny nodded. "I can believe that, my Queen. I know how tired I used to get after school testing and I knew those were coming. Not like you can prepare for something like what happened this morning."

Gabrielle smiled. "True, but it really was a nice surprise once my mind got wrapped around the idea." She motioned to the door. "Go on, now. I'm sure you'd much rather be talking to the Captain and crew that came in today than hanging out with me. I'll be fine. We'll talk in the morning."

"Actually, I'd rather talk to you right now, my Queen, but you need to recover. I'll be by... or would you prefer to summon me when you are ready?"

"Ephiny, regardless of the title that you can't seem to get by, I am just Gabrielle. Come by in the morning whenever you're ready. I'll be glad to have you here."

"Thank you, my Queen," Ephiny said, bowing her head and moving to the door. "Goodnight."

Gabrielle watched the Amazon leave and shook her head.

Nora had come by a short while later and offered Gabrielle a sleeping draught which she politely refused. Then she set herself to wait.

It took a while, but Gabrielle had not lived so long without garnering an almost infinite amount of patience. At the very darkest part of the night, she slipped unseen into the shadows and went hunting for blood satisfaction.

Even after more than a thousand years, it was a hunger that she couldn't completely control, though she managed it very well. Still, the need shamed her and she kept to the shadows until her task was done.

Just after dawn, Ephiny knocked lightly on the door of the hut. She knew it was still very early and hoped that Gabrielle had meant what she'd said the previous evening. She couldn't contain her enthusiasm and it had made it difficult to sleep.

Ephiny had read the scrolls - both Gabrielle's as well as those her own ancestors had penned and passed down through the years. Some of her very favorites were those her forebearer had transcribed of her own adventures with the youthful, naïve Gabrielle.

She watched them grow up together, going from unsure antagonists to friends and confidants. Ephiny suspected her many-times-removed grandmother had been half in love with the woman she called Queen, though she never said a word to Gabrielle. Anyone with half an eye could see she and Xena belonged together and had gone through heaven and hell to stay that way. Ephiny looked forward to getting to know the woman who had so enamored her predecessor.

Her musings were interrupted by the soft call, "Come in."

Gabrielle sat at the small desk, looking over a thick journal. She was dressed in trousers and a tunic this morning and Ephiny wondered what had become of her Amazon leathers.

"Good morning, my Queen."

"Please Ephiny... just Gabrielle. I'm not Queen of the Amazons anymore. I never really was." The last was said softly and with a bit of sadness.

"I must disagree with you, my queen... Gabrielle. The Nation still looks to you as our queen. One of our greatest. However, I would be honored to call you Gabrielle, if you'll explain it to Regent Narmia when we see her in the main village. I'm not sure she would appreciate the informality."

"I'll deal with the regent. Thank you, Ephiny. Now c'mon and show me where we can get some breakfast around here, then we can take a tour of the outpost before we head inland for the main village."

Ephiny nodded and gestured towards the door. "Would you like me to arrange a guard for you...?" stopping when Gabrielle turned outraged green eyes in her direction. "Hey, just asking," Ephiny said, holding up her hands. "I'm supposed to."

Gabrielle sighed. "I know. I think Melosa charged Ephiny with looking out for me as much as she did telling her to make me an Amazon princess."

Ephiny nodded, knowing it for the truth. She led the way into the mess hall that was sending out all kinds of interesting scents. Word had quickly gone round that the Queen had returned and the small kitchen staff had scrambled to find the old recipes she had shared with them so many centuries before.

They sat down and were immediately served something that made Ephiny hesitate, sniffing cautiously. Gabrielle on the other hand scooped up the fresh rolls and began devouring them.

"Ah, cinnamon rolls. I can't tell you the last time I had them and so fresh." She looked at Ephiny, who was still eyeing the suspiciously. "Ephiny? Don't you like cinnamon rolls?"

"I dunno. I've never had them." She looked at Gabrielle. "I've had oatmeal every morning of my life for as long as I can remember."

"Oh, you've gotta be kidding me."

Ephiny shook her head as she gingerly took a small bite. She chewed slowly and Gabrielle watched her face for a reaction. Ephiny put the roll down and continued to chew.

"My Queen, I'm afraid you will have to remain her indeterminately."

"Ephiny? Is there a problem?"

"No, my Queen, but if this is the food we get when you visit, I'm not sure I can let you leave." Ephiny grinned and picked up the roll, taking a big bite and closing her eyes in delighted ecstasy.

Gabrielle returned the grin and smacked Ephiny lightly on the arm. "I can see we're gonna have a lot of fun together."

Then they got down to the serious business of eating.

## Chapter XXIV

Ephiny took Gabrielle around the outpost, introducing her to everyone in the village. Gabrielle had a word for each and every one of them, though many of them could not respond in kind. They were completely awestruck. Gabrielle handled the attention with good humor and grace however, and agreed to a storytelling session before her departure the following day.

Even though she herself was in no rush, protocol demanded that she get to the main village and the regent expediently. She was fairly certain a runner had been dispatched to the main village as soon as they knew who she was. But Gabrielle was going to take a bit of time with these women as well, especially as she didn't know how long she would be with the Amazons. She'd learned long ago to keep her plans fluid.

"I think the Captain is a little jealous," Gabrielle commented as Ephiny escorted her back to her hut after the festivities were over much later that evening.

Ephiny flushed, not meeting Gabrielle's eyes. "What do you mean?"

Gabrielle stopped and put a hand on Ephiny's arm, effectively stopping her as well. "C'mon, Eph," not noticing the startled look the shortened moniker garnered her. "You don't get to be my age without having seen everything at least once and the ability to recognize it almost immediately."

She turned and started walking towards the healer's hut once more. Ephiny rushed to catch up.

"Ephiny, I'm a big girl. I can get to the hut on my own. Why don't you go spend some time with Elizabeth? We'll have time on our journey to the main village to exchange stories. I promise."

Ephiny nodded, understanding the politely worded order clearly. "Let me walk you to the door and then I'll go. She understands I have responsibilities, she just...."

"She just knows what she wants and is anxious to pursue it."

Ephiny chuckled. "Yeah, something like that."

"Ephiny, can I give you a piece of advice without interfering too much?"

They stopped outside the door and it occurred to Gabrielle in passing to wonder if Nora had given up her own bed. She shook the thought free from her mind as Ephiny turned questioning eyes to her.

"You don't know how long you've got... not for life and not for love." She paused and drew a painful breath. Sometimes life cut a little too close for her liking, but Ephiny deserved the truth of her words... for the friendship Gabrielle had had with her ancestor, if not for her own sake. And Gabrielle had decided that she liked this Ephiny for herself. She reminded the bard so much of the Amazon she had once made her regent.

Gabrielle held her hands up and while collecting her thoughts. Ephiny waited patiently, not interrupting. "If the opportunity presents itself, Ephiny, seize it. Maybe you and Elizabeth will hit it off, maybe you won't. But you won't know if you don't give it a chance and you don't want to live with regrets."

Ephiny recognized that the advice came from experience and nodded solemnly. "Thank you, my Queen... Gabrielle. Goodnight."

Gabrielle waved and waited until Ephiny had passed back to the mess hall where activity was still taking place even at the late hour.

"Amazons still love to party," she commented to herself with a shake of her head. "Guess some things really are born into the blood," chuckling as she crossed the threshold and closed the door behind her.

It was quite the procession that gathered at dawn. Gabrielle took one look around and immediately sought out Ephiny.

"Hey, Ephiny... what gives?" Gabrielle asked, motioning around to the numerous people making preparations to head inland to the main village. "I know we need to get the ship's crew back, but do we really need half the outpost to accompany us? Seems like those left behind are getting shafted pretty badly."

Ephiny flushed lightly at the implied criticism. Gabrielle still resembled a twenty-five year old woman and it was sometimes hard to remember that she was an immortal with a more than a thousand years of experience behind her. Regardless, though, Ephiny had a duty to perform and so she would to the best of her ability. She took Gabrielle by the elbow and led her away from the gather women to a secluded spot to speak to her privately.

"Gabrielle... my Queen. It's my responsibility to get you to the main village safely. Every woman here wanted the privilege of joining your entourage. I cut it down to fifteen by drawing lots. Everyone else is here to say goodbye." Ephiny shrugged. "You made quite an impression last night."

Gabrielle blushed slightly. "I'm sorry, Ephiny. I didn't mean to undermine your authority. I'm just...."

"You were never real fond of the pomp and circumstance accorded you as Queen, were you?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, not really. I never truly understood the need for it. And I never had an honor guard... even after...."

Ephiny nodded her understanding. "Well, please let us give you one this once. You don't know Regent Narmia. She is a stickler for rules and protocol. If I allow you to show up in the village without one...."

"Even by my command?"

"Even then. Until and unless you assume the mask again, she is still the ruler."

Gabrielle frowned and muttered mostly to herself, "May just have to do something about that." She missed Ephiny's smile at her words. Then she turned and faced the large group of women patiently waiting.

"Thank you all so much for welcoming me home to the Amazons," Gabrielle said to the crowd. The woman cheered and whistled, their calls ringing out in the still morning air. "It has been great to meet so many new friends and I hope to have the chance to visit with you all again in the future."

The cheering rang out again and Gabrielle nodded an acknowledgement before stepping down and indicating to Ephiny that she was ready. Ephiny nodded and began leading the entourage out of the outpost and towards the main village.

Just as the troupe was exiting the gates, one of the cooks came running up to Gabrielle with a sack. She pressed it into Gabrielle's hands and then turned and headed back the way she had come as fast as she could go. Gabrielle looked after the woman with a puzzled expression. Then she opened the sack and puzzlement turned to happiness.

Ephiny, noting that Gabrielle had not yet joined them, ran back to see what the hold-up was.

"Gabrielle? My Queen?"

Gabrielle held up the sack and Ephiny knew what it was from the scent before she even opened the bag.

"Good," she said matter-of-factly as she took Gabrielle's elbow. "Maybe we'll start getting cinnamon rolls once in a while too," she added in a loud voice, smiling when cheers and chuckles followed her pronouncement.

They had been traveling steadily for a few days making good time. For the most part, the women spent their time forging new friendships between them. Gabrielle and Ephiny spent much of their time exchanging stories, Gabrielle always careful to include Elizabeth when she could. Evenings were spent sharing tales between them, though Gabrielle by far was the most popular bard among them.

Midmorning of the sixth day gave them and unexpected and unwelcome surprise. Without warning, marauders swooped down on them, wreaking havoc among the traveling party. The Amazons crowded around their Queen and both they and the ship's crew struggled to arm themselves for the skirmish.

The raiders were covered from head to toe in black cloth, only their eyes showing from the slit left for them. They came in swinging and the women were quick to fight back... except for Gabrielle. They wouldn't move to allow her a chance to fight... or be killed.

"Ephiny, move. I can handle myself," fighting to get out of the circle without getting anyone protecting her killed.

"Please, my Queen. It's our duty," Ephiny panted as she ducked a wild swing and thrust forward into her opponent.

"To protect an immortal?!? Ephiny, please. I have been doing this for hundreds of years." Gabrielle easily felt the bloodlust rise and knew bad things were going to happen if she didn't get the opportunity to bleed it out through fighting soon. Already she felt her fangs come to the fore and she was hard-pressed to keep them contained.

She slid the seldom used katana from its sheath and pushed her way to the forefront of the fighting. The fury she unleashed caused both Amazons and sailors to stand still and watch the pure beauty of her violence in motion.

When the attackers realized there was a samurai in their midst, they disappeared as rapidly as they had come. Gabrielle stood apart watching them, willing her blood to calm. She stood breathing hard until she felt a light touch on her back.

"Your majesty? Are you all right?" Ephiny asked softly. Truthfully, Gabrielle had stunned all of them. They knew the stories of the young bard who had traveled with Xena and even when she had chosen to bear arms, she had never been a ferocious warrior. She did what it took to get the job done and no more.

The stories they had of her during her three hundred year stay were a little more vague, but it was well known that Gabrielle never considered herself a warrior, though she did teach some of the warrior arts she had learned. They had, in fact, been incorporated into the regular warrior regimen and were now part of the curriculum.

Nothing, however, had prepared them for the raw fury, the pure grace or poetry of motion that dictated her fighting abilities. She was so far above them on so many levels and suddenly each one realized how futile their efforts to protect her had been.

"Gabrielle?"

The bard had stood silently so long that Ephiny had been compelled to address her again. Finally, she turned and looked at the many women accompanying her. She shook her head to clear it and looked at Ephiny, glad that the Amazon did not retreat before her gaze.

"I'm fine, Ephiny. Thank you. What about everyone else?"

Two women, both from the ship's crew, were dead. Another half dozen or so were wounded. A dozen raiders lay dead around them.

"We'll need to stop for the day. To take care of our wounded and bury our dead."

"And then you can explain to me what exactly happened here. Though I imagine that is why we weren't taking the direct route."

"Yes, my Queen," recognizing a royal decree easily and agreeing with Gabrielle's assumption.

They divided themselves into different assignments, with Gabrielle being the healer. Through some twist of fate, she and Elizabeth, the ship's captain, ended up setting up the camp together.

"You're very different from what I'd come to expect, my Queen," Elizabeth commented quietly. She has never relinquished her need for formal address of Gabrielle and was quite happy to switch to her royal title. Gabrielle had rolled her eyes and accepted the change. It was better than Mistress.

"I have learned to adapt myself to all sorts of situations, Captain. I use what I need and save the rest."

Elizabeth nodded her head. "So are you really an immortal being?"

"Yep, but that's not something I share around either. I would appreciate...."

The Captain held up a hand. "Not to worry, my Queen. I have waited too long to be an Amazon to jeopardize my chances to stay."

"Oh? I didn't know the world remembered the Amazons," knowing full well they didn't. But Gabrielle was interested in Elizabeth's words.

The Captain shook her head. "The world doesn't. But women in the know do. Those who can read the signs... those who know the tales."

"So that is why you and your crew agreed to bring me here?"

"No, my Queen. Well, not exactly. We accepted your commission because it was intriguing and it paid well. The Amazons were an unexpected, but very welcome bonus. There are still many of us out there who would much prefer to come here... who dream of a place like this for us. I consider myself very lucky for the opportunity to be a part."

Gabrielle nodded, but said nothing and their work continued in silence. That evening, they lit the fires and once again, Ephiny took up the funeral dirge that brought back aching memories to Gabrielle's mind.

Even after centuries have passed, nothing makes that pain any easier. She closed her eyes, willing the images and the grief away. When it was over, she walked into the darkness alone.

Finally, they reached the main village and Gabrielle was welcomed with much fanfare by all with one obvious exception. The Regent Narmia felt Gabrielle to be an interloper... a pretender trying to claim her throne and the affection of the people.

"And what do you want from us, Gabrielle?" said with oozing sarcasm. "What do you expect?"

"I expect a bit of common courtesy, though if you can't manage it, I'm sure I can teach you a few manners."

Ephiny bit her lips to keep from laughing, as did the rest of the Amazons who had traveled with Gabrielle from the outpost. The ship's crew, however, wasn't quite so considerate and their laughter merely fueled the fire.

"How dare you!!" Narmia bellowed at Gabrielle. "Who do you think you are?!?"

Now Gabrielle called upon a persona she rarely had need of any longer and before the watching eyes of the Amazons, became THE Amazon Queen.

"I \*KNOW\* who I am, Narmia. \*I\* am the Amazon Queen and you need to get the bug out of your butt and get over yourself."

"You can't speak to me that way! Guards, remove her!"

But not a single guard moved to raise a hand to the Queen. Ephiny was well-liked among her peers and a simple hand signal from her had halted any perceived movement on the part of the guards. Narmia had become an increasingly disliked regent for her actions and attitude and Ephiny figured Gabrielle was just the person to fix that little problem.

## "GUARDS!!"

Gabrielle looked around, noting the crowd watching with interest, but not one moving to help Narmia. The Regent also looked around, her lips curling with disdain when she realized she was alone. She stepped down from the dais she had been seated on.

"You will all end up in the eastern colony for your disobedience, but first I will show you who the true Amazon Queen is!"

She drew her sword and came at Gabrielle with fury in her eyes. Gabrielle rolled hers, suddenly remembering one reason she had stayed away so long. Too much estrogen was just as bad as too much testosterone and the Amazons definitely had more than their share of estrogen.

When Narmia swung, she fell to the ground and blinked. Her target hadn't been where she'd expected her to be. Gabrielle accepted the katana from Ephiny and stood waiting for Narmia to recover herself.

Narmia stood and swung again and Gabrielle humored her for a while, trading blows back and forth and stretching muscles that rarely got used for that purpose except in sparring. Without warning, though, Gabrielle went on the offensive and in a matter of a few strokes, had disarmed the regent and had the blade at her throat.

"Consider yourself removed from office," Gabrielle said quietly. "Ephiny, take Narmia to the jail until such time as the council has made a decision on her fate. Then please call the council together. Apparently I need to catch up on a few things."

"Yes, my Queen," Ephiny answered. She nodded to the guards, who now finally moved. Narmia stood and went with them quietly, unsure what had just happened, but well aware she had ultimately pushed too far.

"Elizabeth, if you and your crew will go with Janus, she will get you settled into the barracks until you can begin your Amazon training. Ephiny, do I still have...."

"Your home has been preserved just the way you left it, Gabrielle. We've always hoped you'd come home to us." Gabrielle smiled weakly, knowing she wasn't going to stay. But she said nothing and moved to the cave she had called home for three hundred years.

Everything really was the same, though the lack of dust showed it had been carefully tended in her absence. The down mattress had been freshly washed and restuffed and the furs that covered it were equally clean. The desk had a small pile of parchment on one corner and the shelves were overflowing with the scrolls she'd left in place.

Gabrielle crossed to the bed and laid down, obscenely glad for its soft comfort. She grown to like her little luxuries and was so looking forward to a soak in the hot spring. Hot baths were something she'd grown to appreciate even more as she'd gotten older and Gabrielle had loved them to begin with.

She got up and went to the spring, cleaning up before she went back to the council house to catch up on the rest of the news of the Amazon Nation.

Ephiny had been bringing her up-to-date, but they hadn't reached the present. Gabrielle now had the distinct impression that Ephiny had been deliberately vague to allow Gabrielle to make her own judgments on the situation. Gabrielle approved heartily the young woman's prudence and wondered about the possibility of making her the new regent. *Another full circle completed*, Gabrielle thought with a smile.

The council meeting was very informative. The raiders had turned up some two hundred years previously and their increasing attacks on the Amazon had caused them to split the Nation into several splinter tribes. The tribes had spread across the continent, each naming a regent and the regents had met on a yearly basis to share news and information. They still considered themselves to be a single Nation, united under one Queen.

Narmia was chosen to be regent because she had been an effective leader against the raiders, driving them out of the Amazonian lands. Making her regent had been a mistake, however because the power of ruling had made her harsh and stringent. She abided strictly by the law and gave no quarter for mercy.

"Why wasn't she removed from office?" Gabrielle asked logically.

"By law, we can only remove a regent for treasonous offenses or if she continually breaks the laws of the Nation. Narmia didn't break any laws," replied one elder.

"No, she was simply suffocating us with them," said another.

"Then I think we need to change the laws," Gabrielle said. "If the system that's in place isn't working, we need to try something else."

"Actually, your majesty," Ephiny spoke. "The system works just fine. Perhaps we should mend the law, though, allowing for a little common sense."

Gabrielle chuckled. "Common sense is always a good thing. Makes for a much easier way of life."

"Agreed," another of the members said. "And may I say we are happy to welcome you home, my Queen. It has been far too long."

"Thank you," Gabrielle replied. "I don't know how long I'll be here, but it is always nice to be back among my sisters. One thing, however." She looked at each of them, allowing them to see the seriousness of her words. "My name is Gabrielle. I'd appreciate it if everyone would use that."

"But...."

"Listen, part of the reason there was a problem with Narmia is because she wanted to be Queen. Maybe it's time to let that tradition die and have a democratic society. One where a council is chosen by vote every few years."

"NO."

The oldest elder stood then and the room fell into silence. Gabrielle looked at her, waiting patiently for the old woman to continue.

"My Queen," the woman said, bowing low and Gabrielle scrambled through her mind for the elder's name.

"Speak, Halina. You're among friends here."

"My Queen, I agree with some of your reasoning. I do think we would do well with a democracy... an elected council \*if\* we could get coverage of a widespread demographic area. All ages and ways of life should be fairly represented." She waited for Gabrielle to nod her understanding. "But I do not think we should give you up as our Queen, or the woman who stands in your stead while you are gone."

Halina held up a hand when Gabrielle would have spoken.

"I know you're not here much... certainly not nearly as often as we would like to have you. But there is so much history wrapped up in you and your title that I hate for us to lose that completely."

Halina took a deep breath and Gabrielle waited for her to finish.

"I'm an old woman, relatively speaking," she added with a chuckle. Gabrielle had to grin and the women in the room tittered. "And I've seen a lot in my years here. Narmia was an exception, not the rule. Most of the regents have served with pride and honor. If the reason you think we should be strictly democratic is because you really dislike being Queen that is one thing. Otherwise, I'd really like to see some sort of merging of the two, because you're an important part of the Amazons, Queen Gabrielle. And I'd like to see you stay that way."

Gabrielle sat silently, considering Halina's words. "I'll think about it," she finally said quietly. The council accepted her words and filed out.

Time passed and the Amazons reached the compromise that Halina had been hoping for. Gabrielle remained as the Queen and a council was chosen in each village. Each guild had a representative on the council and they varied in age from young to old. The council then proposed three candidates for Regent that was then voted on by the populous of the village. A regent's term was unlimited, but she could be removed from office if it was decided by either the council or a majority of the village that she was acting against the greater good of all.

"You really don't like this, do you?" Ephiny asked as she helped Gabrielle dress for the ceremony. All the councils and regents had been chosen and Gabrielle as Queen was to preside over their swearing in. Gabrielle looked at herself critically, seeing so many differences from the feckless kid she had been the first time she'd worn the leathers.

"I've never felt like an Amazon Queen. It's never been who I am and that's all I'm allowed to be here. It just...."

"Would you believe me if I said I think I understand?" Ephiny said, tying off the vambraces. "It's one of the reasons I turned down the regency."

"I was curious about that."

Ephiny shrugged. "I know we aren't more than friends... can never be more than friends, Gabrielle. But we \*are\* friends and I think you need a friend with you, even if it's only for a little while."

Gabrielle bit her lip. "You know that I'm not coming back this way... at least not for a very long time. Are you sure you want to leave everything, everyone you know, just to go traipsing off with me for a little while? What about Elizabeth?"

Ephiny shrugged again. "We need some time apart." Not mentioning the jealousy issues. "Maybe... I dunno. But I do know that I'm going on with you, at least for a little while."

"Running away?"

"I prefer to think of it as running to." Ephiny smiled. "Besides, the Queen has to have some sort of honor guard... even if it is only an honor guard of one."

"Well, I'm glad to have you along, my friend. You really do remind me of your many times removed ancestor, Ephiny."

"I take that as a compliment. I'm actually looking forward to visiting the rest of the tribes."

Gabrielle smiled, the first real one Ephiny had seen since she'd put on her Queen's leathers and she felt herself smile in reflex. "Me too," Gabrielle confided. "I haven't seen the rest of this land. We visit the Uluru tribe first, right?"

"Yes, my Queen. They've ask for a bit of a head start to insure everything is prepared for your arrival."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "I know. I'd rather travel with them, but it is probably for the best. Less complications."

She didn't say anything else, but Ephiny was pretty sure she got the inference. She'd seen more than her share of drama growing up in the main Amazon village. Gods knew she didn't have the patience for it and she was fairly certain Gabrielle didn't either.

"Besides, it'll give us the chance to do a little exploring and meet the neighbors."

"Yep. I'm looking forward to it," Ephiny said.

"Good. Now let's go get these women sworn in so we can kick off the party I've heard about for the last two weeks." Gabrielle laughed. "You'd think the Amazons had discovered something new the way they've been carrying on."

"Yeah, well, any excuse for a party...." Ephiny let the thought trail off.

"Absolutely. And the bigger the better."

The Amazons wondered what the joke was when the two emerged from the dressing room laughing like they'd never stop.

The next morning, the coastal tribe headed back to the western outpost. They would sail their small fleet back around the island to the eastern side of the continent, arriving at their home in plenty of time to prepare for Gabrielle's arrival.

The Uluru tribe headed immediately east, making their best speed to the center of the island that was now their home. They were anxious to welcome Gabrielle and hurried as fast as they dared.

Meanwhile, Gabrielle went to the glade she had not visited in a millennium. It was so much larger, now and filled with a vast number of graves. Though the Amazons still practiced cremation, a marker was left with names and dates of each sister when she died. Gabrielle looked for one in particular, dusting it off lightly before sitting down next to it. She never saw her friends step from the shadows and gather round to hear her words.

"Hello, Eponin. It's been a long, long time... a lifetime and more. I still miss you and the others. I find myself wondering what it would have been like if I had been normal." Gabrielle stilled the thought with a chuckle. "Okay, if I had been mortal. Happy now?"

The warriors surrounding her laughed as well and their laughter was like a whisper of wind. Gabrielle's smile was melancholy as it caressed her gently.

"Anyway, I think you'd all be proud to see what the Amazon Nation has become. The women are vital, healthy and strong. They make a difference for each other. Even Narmia." The former regent had been assigned to the training fields and had done an exceptional job teaching new recruits the fundamentals of battle planning.

"I don't know when I'll get back here again. Ephiny's many times great-granddaughter and I are going to do a bit of exploring... a little bit like Xena and I did, once upon a time. You'd like Ephiny. She reminds me so much of our Ephiny and I'm every bit as glad for her friendship as I was for yours and hers. She's the first real human friend I've had in... well, I'm not sure I want to think about how long it's been. She doesn't know about me yet. Well, I mean the immortal thing she does, yeah. All the Amazons know that. I haven't figured out how or even if I should tell her about WHY I'm immortal. Guess we'll worry about that when the time comes."

Gabrielle took a deep breath and stood. "Enjoy your rest, my friend. And when you see the others, give them my love." She bowed her head briefly.

"Goodbye, Eponin," she whispered and left the glade without a backwards glance.

There wasn't a warrior there who didn't dry their eyes, before merging back into the shadows of the underworld.

## Chapter XXV

The first stop on their trip was at the original native village. Gabrielle was amazed to see the changes and growth that had occurred during her lengthy absence. There were many men and even quite a few women,

though they were considerably less in number. Ephiny and Gabrielle were welcomed warmly, then left to look around at their leisure.

The market area was large and Gabrielle spent a bit of time going through it, dickering back and forth with the merchants and bartering until both parties were satisfied with her purchases. Ephiny just stood back and watched, shaking her head at the whirlwind side of her friend she'd never thought to see. She thought back to the private scrolls of her ancestor she carried and wondered if she'd see anything else described in them.

They spent several days in the village, with Gabrielle talking to their ruling council among other things. The agreement she had drawn up between them and the Amazons so many years ago had worked out mutually beneficial to all involved and Gabrielle was gratified to know that it was still honored.

Several of the men of the village circled both she and Ephiny in interest, mating being the primary reason most Amazons visited them, but after several rejections and one rather abrupt dismissal, the men understood that neither of them were interested in producing children.

"Ephiny, did you really need to leave a mark?" No censure in the question... just honest curiosity.

"Considering where his hands were," Ephiny growled, "he's lucky I didn't break them." She motioned with her own just exactly where his had tried to be.

"Ooh. He's lucky it was you and not me in that case." Ephiny's brow arched in inquiry. "I'd have put the pinch on him."

"The pinch?" Ephiny's face was awash in confusion as she went through her mental catalogue of fighting techniques. "OH!" she exclaimed as it dawned on her. "You mean THE pinch. Xena really taught you that?"

"Yep, she really did," Gabrielle answered softly, remembering all too clearly kneeling on the floor in the room in Japa. Even now, she felt the roiling in her gut that she'd felt then and it was all she could do not to puke. Ephiny's hand on her arm grounded her and after a moment of intense concentration, Gabrielle was able to put the fierce feeling aside.

"I'm sorry Gabrielle. I didn't mean...."

Gabrielle waved off Ephiny's apology. "Don't be, Eph. You have no way of knowing what's taboo and what isn't. Just like I never know what exactly will set me off." She smiled wanly. "Sometimes a mere scent will remind me of something.... Anyway, just bear with me, my friend. It doesn't happen often, thankfully. And I always live through it."

She patted the hand on her arm and Ephiny squeezed back lightly in return. "Besides," Gabrielle commented wryly, "I brought it up, remember? Now c'mon. Let's go visit the Uluru tribe."

"It's been a long time since I crossed a desert," Gabrielle commented. "Now I remember why."

"At least we haven't run into any sandstorms," Ephiny said with a chuckle.

"Don't even joke about that," Gabrielle warned with a smile. "It's not pretty."

"You're kidding... you've really had to travel in a sandstorm?"

"No, I'm not and yeah, I really have. You think the sand you have all over now is bad?? Wait til it gets \*blasted\* into crevices it doesn't belong in."

"EW! Thanks, Gabrielle. Wasn't like I was itchy before the little mental image."

"Yeah, well, let me assure you the physical one is much worse. Been there, done that, don't want a repeat."

It had been nearly three weeks since they'd left the native village to make their way to the central Amazon village of Uluru. They had been given directions to the one or two small pools of water along their route, but it had been five days since they'd seen any and they were both getting pretty desperate to find some.

"Why exactly are there Amazons in the middle of nowhere?" Gabrielle asked, hoping to take her mind of the sand.

"After the plague was over," looking at Gabrielle to see if she remembered that time. Gabrielle nodded and Ephiny took a deep breath. "After the plague was over, the council and regent decided that it would be prudent to the life of the nation for us to expand a little bit. Have a few separate tribes in the Nation instead of just the one."

"And who got punished that they ended up in the middle of the desert?"

Ephiny chuckled. "No one. It was decided that the western outpost would become a permanent outpost, though we rotate people in and out of that one every six months. They the council decreed that a scouting party would travel until they found a good spot to start a second village."

"The desert?"

"Hush!" Ephiny admonished. "I'm trying to tell the story here." Then she clapped a hand over her mouth as she realized what she'd said to whom. Gabrielle simply chortled.

"Go, on, Ephiny," she said as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "I'll be quiet, I promise."

"Ahem, yeah, well anyway, about halfway across the desert, several of the party were taken grievously ill. It was decided that they and a few of the well Amazons would stay while the remainder continued on their journey."

"During the year it took the scouting party to reach the far coast and set up a small outpost, the Amazons that stopped here had been busy setting up a colony of their own. By the time the few from the original scouting party not already settled in the east had returned for them, they had managed to make themselves a comfortable home."

"In the desert?"

"In the desert. When the scouts returned and gave the news, the council decided that it was all good... especially as it gave us not one, but two more villages. And it gave us a place to rest on the journey between coasts."

"Well, for that reason alone, I am glad they found a home here. I am over the sand thing."

Ephiny laughed. "You know, you sound a lot like the way you describe Aphrodite when you talk like that."

Now it was Gabrielle's turn to laugh. "What can I tell you? She rubs off on you after a while."

Finally, they stood within sight of the big red rock that was the only thing that could be seen for miles.

"Wow! That's pretty amazing," Gabrielle said softly.

Ephiny glanced up, but she was more interested in scouting the area. The Uluru tribe was supposed to be located near the rock, but she could see no signs of life or habitation. And never having traveled this far, Ephiny was at a bit of loss on how to find them.

"Uh," she grunted, before turning her attention back to the cleverly unmarked landscape. Gabrielle looked at her strangely.

"Um, Ephiny? What are you looking for?"

"The village," came the distracted answer.

"There's nothing here."

"Yeah, there is. I just have to find it."

Gabrielle sat on a rock and leaned back, squawking in startlement when the rock moved. A grinding noise and what felt like a miniature earthquake caused both of them to look around before noting the growing hole in the ground.

"Underground? They live underground?" Gabrielle questioned Ephiny.

"Yeah, though I'm not sure I'd have ever found the trigger if you hadn't leaned against it. They've disguised it really well. Nice work, my Queen."

Gabrielle swung at Ephiny lightly, who easily ducked the punch. "Smarty." She looked down the darkened hole that showed the beginnings of a set of stairs. "Well, c'mon. Let's go see this underground village."

Gabrielle started down the steps before Ephiny had the chance to stop her. But she'd only gone down two stairs before she halted abruptly... so abruptly that Ephiny nearly plowed into her back.

"Gabrielle?"

Suddenly the two spears that were locked on her belly lowered slightly. "My Queen?" came a voice from the darkness.

"Yes," Gabrielle answered succinctly.

The spears were lowered further and one guard came up the steps slowly, blinking in the bright sunlight. "Apologies, my Queen. We weren't told to expect you so soon."

"Well," Gabrielle commented wryly. "I commend you for your diligence. May we enter?"

"Oh... oh, yes. Please. Dina, pass me a torch so the Queen and...." The guard looked beyond Gabrielle's shoulder. "Ephiny, wasn't it?" The curly head nodded. "Ephiny can see to get downstairs to the village."

The village itself was an amazing piece of work. Tunnels had been carved from the rock that glittered with color where the light hit it and rooms were scattered throughout. In places, the ground above had been shaped to let sunlight through and an underground water supply created a vast pool in the center square.

"Welcome, my Queen," the regent said with bowed head. "Welcome to Uluru."

Gabrielle looked around in awed delight. "This is amazing, Pyrna. Simply stunning."

"Thank you, my... Gabrielle," changing her address when Gabrielle held up a hand and gave her a look. "We are very proud of our home here."

"You should be," Ephiny commented. "This is fantastic. Did you carve all this out yourself, or...?"

The regent laughed. "Gods, no. Our ancestors were very lucky to have found the main caverns when they first settled here. We've put in a lot of work to expand them and still are, actually. We continually need more room as the tribe grows."

"Where do you find men? We haven't seen anyone for nearly three weeks."

"We travel to either of the other tribes. Both have agreements with the native villages near them."

"And that works for you?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yes. We lose a few women to the other villages, but for the most part, everyone comes home... and usually they bring someone with them."

"Well, this is all quite fascinating. Could we have a tour?" Gabrielle asked again, her eyes taking in everything with muted delight.

"Absolutely. Then we will have a banquet. This is a first for us, you know."

Gabrielle looked stunned. "Your first banquet??"

The regent howled in laughter until she doubled over from it. "No, your majesty. This is the first time our Queen has visited. I assure you we know how to throw a good party."

Ephiny snickered. Gabrielle chuckled. "Born in the blood," they muttered to one another simultaneously. Then they followed the regent through the vast cavern network.

Both Ephiny and Gabrielle enjoyed their time with what they referred to as the cavern Amazons. Gabrielle had been amazed to see the many different ways they had adapted their underground life to be almost what even a topsider would consider normal. There was hot and cold running water, a grist mill, an elaborate system for removing wastes and a large area for games and tournaments.

Ephiny really liked that as it was home to all sorts of contrived means of exercise. "This makes so much sense," she commented to Gabrielle as they used the facilities on morning. "Not like they can climb trees or run for long distances."

Gabrielle looked to Ephiny who was climbing up the rock face beside her steadily. "Nope, but I tell ya, this has to be one of the hard things I've tried to do."

The most ingenious thing to Gabrielle, though was the greenhouse and the deliberate management of heat and sunlight and water.

"This is... this could solve any number of famine problems," she commented to the head grower. Gabrielle had seen famine and the devastating results firsthand.

"Yeah, but we haven't figured out how to share our knowledge and we're still testing in the other two villages to see if it will work aboveground."

"This would be a way for the Amazons to leave their mark on the world," Ephiny commented. Gabrielle nodded, but didn't say anything.

When it came time for the duo to leave, they found themselves with something of an entourage.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle," Ephiny muttered. "If I'd known we were gonna be taking half the tribe with us, we would have snuck out in the middle of the night or something."

Gabrielle rolled her shoulders. "We'll cope," she said, hoping it was the truth and not just wishful thinking on her part. It would make for an unbearably long trek otherwise.

As it turned out, it wasn't nearly as bad as either Gabrielle or Ephiny expected it to be. A majority of the women only wanted to accompany them a short distance before returning home. The few who were left were determined to prove their worth and mostly left Gabrielle alone except to ask for the occasional story. That was one contribution Gabrielle was always happy to make.

They reached the coastal village in good time and the women who had traveled with them went on into the native village to see about finding a mate. Gabrielle shivered with the cool, detached precision the task was performed with. Even for children, she didn't think she could copulate with a man she didn't at least feel affection for.

"It's not as bad as it seems, Gabrielle. Most of the women spend a few months finding someone that at least like and feel some compatibility to. Only a few approach it from a clinical point of view."

Gabrielle shuddered. "I guess I've always thought sex and love should be a part of each other. I just couldn't...."

Ephiny placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I understand, Gabrielle. Some Amazons feel the way you do and never have children for that reason. But it is their choice and it is our way. Always has been."

"I know and I wish them well."

"Well enough to preside over the fertility rites tomorrow night?"

"Yes, I will preside at yet another Amazon party," Gabrielle replied with a laugh. "I swear I party more during my relatively brief stays with the Amazons than I have the rest of my life put together."

Ephiny chuckled. "Gotta make sure you wanna come back."

The rites went well and the party was a lot of fun, but increasingly Gabrielle found herself growing edgy. Even her enjoyment at being introduced to the community and visiting a new village was muted. She wasn't sure whether to put it down to the increasing need to feed again or the constant companionship she seemed to be surrounded by.

After a couple days of watching Gabrielle's increasing frustration, Ephiny finally took Gabrielle aside. Gabrielle wasn't totally surprised. She and Ephiny had become good friends and she figured it was apparent even to the most non-observant among them that she was out of sorts. What stunned her completely were Ephiny's words.

"Gabrielle, how long has it been since you fed?"

"Ex... excuse me?" Wide green eyes looked at Ephiny with a mixture of fear, relief and despair.

Ephiny took Gabrielle's arm and led her away from the village and down toward the beach. When it was obvious they were alone, Ephiny cleared her throat to speak.

"Let me tell you a story. Many years ago, there was a young Amazon Queen named Gabrielle whose chose her friend Ephiny to be her regent. Ephiny was very fond of the Queen and occasionally wrote about Gabrielle in the private journals she kept."

"As time passed, Ephiny noticed subtle differences in both her Queen and the Queen's unofficial consort, Xena. Nothing definite that she could put her finger on, but something changed between them, long after Ephiny knew they were lovers."

"It was sometime after the..." she paused and chose her words carefully, "village incident. I don't know how long afterwards though. It was the first time you had returned to the village since Xena had dragged you from the Nation and there were still some very hard feelings towards the warrior. It was after Xena had thanked Ephiny for the actions she had taken to protect her Queen and apologized for her own that Ephiny literally stumbled on their secret."

"She had gone into the woods to get away and think, knowing that any punishment meted out to Xena was her responsibility alone. She went straight to her thinking tree, muttering and cursing as she struggled to climb up with a still weak arm. Finally, though, she was up and getting to her favorite spot didn't take a lot more effort."

"Ephiny sat unmoving for quite some time, letting her mind still and reviewing all the facts as she knew them. She was shocked when without warning Xena and Gabrielle stopped beneath her and began making love almost frantically. She opened her mouth to announce her presence when she saw Gabrielle open her mouth and sink fangs into Xena's neck, drawing an unexpected response from both warrior and bard."

"It didn't last long and Xena returned the favor before their lovemaking became tender. Ephiny recognized the moment she was spotted by Xena's senses and turned away to give her friends some privacy. They dressed one another slowly when it was over and headed back to the village. Xena pinned Ephiny with a stare and accepted the solemn nod as her agreement to remain silent. Ephiny stayed in the tree most of the night trying to understand just what she had seen."

"She never mentioned it to anyone. But she did always wonder what had happened."

Gabrielle sat very still, arms wrapped around her body as though for protection.

"I'm sorry I upset you Gabrielle," Ephiny said softly. "I only asked out of concern and a little bit of confusion."

"Did everyone in your family know?" Gabrielle asked hoarsely. "Has this been a secret passed from mother to daughter for thirteen hundred years?"

"No, Gabrielle. Not at all. At least if anyone else knew, no one ever talked about it. I discovered the journals by accident." Gabrielle's skeptical expression made her hurry on. "When we left Greece, everyone was allowed to bring a small box of their possessions." Gabrielle nodded, remembering far too well the anguish that had caused some.

"My ancestors brought a chest that Ephiny had made herself, full of intricate designs and delicate carvings. At first, it was used because it was all we had and then it was put away as the only reminder we had of our old homeland and the things left behind there."

"My mother died when I was thirteen, but I was in warrior training and considered an adult. So I was allowed to keep my home." Ephiny drew a breath. "The night that we graduated from basic warrior training we were able to spend the night at home. It was the first time I had been there alone and it was a little scary." She chuckled self-consciously.

"I spent a lot of time just wandering around the empty hut until the chest caught my eye. For a long time I just studied it, wondering. Finally, I saw a pattern in the grain and I realized it was a puzzle. It took me nearly two months before I figured out the secret, but when I did, I found the hidden crevice the journal was in. It was... I thought it was the greatest thing that would ever happen to me."

She smiled at Gabrielle. "And for the longest time, it was. I was the keeper of an undiscovered bit of Amazon history... my own little secret. Then I met you."

Ephiny looked at the still figure whose tense back was facing her. "Gabrielle, will you explain something to me?"

For the longest time there was nothing but silence and Ephiny had about given up hope of an answer when a whispered voice was heard in the stillness. "If I can."

"You're not a regular bacchae. You eat and sleep like anyone else, you go out in the sunshine and you seem to be able to control the need to feed." Ephiny hesitated, wondering how to voice her question, but Gabrielle understood

"I am not a full bacchae and I have a goddess that looks out for me." She paused. "I drank the first time Bacchaus offered the chalice and that gave me the immortality and the blood need. Xena stopped me before I could drink the second time and complete the ritual."

"I eat because I enjoy it and occasionally, I am even hungry, though that usually only happens after great exertion or stress. I sleep because it helps pass the time and reminds me that I was completely human once upon a time. Of course, sometimes I actually get tired enough to sleep, but not often."

Her voice, already quiet, dropped to a whisper. "The blood need isn't something I can control... I still have to feed as long as Xena and I are apart. Aphrodite just gave me a talisman that makes it more manageable for me; I don't have to feed very often."

Ephiny walked up to Gabrielle then, close enough to touch but still separate from her. "Thank you," she said softly. "I appreciate your trust." She drew a deep breath. "Now go. I'll tell the Amazons you needed a bit of peace."

Ephiny started to move away when she was stopped by Gabrielle's voice. "Thank you for understanding."

Ephiny chuckled. "There is still so much I don't understand, but I do understand that I'm your friend and friends stick together."

Gabrielle smiled through tears the younger woman couldn't see. "They sure do, Eph. They sure do."

They became more comfortable with one another after that and their time in the coastal village was marked with a lot of laughter. The tribe was very sorry to see them go.

"My Queen, your boat is stocked and ready for travel."

"Thank you, Kima. Are you sure this won't create a hardship for your village? It's not like I am coming back anytime soon. Several years at the very least," Gabrielle commented to the regent as they walked towards the docks.

"Gabrielle, the boat is one we confiscated from raiders who tried to overrun us. We refitted it to make it a more comfortable pleasure vessel on occasions we get the opportunity to use it. As for the crew... every woman here understands it may be a while before they get to come home. You were very forthcoming about that. We still had to have a tournament to determine who got to go with you." Kima chuckled softly at the embarrassed consternation so apparent on Gabrielle's face.

"I'm sorry, my Queen. I don't think you really understand the effect you have on people... especially Amazons." They stopped at the bottom of the gangplank. "Safe journey to you, Gabrielle. May you soon find the one your heart most desires."

Without giving the Queen an opportunity to respond, the Regent turned and walked back to the end of the C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

dock where most of the village had gathered. A commotion from the back of the group caused them to part and Ephiny pushed her way through.

"Apologies, my Queen."

Gabrielle held up a hand to forestall her words. "Glad you could join us. Now let's get started. If I understood correctly, this journey is gonna take us several months."

Ephiny groaned silently, then jogged up the gangplank, stopping short when she noticed their captain.

"Elizabeth?"

"Hello, Ephiny," the low voice rumbled. "I thought it was time I was honest about my feelings for you," were the words she spoke, but Ephiny clearly read the intent in the dark eyes facing her. Suddenly, several months at sea together didn't seem a bad prospect.

They had been at sea ten days when the call of "Land Ho!" echoed down from the crow's nest. Since it was completely unexpected, most of the women on the ship ran topside to see. Sure enough, there was a small bit of land visible and with a nod from Gabrielle, the navigator made for it.

The land was beautiful, green and lush in a way Gabrielle had not seen in years. The beach was black sand, fine and smooth as silk and Gabrielle wondered for a long moment if she really needed to see the world Cecrops had told her of. This one was simply astounding.

Then she decided they had time to do a little exploring. Hopefully, their enjoyment of this place would not cause her to lose her entire crew.

Days and weeks turned to months before Gabrielle decided she needed to press on to the other world she sought. Their explorations had shown them mountains and valleys, green hills and snow covered peaks. The lakes were clear and the volcanoes... well, they would have been just as happy without them. But then again, as the saying goes, too much of a good thing can be boring. A little bad now and then in your life makes things so much more interesting.

As it was, about a third of the crew decided to remain behind, including Ephiny and Elizabeth. Gabrielle wasn't surprised, though she would miss Ephiny greatly. She was flattered to be asked to marry them before the ship left for open water.

When the ceremony was over, Ephiny found a private moment to say goodbye.

She gave Gabrielle a strong hug, which the Queen returned in full measure. "I'm gonna miss you, ya know. Traveling with you was one of the most thrilling experiences of my life and I'll never forget it... or you."

"I'll miss you too," Gabrielle said quietly. "I can't tell you how nice it was for me to have your company for just a little while. Be happy, my friend. And love one another long and well."

Elizabeth stepped up beside Ephiny then and extended a hand towards Gabrielle, who accepted it with a firm squeeze.

"Thank you, my Queen. You brought me to my future and I will always be in your debt for that."

"I'm glad I didn't interfere with that."

"No, that was my own stubborn foolishness. I'm glad Ephiny has you for a friend."

Now Gabrielle gave a genuine smile. "So am I. And I hope I can count you in that number?" tentatively.

"I would be honored, my... Gabrielle."

"Thank you, Elizabeth. Now I'm sure the two of you have better places to be than here talking to me." She made shooing motions with her hands. "Go on, now."

The two of them were out bright and early the following morning with the rest who were remaining behind to give the ship a proper send off. Then the long voyage for the New World began.

It was a long, monotonous trip, broken only by the days they would stop to swim and refresh themselves. They ran into several small islands along their route, more by accident than design, though everyone was grateful for small blessings. Those stops made the voyage much more tolerable and provided them with precious fresh water and food.

After two months at sea, Gabrielle's boredom drove her to try something that reminded her of Xena.

She dove from the stern of the ship carrying a long rope that was looped around an iron ring attached to the very outermost piece. With a yell, she gave a directive to the captain and Marta began tacking the ship to catch the breeze. Soon the boat was racing along and Gabrielle was standing up in the water, racing along behind it.

The color in her face and the sparkle in her eyes was a welcome sight to all and they laughed with her in her joy. It would be an experience she would repeat several times before they reached the coast.

Gabrielle shuddered in remembrance. What she had found when she reached the New World was not what Cecrops had told her to expect. Though she did manage to find what he spoke of after a bit of foot travel on her part.

"Xena, I don't know exactly where you are, but I hope with all my heart you're in a safe place... not where we ended up on my first visit. America is a wild, beautiful country," here Gabrielle chuckled. "A lot like you, my love."

A knock on her door interrupted her internal dialogue. Gabrielle admitted the steward with her hot water and then closed the door behind him.

"I wonder if you have the luxury of taking a hot bath. Those were always more fun together."

With a wistful smile, Gabrielle dropped her robe and stepped into the small tub to clean up for the day.

"Ahhhhh "

## Chapter XXVI

"Brrr," Xena murmured softly as she shook the water from her arms and squeezed the excess from her hair before snatching up the towel and drying herself off briskly. Even being out of the wind didn't help warm the almost frozen water she was bathing in and she glanced down at herself wryly, double checking to be sure her fingers and toes were still attached.

The weather had turned violent somewhat unexpectedly, since Xena was still learning the signs and patterns of a land still pretty new to her experience. She knew enough, though to gather wood and find a dry cave to hole up in until the worst was over.

Besides being dry, the cave had provided her with a new bearskin coat and enough bear meat to sustain her entire journey east, as well as a feeding that should last a while. It had also made the bath a necessity.

"Oh Gabrielle," she muttered as she returned to the welcome warmth of the cave. "What I wouldn't give for a hot bath with you right about now." Then she added a bit more wood to the blaze and set out to cure both the meat and the hide. If her weather senses interpreted the indications correctly, she was going to need the coat for a while.

The scroll had been somewhat vague in its clues, but it told enough to send her traveling to the northeast. She had to find the trees it was made from and from there she would find the staff. Keto had told her to look for the blue trees and a few well-placed questions had put her on the path she now walked.

She questioned the wisdom of being out in the weather, but knew her heart wouldn't allow her to let up, even if her head knew better. For now, the weather dictated her actions and it decided she was staying put.

With the hide stretched out and the meat slowly curing over several small fires, Xena found herself at a loss. Her supplies were few and those not currently in used had already been well tended to. That left Xena with more time to think than she was comfortable with, knowing her thoughts would turned to Gabrielle and what she had lost.

So she rose from the bedroll and began going through a series of motions - arts she had learned in the eastern lands that allowed for both offensive and defensive movements designed to maim or kill without the use of any weapon.

Round and round she went doing forms slowly and precisely, then brought the movements together faster and faster til they flowed like a waterfall... fast, beautiful and deadly.

Finally, dripping sweat and exhausted, Xena fell on her back into her bedroll. She lay there for a moment, breathing heavily, before adding more green wood to the smoke fire and banking her cooking one.

Just before she closed her eyes in sleep, Xena's mind turned to the warmth she'd long ago come to associate with Gabrielle. A smile crossed her lips.

The next several days were spent in much the same routine, much to Xena's dismay. Sleep hadn't been a friend to her in a very long time and now she found she had to work harder than ever to be able to do so.

On the one hand it was nice. She hadn't been in such great shape since before Solon was conceived. She felt as though years had simply dropped from her body like they'd never happened.

On the other hand, however, Xena was bored. It wasn't like Gabrielle was around to appreciate the hard work and there was no one else Xena wanted or needed to impress. Besides, repetition of this kind made her a little stir crazy. It was one thing to repeat an exercise to learn a new move or build up certain muscles. It was something entirely different to be forced by circumstance to do the same thing over and over again.

After four days, the storm abated and Xena stepped out into... bare prairie. The wind had blown so hard that it had swept the snow clean away in its fury. Xena was amazed. In her experience, snow tended to fall and stick to whatever it hit and stay there until the spring thaw.

The sight of sunshine made her smile and she hurriedly packed up her small camp, doused her fires and began her northwest trek again, thankful beyond words for the bearskin coat. It might have looked warm with the sun shining, but the temperature was frigid and the wind pierced everything around it with a bone-chilling numbness.

Winter seemed to last forever and the fact that she was slowly and steadily moving north did not change Xena's perception. Finally though, winter gave way to the inevitable and spring. And spring found Xena in the mountains.

Months passed as Xena walk up and down every hill and valley, growing more frustrated every day. She figured it was a good lesson in patience; she just wasn't sure she had the patience to learn it.

"A tree is a tree," she muttered to herself. "How am I supposed to find a staff in the middle of a forest? Better yet, how do I know if I have the right forest?"

Xena rubbed her hand on the back of her neck, feeling the stress of almost a year of fruitless searching. A look at the sky showed the approach of the first winter storms and she decided to find a place to wait for spring.

Spring came again and Xena was even more determined to find the staff. She'd spent a majority of the winter studying everything she could to try to best ascertain where she would find it. She packed her bags and headed northeast once more.

Without warning, an odd little man stepped in front of Xena and instinctually she reached for a sword that was no longer there. She stopped, realizing her mistake almost immediately and giving the man a second look. Her jaw nearly dropped in recognition.

"Joxer?" she whispered.

The man cocked his head, the pot that he wore as a hat slipping to one side before he reached up a hand to stop its motion. He resettled it, then extended a hand towards her.

"Name's John Chapman, but folks 'round here all call me Johnny Appleseed. You like an apple?"

"Not from you, buddy," Xena muttered. "You don't know the power of an apple seed."

He looked a bit startled at her answer, but swallowed and bravely continued on. "Oh, but I do. I've made it my job to spread them all over the country," he said, not understanding the strange look Xena was giving him. "Please, take one," trying to press an apple into her hands.

"No, thanks," she answered adamantly. "I don't share that kind of thing with anyone but Gabrielle."

He held up his hands. "All right. If you change your mind, I'm planting orchards all over. You're welcome to help yourself."

"Thanks," Xena said as she moved away from him.

"Hey," he called just before she was out of sight. "What's your name?"

"They call me Xena."

He opened his mouth to speak again, then shrugged his shoulders. She was nowhere to be seen. He turned his steps westward again and walked away... whistling.

The city was crowded, noisy and full of sights she'd never imagined to see in her lifetime. And the smell... it was indescribable. It reminded her... Xena's lips twitched in memory. It reminded her of the first time she'd decided to cook for Gabrielle. She'd never known hot cooking oil would burn like Greek fire and smell even worse.

Then she smiled, remembering how Gabrielle had pitched right in to not only clean the mess, but had the grace not to tease her about it afterwards. And the night itself had been... wonderful. A beautiful memory she still treasured.

Xena sighed, wanting more than memories and she turned unwavering footsteps to find the answers she sought.

The first place she tried was an inn and they refused to let her inside, citing a policy against allowing "Injuns" in the door. The second mocked her clothes, stating that no respectable woman would be seen dressed as a man. She considered starting a fight, but remembered Keto's final words of caution.

"White men different from us, Zee-nah. Look for reason to do harm to those not them. Some good, but hard to tell who."

She agreed, but she felt that way about most people. It was impossible to tell good or bad by appearance alone.

Xena thought for a while, then decided to find a lawman. That might give her a start on finding Hercules.

"Hey!"

The two men at the desk turned to face her, then raised an eyebrow at her appearance. The older one beckoned her forward, though and she closed the door behind her as she stepped into the room.

"Can I help you... uh, ma'am?" the older man asked. It was clear she was a woman, but he'd never seen one dressed so.

"I hope so. I'm looking for somebody."

Silence.

The younger man spoke up. "This someone got a name?"

Xena shrugged. "I'm sure he does, but he didn't give it to me."

The two men exchanged glances. "Okay, so whaddya want from us?" said the older man. Obviously he was in charge and Xena felt it equally obvious that neither of them had any intention of helping her.

"Look, just forget it, all right? I'll find him on my own."

"Now, hold on, little lady. Hold on." He saw her eyes narrow and stepped back instinctively. "I'm sorry, Miss... Miss.... What's your name, anyway?"

"You can call me Xena. Just Xena. And I'm no lady."

"I'm sorry Mi...." He hesitated at the glare. "I'm sorry, Xena. We didn't mean to make you think we wouldn't help. It's just usually when we're looking for someone, we at least know \*who\* the someone is."

"Well, he's my height, a little taller... blue eyes, light brown hair, muscular," gesturing to the width of her shoulders. "Kind of reminds you of a hero from legend."

"Hey, boss, that sounds like...."

"Yeah." The older man turned back to who was looking at him with a raised brow. "Oh 'scuse us again, Mi... Xena. A fella who mostly fits your description is actually a fellow lawman. He's the Marshall in these parts."

Xena nodded, though she really didn't understand what a Marshall was. She still didn't know exactly who these two were or what their titles were. She only knew the kind woman at the mission had pointed her in this direction when she'd asked for a lawman. She tended to dismiss the rest of the woman's diatribe.

"Can you tell me where to find him?"

"Well, he's out of town on business, but he should be back directly... a week at the outside."

Xena's eyes widened. She didn't want to be in the odd town a week. It was loud and it stank and the people... well, she'd about reached the end of her rope with rude and obnoxious. And there was no bloody way she was going to put on those ridiculous costumes she saw the women here wearing. There was no sense and little practical purpose to them. They reminded her vaguely of the outfit Gabrielle had worn the first time they'd met.

"Tell ya what," the older man said, seeing the uncomfortable look in her eyes. "My name's Jake and this here's Billy." They exchanged head nods. "Miss Lucille owns the boarding house where we both live. Why don't one of us take ya over and you can stay there and wait for Hank?"

Xena studied them both for long moments. So many times she'd trusted, only to have it come back and bite her badly. But she was at a loss to find Hercules and this was the best chance she'd had in the months since she'd started her quest. What was one more week?

"All right," she finally drawled, realizing that she could easily take both of them if they were lying to her, but hoping that, for a change, someone was being honest with her right up front.

Jake nodded and snatched his hat from the rack. "I'll be back in a minute, Billy," stopping the younger man's protest with a look before it could be voiced. "I'll ask Miss Lucille 'bout some of her special muffins for ya, all right?"

Billy grinned and nodded. Unlike Jake, he always felt a little shy around Miss Lucille, though she'd never been anything but nice to him.

Jake reached for Xena's elbow, then stopped when he heard a growl emanate from deep in her chest. Instead, he opened the door and gestured her to go in front of him. She rolled her eyes and stepped back out into the dirty, smelly, crowded outdoors.

There were times and this was one of them, when adding the heightened awareness of her bacchae senses to the already very aware warrior senses pushed her to overload. It made her wish for way to turn them off.

Jake led them down the road until Xena realized they were moving to the outskirts of town. She kept a careful eye on where they were going. She wanted to be able to get back to town if things didn't work out.

Xena was able to breathe a little better here and Jake smile slightly to see her relax. He placed a friendly hand on her arm, removing it when she flinched. "Don't worry, Xena. Miss Lucille will take good care of you."

Miss Lucille reminded Xena a lot of her mother Cyrene. And since Xena would not tolerate charity, she spent her days doing chores around the place to earn her keep while she waited for the mysterious Hank.

Four days after her introduction to Miss Lucille's boarding house, a large roan horse ambled up the path. Lucille came out onto the front porch, smiling when she caught sight of the big man climbing down from the horse's back.

"Howdy there, Hank!"

"Hey, Miss Lucille! How is everything?"

"Good, good! Got somebody here been waiting for ya. Did Jake tell ya?"

"Nope, I came straight here first. I need a bath. It's been a long road."

"You want me to send 'em up after you get done?"

"Yeah. I won't be too long, but I gotta get rid of the trail dust. It's making me itch."

Lucille laughed. "Git along with you then. I got water heating for the wash... I'll give you that and heat more for the laundry." She held up a hand before he could speak. "Tell me a hot bath don't sound real good to you bout now."

"No fair, Miss Lucille. I'm trying to be selfless."

"Why? I made the offer. Oughtta enjoy it while you can."

Hank chuckled. "All right, Miss Lucille. All right. Thank you. I'll take the water up when I go."

"Thanks, Hank."

He waved a hand to her as he entered the house. The door slammed behind him and Lucille stood on the porch listening to both indoor and outdoor sounds. She nearly jumped from her skin when Xena came around the corner noiselessly.

"Land sakes, child. How do you do that? I've never known anyone to be so silent in my entire life."

Xena smirked to herself, but merely shrugged her shoulders at Lucille. She'd given up trying to get the middle-aged redhead from calling her child. *Not like she'll understand I'm nearly two thousand years old*.

Lucille shook her head. "Look, Hank's home and he needed the hot water I had on for the laundry for his bath. You wanna fetch me a couple more buckets of well water?"

"Sure," Xena answered, glad for the chore to fill her time til Hank got done. She was ready for this part of her quest to be over. She smiled to herself. And if she was very lucky, it would be nice to see an old friend as well.

Lucille watched Xena for a moment before she returned to her kitchen. She'd have to fix a substantially larger dinner than she'd been planning. But she was glad to have Hank back. She was more than a little curious as to why Xena was searching for him.

"Never met a more closed-mouthed woman than she is," Lucille muttered to herself, before pulling out her big skillet.

Xena brought the two buckets of water into the kitchen and set them by the stove since the pot Lucille had put on there that morning for laundry wasn't there. Then she went back to the barn to curry the horses and let them out to pasture.

Hank hurried with his bath, though he surely did enjoy his hot water. He was curious about the person waiting to speak to him. *Funny Miss Lucille didn't mention a name*. *Don't even rightly know if it's a man or a woman*, though he figured it to be a man. Given his line of work, it was the most logical conclusion.

Besides all that, he needed to get into town to check with Jake and Billy. The rustlers he'd captured were part of a bigger group he suspected and he wanted to see if they'd heard anything new.

So Hank rushed through his bath, though he made sure to scrub every bit of dirt and trail dust from his skin. He sighed. He missed the plumbing he had once known and looked forward to the time when mankind caught up to where progress had been many civilizations ago.

Sometimes being an immortal among mortals just sucked wind.

The dinner bell rang just as that thought crossed his mind and he climbed from the tub and dried off. He pinned on his badge when he finished dressing, knowing he would need to spend the afternoon in town catching up on work.

He walked into the dining room, noticing right away the long, dark hair and broad shoulders. It reminded him.... And then the figure turned around and he was met by familiar blue eyes. It was only his god's blood that kept him on his feet.

"Hello, Hercules," said in a low voice she knew only he would hear.

"Hank! HANK!" Lucille waited until his eyes tracked to hers. "You all right? You look like you've done seen a ghost."

"I'm fine, Miss Lucille. Just never expected to see Xena again." *Certainly not in this time and place. How...?* He reached out to take her hands, pulling Xena from her chair and wrapping his arms gingerly around her body lest she disappear like a dream. She returned the hug fully and he smiled.

"It's been too long, my friend," he said when they separated. "I can't tell you how amazing it is to see you again."

"Her... Hank," Xena answered with a smile, though Hercules could see so many other things in her eyes. He raised his eyebrow in question and she nodded ever so slightly. Herc blew out a breath. He couldn't wait to hear this story.

Lucille beamed. "Well, now. Ain't this nice? She's been waiting to see ya, Hank. I'm glad you're the one she was looking for. Now let me get dinner on the table. I'm sure ya both have lots to catch up on."

She direly wanted to stay around and listen, but she knew Xena wouldn't speak if folks were hanging round. Even after only four days Lucille had learned that much about her mysterious boarder.

Hercules waited until he knew Lucille had left them alone before asking in a sibilant whisper, "What...? How? Why? When?"

Xena held up a hand to stem the flood tide of questions her was sending her direction. "Later. Suffice it to say that I'm trying to get home... to my time and to Gabrielle."

Now both eyebrows went up and Hercules was becoming more intrigued by the minute. At that moment, however, Lucille came back out of the kitchen and set two bowls full of vegetables in front of them, then swept back out of sight to retrieve the meat platter.

"We'll talk?" he asked.

"Yes," was the only answer she gave before Lucille was seating herself and the topic of conversation became more general.

"Miss Lucille, if Jake or Billy come looking for me, tell them we'll talk business tomorrow. I've got some personal stuff to take care of this afternoon."

Lucille looked between him and Xena and nodded. She wasn't sure if she was jealous or not. It was obvious the two had a history between them, but if she was reading her signals right, they were nothing more than good friends.

"They don't know you're back yet, Hank, so they shouldn't be asking any questions til they get back from town."

"Well, Marty and Ruford took the prisoners into custody, so they know I'm here. They just can't drop everything to come out here." He grinned and Lucille laughed.

"You two go on. I'll hold down the fort if they git back 'fore you do."

"Thanks, Miss Lucille." Hercules turned to Xena. "Walk or ride?"

"I don't have a horse."

Herc smiled. "I think we can fix that problem if you wanna ride."

The sparkle in her eyes was answer enough and in a very few minutes, the two were galloping across open field. They slowed as they reached the small creek near the back property line and dismounted easily. They let the horses free to graze and they walked to the bank of the trickling water.

Hercules sat against a tree trunk, watching the woman he'd known so many lifetimes ago. A lot had changed since he'd seen her last, but so much more had stayed the same. He waited patiently, knowing eventually, she'd be ready to talk to him. It didn't take nearly as long as he expected it to.

"How much of my story do you know?" she asked softly, never turning from her contemplation of the water.

He shrugged. "Not nearly enough," he responded, "given my shock at seeing you here." He paused. "I know what happened in Japan."

She laughed derisively. "No comments? No mention of how stupid I was? How selfish?"

"What would you like me to say that you haven't already told yourself a thousand times?" he countered as he stood up.

She clenched her fists and waited, needing him to say it out loud.

"All right...." he relented. "You made the wrong choice, the wrong decision and it was for nothing! Gabrielle was left to suffer alone! Is that what you wanted me to say??"

Even knowing it for the truth, hearing it come from his lips made Xena's shoulders slump. "Is that what you really believe?" in a bare whisper.

"It's what I know. I saw what happened there... how you were manipulated. How you let yourself be manipulated so you could ignore the truth in your heart and then justify it to yourself." Hercules drew a deep breath. There was no point in railing at her for things long past. He was sure she indulged in enough self-castigation as it was.

He walked up behind her, close but not touching. "It doesn't matter now. It's in the past and you can't change it. All you can do is hope to make the life you have now better."

"No! NO!" she said again, fiercely. "I have a way to go home... home to my time, to Gabrielle. And by the gods, I'm going to get there!"

He looked at her and the conviction in her voice and the fire in her eyes made him believe she really could. "All right," he said slowly. "Is there a way I can help?"

Xena nodded and turned away from him again. Then slowly, she poured her story out to him... starting with the surprise of finding herself naked in an unknown land, glossing over her bacchae tendencies and immortality and finishing with the scroll and its totems that she was now on a quest to find.

"So you think finding all the totems will give you a way to go home... back to our time?"

"Yes. Keto has assured me the results are mine to choose if the ritual is done right. And that's what I want." She closed her eyes. "I need to go home to Gabrielle."

"Why?"

The single word fell into silence and Xena froze with the chill it sent skittering over her skin. She waited, mouth open, trying to come up with a response that wouldn't sound selfish and found to her dismay she couldn't. When Hercules realized she had no ready answer, he pushed a little harder.

"Why would you put her through all the turmoil she has already suffered at your gruesome death again?"

"You've seen her? She's still alive?"

He hated to dash the hope he could see in those blue orbs, but he'd promised Aphrodite to keep Gabrielle's secret.

"Xena, I saw her in the scrying bowl not long after your death. She was devastated." Truth. "I haven't seen her since." Also truth, as far as it went. Dite kept him informed of things, though. They had an arrangement.

"You couldn't at least go check on her?" furious now at his neglect of Gabrielle.

"For a while there, we couldn't even find her. And once we did, Dite asked me not to seek her out."

"So you just let her be alone??"

"No, Xena. YOU did that." And even though they were true, Xena felt the words slash her heart and soul to ribbons and she sucked in a breath at the pain of it.

"You're a real bastard, Hercules," she managed to whisper through clenched lips. "I don't know why I thought you'd bother to help me." She stalked away from the creek, headed back towards the boarding house at a ground eating pace.

Hercules sighed and shook his head. *That hadn't gone well*, he thought sourly. Then he whistled for his horse, mounting his and gathering up the reins for Xena's. It didn't take him long to catch up to her.

"Leave. Me. Alone." The words were hissed at him very distinctly and he felt his nape hair rise as it hadn't in nearly two thousand years. He deliberately moved his horse in front of her and jumped down mere inches from her face. Plenty close enough for her to take a swing.

Which she did. Hercules was the only person who not only knew and understood what she was feeling, but was honest enough to push her on it and strong enough to handle her reaction.

She swung at him repeatedly and he let her, only protecting his face from the onslaught. She didn't say a word or shed a tear, but finally she dropped to the ground exhausted.

"Feel better?" as he fell down beside her, wincing at the bruise he could feel forming on his ribs. "Ready to listen to me now?"

Xena didn't answer, but she didn't move either.

He cupped his fingers under her chin and raised her eyes to meet his. The pain and turmoil swirling in their midst made him catch his breath and he swallowed hard, remembering the desolation he'd felt when he'd lost Deianeira and the children and again when Serena had been killed. And knowing through Aphrodite what Xena and Gabrielle had shared....

"Xena, I have the staff. I can't tell you how surprised I was to find it in my possession again. I'll give it to you, but you have to promise me something first."

She nodded, her eyes never leaving his face.

"I want you to promise me that if the ritual works, if it gives you what you ask for... you have to promise me not to waste the chance you get." He held her face still when she would have nodded her agreement. "Whatever it takes, Xena. You make Gabrielle your greater good from now on and let the future take care of itself."

"But...." Confusion as those words fell from his lips. He moved his finger up to cover hers and she trailed off. Then he sat back on his haunches and looked up towards the late afternoon sky.

"Let me explain something to you, Xena... something I know from experience. Eternity is a very long time to C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

have to live with regrets. To regret not being there when you should have, or as often as you wanted to. To regret putting things in front of those you cared the most for instead of putting them first. To be alone...." He broke off unwilling or unable to finish his thought. It didn't matter though. Xena knew just what he meant.

"So you have to promise me, if I help you on your first step back to Gabrielle, that you will put your responsibility to her first from now on. You're an immortal now, Xena. Do you really want to live with eternal regrets?"

He waited in silence for a very long time, just watching the sun slowly slip beneath the horizon. Twilight was upon them before Xena spoke.

"I promise."

Hercules took a few days off and he and Xena spent it renewing their friendship and reminiscing about times long gone. The night before Xena was ready to leave, they sat out on Lucille's front porch with the scroll on a small table between them.

"I'm telling you, Xena. This clue is sending you into Mexico... somewhere near the ancient civilization ruins."

"He... Hank, why would there be an Amazon mask in the Aztec ruins?"

"I don't know, but that's were you'll find it." He paused. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Xena hesitated, then shook her head no. "You have a life here and this is my quest."

He nodded, accepting her answer because he'd known what it would be. But he felt better having offered.

"Maybe I'll see you again then?"

"Maybe," Xena said. "But I won't forget," she added in a whisper.

"Good. I'd hate to have to hunt you down and remind you again."

They chuckled together easily like the old friends they were. Then Hercules turned serious once more.

"Be careful, my friend. The Aztecs were dangerous when they were a thriving civilization."

Xena gave him a feral smile. "I'm still dangerous. I'll find that mask and it will lead me to Gabrielle." She turned to the stars and whispered fiercely. "You hear me, Gabrielle? I'm gonna find you."

## Chapter XXVII

Oh, Xena... I wish I could find you now. Or you could find me. Several of my Amazon crew died and the new mask Ephiny made for me is gone. This is one nightmare experience that will always haunt me.

Gabrielle looked up from her diary, remembering still all too clearly the incident involving the Aztecs had been one of the most gruesome she had lived through.

After almost three full months at sea, they had finally reached land and they were all very happy to see it. The scouts went first, though Gabrielle insisted that as an immortal, she was the better choice. The Amazons insisted and Gabrielle had good-naturedly let them override her, knowing it was a matter of honor for them. It was a decision she came to rue very rapidly.

The four women moved silently, swiftly and cautiously. They had no idea what to expect and didn't want to be taken by surprise. Unfortunately for them, their watchers had seen them as the ship came over the horizon much earlier in the day and were laying in wait for them.

The men moved silently, just as they had been directed by their priest. He stood on a high hillock away from the shore dressed as a representative of the war god. The blue and green plumage of his mask was disconcerting and it hid him well in the lush jungle just off the beach. He watched with impassive eyes as the warriors readied themselves to capture the encroacher they would sacrifice to their god.

The Amazon dropped without a sound, though she was seen and instantly the guards formed up near her to defend her against the threat. Unfortunately for them, they were ill prepared for the darts that flew from the foliage unseen until it was too late. The women were gathered up and disappeared into the jungle as the alarm went up and the rest of the crew readied themselves for rescue.

Armed to the teeth and wearing their ceremonial masks, the Amazons followed their fallen sisters. The trail wasn't hard to see, but caution slowed them somewhat. There were already four of them in trouble; no one wanted to add to that burden.

When the reached an opening in the brush, they stopped in horror at the sight before them.

The priest, dressed in feather robes and mask stood on the far side of an altar, knife raised high in the air. Even as they watched, the knife came down into the still living chest of the man strapped to the altar before him. The man screamed in pain before the shout ended abruptly. The priest raised bloody hands high above his head, the man's heart clenched in one of them.

Several of the Amazons turned away to be sick. The next person forced down onto the altar was an Amazon and Gabrielle felt the fury in her rise. She let it. The red wash of familiarity reminded her of her experience at the Library and then she let the blood lust take her.

The coppery scent in the air caused her fangs to protrude rapidly and she became a blur as she cut through men and women who went from chants of worship to cries of terror in the moments it took for her wrath to reach them.

Gabrielle felt her mask ripped from her face and laughed at the look of terror that met her glowing red and yellow eyes. She didn't hesitate, but dug her claws into the man, watching dispassionately as the man sank to the ground dead.

She was fortunate, this time, in that the Amazons around her were much too busy with their own battles to C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

notice her transformation. She reached the altar and didn't even slow down, but simply sank her teeth into the priest's neck and drained him dry before tossing his withered body aside. Then she turned to the altar and nearly wept.

The Amazon was still sluggishly bleeding, but it was the look of horror frozen on her face that was the most telling. Gabrielle closed her eyes, willing herself to calmness, not wanting to desecrate her Amazon sister's death by exposing the most violent part of herself.

When she opened her eyes again, Gabrielle noticed that the sounds of fighting had faded away. The Amazons stood waiting for her orders and the natives, if any had remained alive, had simply faded back into the jungle.

Gabrielle shrugged. She had no way of knowing that they had seen her fury and had scattered in fear. She only knew that even her hyper-aware senses could find no trace of them nearby and she was satisfied with that. Her Amazon sisters deserved whatever respected in death could be afforded them and that was her primary concern... that and taking care of her wounded.

"Is everyone okay?" Several of them had minor wounds, but they understood what her question meant and they all nodded in assent. Gabrielle looked at them in satisfaction. "Tish, Lorrin... divide the sisters up. Tish, you take your half and head back to the beach to collect firewood. Lorrin, bring your group up here and let's find a way to get our fallen to their pyres."

The Amazons moved quickly to do Gabrielle's bidding and in minutes they had located four dead. A few among them were wounded, but nothing that couldn't be taken care of once the pyres were built.

It took a while, but finally they had travois built for the bodies and they began the slow journey back to the beach. With great care, each woman was lifted to her final resting place and at Gabrielle's signal the pyres were lit. For a long while the Amazons stood in respectful silence before Gabrielle spoke again.

"Those of you who are wounded need to tend to your wounds immediately. Misha, set short guard rotations tonight. No more than two hours each. Tomorrow, I want all of you back on that boat and headed away from here."

"What of you, my Queen? We can't simply leave you alone here... not after this."

"They won't bother me, not for a while," Gabrielle answered with a feral glint in her eyes that made each of them flinch. "Especially not after what happened here."

"Are you, sure, Gabrielle? I mean...."

"Trust me, Tish. I haven't lived as long as I have without knowing how to take care of myself. Besides, they can't kill me, remember? And I'll not have anyone else risking themselves on my behalf." Gabrielle waited half a beat before lowering her voice and delivering the look. "Understood?"

Every Amazon nodded her agreement rapidly and Gabrielle smiled sadly. She'd enjoyed her time with these women, but she would not risk their lives for the sake of alleviating her loneliness. With a bit of luck, Aphrodite would pop around soon.

She completely forgot about her mask, until quite some time later.

Gabrielle watched the Amazon ship safely out of sight. She felt the eyes of the natives watching her and smiled grimly to herself when she felt intuitively they were going to keep their distance from her.

They followed her at a distance, but not so far away that her senses couldn't detect them both by hearing and by scent. Gabrielle shied away from returning to the place that held so much death and destruction and by instinct, her footsteps turned northeast.

For days Gabrielle walked, enjoying the solitude and more than happy to put the memories of the recent past behind her. They brought more painful, far older memories to mind and Gabrielle had no desire to revisit them again. She was so far beyond it, her mind felt it shouldn't hurt anymore. Her heart knew better.

"That's because you have a totally radical heart, babe! It knows."

Gabrielle smiled at the voice in her ear and turned to find Aphrodite standing next to her. She laid a friendly hand in concern on Dite's arm.

"Aphrodite, are you all right?"

The goddess looked a little run down and tired to Gabrielle... something she hadn't seen since Gabrielle had made her a mortal, once upon a scroll.

Dite nodded and shrugged lightly. "A little tired I guess. I'm not getting the power like I used to and there is still so much work for me to do...." She trailed off and shrugged again. "I'm sorry. I came here to check on you, not bitch and moan about my stuff."

Gabrielle took Dite's hands and drew her to sit down beside the small fire she'd built. The land she was traveling through was very hot during the day, but the temperatures became quite chilly when the sun went down. Aphrodite reached towards the fire appreciatively, Gabrielle noted in concern and she offered her friend a cup of hot tea that was gratefully accepted.

They sat in silence for awhile, taking comfort from one another's presence and the tea they shared. Finally Dite gave in to Gabrielle's questioning look, knowing she deserved an explanation.

She set down the cup and opened her arms wide, gesturing to Gabrielle with her head. "C'mere, cutie and give me a hug. I could use a little bard lovin'," said jokingly, but Gabrielle easily picked up the tension behind the words.

Instead of accepting Dite's invitation, Gabrielle opened her arms and smiled warmly. Dite didn't hesitate, but fell right into Gabrielle's embrace.

They sat together for the longest time while Gabrielle held Aphrodite, gently rubbing her back and murmuring nonsensical words in her ear. Aphrodite drew strength from the actions and when she sat up and drew away, Gabrielle could see a distinct difference in her.

"Wow, babe! I so cannot tell you just how totally amazing that feels. I just got more bitchin' love vibes from C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

you than I've felt from anyone in like, ages. This totally rocks."

Gabrielle sat back, astounded by the transformation a bit of caring had given the goddess. Realization suddenly dawned.

"You're getting weaker aren't you... losing your powers?"

Dite's euphoria vanished and she nodded her head sadly. "I'm not gonna, you know, fade out of existence or anything, but it's becoming radically hard for me to like, do much. Most of the others never leave anymore. Ares and I can, but...."

"But it's such a drain you have to pick and choose when and where you go." Dite nodded. "And you spend most of your time between visits with me saving energy to come see me again." Another nod, a little slower this time.

Gabrielle looked down at her fingers, then raised her eyes to Aphrodite's with a look of profound sadness. "I'm sorry, Aphrodite. I didn't mean to be so selfish."

Dite's jaw dropped open. "SELFISH?!? Where'd you get a totally bogus idea like that?"

Gabrielle started to answer when a soft touch on her lips halted any words she might have said.

"I want you to listen to me carefully, Gab. 'kay?" Dite said seriously. Gabrielle nodded her agreement, knowing by Aphrodite's speech and look that she was being completely serious. "I'm here because I want to be here. I need your friendship as much as you need mine and I wouldn't trade it for all the followers in the world."

Gabrielle's eyes widened at that sentiment, but she remained silent. Dite caught the look.

"I know, I know... it sounds like so much tripe, but it's really the truth. I've had a lot of years to think and I've come to understand a thing or two. Not the least of which is the importance of friendship. I'm never lonely when we're together, Gab and I've rarely NOT been lonely... even at the height of my power."

"Now, I will tell you it takes a little more effort to see you these days," Dite reached out and caressed Gabrielle's face gently. "But it is totally worth it to me. So unless it's become a problem for you, I'd like to keep it up as long as I can."

Gabrielle clasped the fingers lingering on her face. "You're welcome any time you can make it."

"Cool," Dite said, reverting back to her valley girl speech patterns. "Maybe we can like, figure out a way to get your bodacious self to Olympus without Ares, you know, finding out... although... I'm not totally sure that's such a radical idea." She nibbled a perfect nail. "I'm not sure how...." Dite looked at Gabrielle apologetically.

"Yeah," Gabrielle agreed. "I'm not sure how they'd feel about me being there either." She shrugged. "We can play it by ear... maybe set up some sort of signal if it's safe."

"Oooh, what a fab idea! I'll work on it. Now, ya wanna know why I'm like, here? I mean besides missing ya, I mean." She blinked as she rethought that statement then shrugged her shoulders. She knew what she meant

and so did Gabrielle.

"Sure," Gabrielle answered with a laugh. "I'd wondered, but figured you'd get around to sharing eventually. We can always find stuff to talk about."

"Ain't that the truth," Dite snorted. "But this trip has a specific purpose. I found out a few things you need to know and take care of before you... are you leaving or staying here?"

Gabrielle thought about the question. "Leaving," she finally said. "It's gonna be a while before Xena is here and I want to get back to what passes for civilization these days for a little while. I feel like I've been out of touch forever."

"Well, depending on how you like, look at things, you have. Now, we gotta get down to business. You have way lots to do before you take another long sea voyage." Aphrodite grinned at Gabrielle's groan.

They stretched out together, one on either side of the fire. Dite concentrated really hard and after a moment had a bedroll and blanket similar to Gabrielle's and some thicker clothing. She shrugged at Gabrielle's questioning look.

"I can, you know, feel the cold a little bit. This is gonna like, take a while, so I figured I might as well be, well, comfortable."

"Good," was all Gabrielle said, but she smiled warmly.

Aphrodite pulled her glasses out of her pocket and set them on the bridge of her nose. Then she pulled out her notes and looked them over carefully before returning her attention to Gabrielle once more.

"Now, be patient with me, Gab and I'll try to make this make sense. I've been working on this for a while, so my notes are a little scattered."

Gabrielle nodded. Dite had reverted to all business again and Gabrielle knew when Dite was serious, it was time to simply sit and listen.

"I got to surfing on the world wide god web, looking to see if I could find a few things out... namely how Xena got transported across time two thousand years without benefit of the Cronos stone. What I found was almost a paradox."

She passed Gabrielle a sheaf of papers and Gabrielle slowly looked through them. Finally she turned verdant eyes back to Aphrodite's.

"How did you find all this stuff... the ritual, the totems?"

"Research," Dite groaned. "Lots and lots of research."

Gabrielle giggles at the expression on Dite's face.

"Yeah, you laugh. I have read more war stuff than I EVER wanted to know about looking for this. Actually, Ares put all this into place... something he's been working on for a while."

Gabrielle paused in her review of Aphrodite's notes. "Waitaminute... Xena's chakram is part of this ritual?"

"Yep. Kinda makes you wonder what he was like, thinking, but he's been a little bit off since she, you know, disappeared too. Oh and that reminds me... he can really feel your fury. He so doesn't understand it and he sure doesn't know its source, but he can totally feel when you unleash the bacchae side of you like you did the other day. So be careful, huh?"

"I will." Gabrielle sighed deeply. "I try not to let it go, but sometimes...."

Aphrodite sat up and scooted closer to Gabrielle, laying a hand on the blonde hair and stroking it tenderly.

"I know, hon. I wasn't criticizing... just giving you a heads-up."

"Thanks, Aphrodite. I appreciate it." She sighed as the long fingers continued to gently massage her scalp. "I get so tired sometimes," she mumbled before her breathing deepened in sleep. Dite caught the tear sliding down her own face.

"I know you do, Sweet Pea."

It was the sun in her eyes that woke Gabrielle and she looked across the banked campfire to find Aphrodite laying on her bedroll sound asleep. Gabrielle sat up with a yawn and stretched, her almost silent efforts still waking the love goddess from her repose.

"Good morning," Dite whispered. Gabrielle whipped her head around.

"Sorry," she murmured. "I thought I was being quiet." She cleared her throat. "Good morning, by the way."

Aphrodite struggled to sit up, moaning as a night in the rough caught up with her immortal body. "Gods, Gab! How do you stand this? Ugh... When did the ground get so hard?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "Aphrodite, the ground has ALWAYS been hard. You just never stick around long enough to find out."

Dite groaned as she stretched, feeling all kinds of popping along her spine. "Ew! That is so grody. Ick! Remind me to order the majorly deluxe outdoor package next time."

Gabrielle laughed. "I'm gonna go clean up," motioning towards the river she'd been following north. She grabbed her towel and soap and slipped through the brush.

Aphrodite considered following her, then decided against it. Nothing was worth risking the friendship she had with Gabrielle, though the temptation was greater than she expected it to be after fifteen hundred years. Then she rolled her eyes at herself.

"C'mon, love goddess. You better than anybody know how eternal some things really are." Then she got up and walked around, hoping to work out some of the kinks she could still feel in a body that had lived a hundred lifetimes.

She endeavored to start a fire the old fashioned way, then realized it was more futile than fruitful. Besides, with the surge of true affection that Gabrielle held for her, Aphrodite felt renewed, better than she had in more than a century. So she snapped her fingers, giving a satisfied sigh when a small blaze popped up.

"That's cheating, you know," Gabrielle commented as she came back in the clearing towel drying her hair. "Most of us can't make fire at the snap of a finger."

Aphrodite looked Gabrielle up and down closely before giving her a sensual grin. "Oh, I dunno, babe... I'm betting you don't have any problems lighting all kinds of fires with just a touch."

Even after fifteen hundred years exposure to flirting with the goddess of love, Gabrielle still managed an enviable blush. Of course, she'd also learned to give as good as she got.

"Startin' 'em's easily, Dite... it's putting 'em out that takes the most... care and effort."

Gabrielle cast Aphrodite a sultry look over her shoulder, causing Aphrodite to fan herself furiously. "Ooh, Sweet Cheeks. You sure do know how to totally turn a girl's head. No wonder you wrapped up that radical warrior babe of yours so tight."

"Yeah and I'm liable to hog tie her to the bed for a while when I finally catch up with her too," Gabrielle muttered sotto voce, but Aphrodite managed to hear every single word.

"Whoo, girlfriend! Don't go making promises you don't intend to keep!" Dite said in a soft voice.

Gabrielle's head whipped around from where she was heating water for tea. "Excuse me?!?"

"Hmm?" Aphrodite asked with an innocent batting of eyelashes. "Oh, sorry. I was just thinking how forward you must be looking to your reunion with Xena."

Gabrielle looked hard at Aphrodite, but the love goddess returned the look benignly. The bard didn't buy the innocence for a second, but Dite didn't look away and finally Gabrielle turned back to preparing the tea. Dite just cheered silently, looking forward to that experience with relish.

Gabrielle found it odd that Aphrodite wanted to accompany her for a while, but she accepted her company with grace and good humor. In truth, she was glad to have Dite along. It meant someone else the natives could look at funny because of the odd colored hair and strange colored eyes. The few she'd met, aside from the very first, of course, were very polite and kind, but they were also very curious. Curiosity she could handle... it was the touching that went along with it that made her uncomfortable.

She thought about that and figured it was because there was no intimacy in her life. It made every touch feel invasive. So she welcomed Dite's presence of only so there would be a place to direct their interest.

Dite on the other hand was glad to be along not only for Gabrielle's sake, but also to insure that the scroll she had carefully copied out into a story like she'd heard her friend deliver time and again would be where it needed to be when the time came for it to be found.

They traveled slowly, following the river and finding that they had many things to talk about. Gabrielle knew C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html

that Dite's flighty personality covered a vast intelligence and the discussions they had between them in their travels only reinforced that belief.

"But why?" Gabrielle finally asked her. "Why let everyone underestimate you?"

Dite shrugged. "It wasn't, you know, intentional. It just sorta like, happened. It made things easier for me though... no one expected anything from me and I was able to get my love gig done without a lot of interference from anyone. It was kinda nice."

"You didn't mind everyone thinking you were...."

"Flighty, ditzy, a dumb blonde?" Dite shrugged. "I dunno... I mean... yeah, sometimes. But it just got easier to let it go than to fight it. And everybody left me alone to do my thing. I totally hate the whole politics thing, ya know? It just so wasn't worth it to me."

"What about now?" Gabrielle asked.

"Now?" Dite chuckled mirthlessly. "Now, they still totally leave me alone... because I am about the most rockin' goddess among them. And I stay way busier than they do. Their little schemes are just so much radical horse puckey to occupy them because they have, you know, like nothing else. I just so don't have the time for their petty little games and intrigues... I never did have."

Gabrielle started at the vehement harshness of Aphrodite's words, easily feeling the unease that was rolling off Aphrodite in waves. She realized that the only times Dite had stood up to her family had been for Gabrielle and Xena and always at great cost to herself. She smiled sadly and patted Dite's arm.

"Well, I like you just the way you are, my friend. Ditzy blonde and all."

Aphrodite laughed. "From one blonde to another, huh?"

Gabrielle chuckled. "You betcha."

The duo crossed into land so flat Gabrielle felt as though she could see to the other side of the world. For days they walked and Gabrielle wondered at Aphrodite's fortitude. She didn't conjure anything up and she didn't complain about the hardship of the trail. It was so different from anything Gabrielle had ever experienced with Aphrodite and she found the effort the goddess was making endearing.

They'd found a cave out of the wind and weather that had sprung up suddenly out of nowhere and Gabrielle had gone about her ritual of setting up the camp. It was one thing Dite never interfered with and Gabrielle didn't notice the scroll that Dite took with her as she explored the cave.

A bit later Dite came back flushed with success and excitement. The scroll had been hidden and the cave....

"This place is totally amazing. The pictures are so fabulous. I'd love to know what rockin' stories are told in these stones."

Gabrielle smiled. "I'll bet they are pretty interesting. The few people we have met in this place seem to have C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

such different ways. I've enjoyed my time in this place."

"So have I," Dite agreed, not seeing the look she was getting from Gabrielle.

"Why?" The question was unexpected.

"Huh?"

"C'mon, Dite. Much as I have enjoyed your company over the last few weeks, it's not like this is your normal gig. You've never been fond of doing things the hard way and let's face it, living like a mortal has never been easy... even for those of us with lots of practice."

Aphrodite smiled sadly. "You're right. But I dunno if I'll ever have the chance to spend time with you like this again."

Gabrielle turned to face Aphrodite fully. "Why? Is there...?"

"You know my power is fading and even being here with you isn't enough to change it. I don't know if I'll have the power to do this again. And I just wanna enjoy it as much as I can." Never mentioning the scroll or the part it would play in both Xena's and Gabrielle's futures.

Gabrielle thought about that, then she patted Aphrodite's arm. "Well, I'm glad you did. I've enjoyed it too. How long...?"

"I should be going soon. I've been gone long enough for even Ares to notice. And we don't want him to get curious enough to come looking, do we?"

"No, but I'm sure gonna miss you."

"Me too, babe. It's been totally bitchin' to have this time just to hang together."

"Well, you let me know when it's safe and I'll stop by and see you."

"You got yourself a deal, Sweet Cheeks."

Aphrodite was gone when Gabrielle woke up. "Goodbye, my friend. I'm gonna miss you."

Gabrielle took her time crossing the rest of the wild and untamed land. Like Cecrops, she was amazed by the beauty of the place and the friendliness of its natives. The land had a freshness she had long missed in the old countries she'd spent most of her life traveling in. Only the two places where the Amazons now resided were similar in newness and fresh beauty.

Eventually, Gabrielle reached the coast and realized she was gonna have to find a way to cross the great water that would take her back to the old countries and Greece.

She walked north, hoping she would run into the Viking's descendents. She remembered well the stories both Dite and Ch'uang had shared with her about the trips the Vikings had made to this new land. So she walked, enjoying the fresh air, even when it was laden with snow. The memories it inspired were happy ones and she had faith she would find the Vikings and be headed home again soon. She had things to do.

## Chapter XXVIII

Gabrielle was both happy and sad to see land again. It had been a long journey and any excuse to be off a boat, even with the talisman she wore was excuse enough for her. There were a lot of things to be said for stable earth and after months at sea Gabrielle was pretty sure most of them were good.

On the other hand, most of her life for the past few years had been lived in a pristine frontier environment, exploring places that few had seen and fewer still actually believed existed. Coming back to civilization was a shock to her system. There were crowds and noise and a smell that made her eyes water.

And the clothes.... Gabrielle couldn't understand why mankind's supposed advancements put women in harsher and more restrictive clothing than before. What the women wore now made her peasant skirt and blouse look positively liberating.

However, Gabrielle continued to wear her trousers and tunics. It was comfortable and no man, or woman for that matter, was going to dictate to her. Not at this stage of her life. She was able to take on any challenge of male authority and it was this that brought her to the attention of a pair of Spanish rulers.

The messenger halted in front of the tiny inn. It had taken him nearly a month of frantic travel, chasing clues and whispers before finally stumbling across this place. He hoped his information was correct this time. He did not want to have to go back to his Queen and King and tell them he had failed.

The year of our Lord was fourteen hundred and ninety-one and Spain wanted to be a world leader in exploration. Word had reached King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella that there was a woman with great courage and skill, who stood for herself and those who could not stand for themselves. And they had decided they wanted to meet this crusader. She was just the sort of brave soul Spain needed to lead its explorations into far away lands.

Finding this woman had been a daunting task, however. She rarely remained in one place longer than a day and she moved like the wind - felt and appreciated, but always unseen. The messenger couldn't even get an accurate description of her. She was short; she was tall. She was blonde; she was red-headed. She would kill with a look; she could slay with words; her talent with weapons was unmatched.

The man shook his head. He sincerely doubted the reality of such an apparition, but it was not his place to make that decision. It was his duty to find her and bring her back with him. Then his rulers would decide if the paragon truly existed, or if she was simply the figment of some peasants' overworked imaginations.

He never stopped to consider the different sources of his information and realize that their perceptions could all be correct. It simply depended on interpretation.

He stepped into the darkened room, standing in the doorway a moment to let his eyes adjust. The late afternoon sunlight highlighted him nicely and the room grew silent when they realized there was a royal messenger in their midst.

Lucius closed the door behind himself and strode to the bar. "Good day, good sir," he said to the barkeeper who carefully tended to his business while giving the stranger the once over.

He nodded politely. "Greetings, sir. What can I get for you?"

"Wine and a little information," Luciua said, laying a gold piece on the bar. The 'keep eyed it a long moment before reaching for a fresh glass and filling it from the keg behind him.

"What sort of information?" asked with hesitation, knowing that some things couldn't be bought and paid for so easily.

"I'm looking for a woman," the messenger said, draining half his drink in a single gulp.

The barkeep snorted. "Fraid you're in the wrong place for that sort of thing, friend. This here is nothing more than an inn and tavern. The brothel is down the way and over one street."

"What?? Oh, no. Not that kind of woman! Holy Mary... my wife would kill me if she.... Um, no. I am on official business. I've been sent to find a particular woman and she was last seen in this area. I'm hoping she's still here."

"This woman got a name?"

"I'm sure she does, though it's never been told to me. All I have is a somewhat unreliable description."

The barkeep scratched his head, then he reached over and refilled Lucius' mug. "Sounds like you've got a problem then, friend. I don't see how you can find anyone without a name or reliable description."

Lucius hung his head. "I know. But I really don't want to go back to the King and Queen a failure." He scrubbed at his tired eyes and finished the rest of his ale. "Will that get me a bed and bath tonight?" motioning to the coin that still lay on the bar between them.

"Bed, bath, dinner, breakfast and food for the road if you wish."

Lucius nodded tiredly. "I wish. I am so tired right now...."

"Come," the barkeep gestured, putting the coin in his pocket. "This is the bathing room," opening a door next to the kitchen. "Once you're done here, it'll be dinner time. Then I'll have a room ready for you to sleep in."

"Thanks," Lucius replied, not bothering to dissimilate. He was just thankful for the chance to sleep in a real bed. Then he filled the tub with water, stripping and sinking into the warm depths with a feeling of complete relief.

Lucius felt like a new man when he emerged from the bathing room. He crossed back into the tavern area with a slight wave at the barkeep and took a seat near the back of the room. Night had fallen and Lucius quickly realized that the inn was extraordinarily busy. The girl brought him a plate of dinner and another wine

and Lucius sat back, giving thanks for his change of luck. It had been a long time since he'd been this comfortable and he was thoroughly looking forward to getting back to the palace... even if he returned without the mysterious woman. He had already come to the conclusion that he'd been sent of a fool's errand and couldn't wait to find out who it was that started the ridiculous rumors about this woman.

He pushed his plate back and pulled his ale forward, determined to enjoy his drink before he went upstairs to sleep. To his surprise, the barkeep stepped up onto the makeshift stage in the front of the room and the crowd grew expectantly silent. Lucius turned his attention there as well, curiosity overcoming his natural reserve.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome Gabrielle."

Lucius watched as a short, blondish red headed woman crossed the stage and took a seat on the stool the barkeep had placed there for her. He watched mesmerized as she held the audience in the palm of her hand, capturing them with her looks and her words and her hands. And he suddenly realized why the descriptions of the woman he was looking for changed from person to person. It was all in perception... and he had finally found the woman of rumor

When she was finished, Gabrielle came down into the audience to accept their compliments. Lucius deliberately made sure he was the last to greet her and when she stopped at his table, the messenger dropped to one knee in front of Gabrielle.

The bard looked at him, startled. "Um, sir, I should tell you that not only will I not marry you because I am quite taken, I have real issues with proposals before a first date."

Lucius laughed heartily, caught completely off guard by Gabrielle's distinct sense of humor. He sat down on the floor cross legged and let his arms rest on his knees. Gabrielle watched him amused as she sat down in the chair he had recently vacated and waited for him to come to his senses.

Finally Lucius laughed himself out and wiped the tears from his eyes. "You speak the language like a native, though it is very clear you're not."

"LOTS of practice."

Lucius chuckled again. "I can see the King and Queen are going to adore you. No wonder they're so anxious to meet you."

"Excuse me?" Gabrielle wondered if her face showed the disbelief she felt.

"Beg pardon, mi'lady," Lucius said as he rose and bowed, assuming the formality of his role. "I bring greetings from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. And a humble request for your presence at court."

"Why?"

Now it was Lucius' turn to be dumbfounded. "Excuse me?"

"Why is my presence requested at court? I don't know anyone there." Gabrielle crossed her arms over her chest and waited patiently.

Lucius rubbed his eyes. "I don't know, Mi'lady. I was just told to find you and extend the invitation."

Gabrielle nodded her understanding. "Do you have a room here?" She waited for his affirmation. "I'll give you my answer in the morning. Good night."

Before Lucius could answer, Gabrielle was up the stairs and out of sight.

Well, that explains a lot, he thought with a shake of his head. Then he moved to find the barkeep and get a key to his room.

Morning found Lucius waiting in the tavern for Gabrielle. He was anxious to succeed in his mission and had been up with the dawn to be sure he didn't miss her. He had no way of knowing she had long been gone on her hunt before he arose and he watched with surprise as she emerged from the bathing room. He wondered how long she'd been in there that he'd missed her going in, then he shrugged.

He couldn't blame her for wanting to soak, especially if she was going to travel back with him. The road was harsh and dirty and he understood well the need to get rid of the dirt.

He watched as she surveyed the room and only when she was satisfied that things were to her standard did she cross to his table.

"I'll be sitting over there," motioning to a back corner, "if you'd like to join me."

Lucius picked up his plate and moved swiftly to set it on the table in order to seat her. Gabrielle rolled her eyes, but allowed the courtesy. She nodded at the table wench, who brought her a trencher and some ale. Then Gabrielle waited until she was nearly halfway done with her food before she spoke again.

"Lucius, do you have a written invitation for me?"

The messenger nodded furiously, wiping his hands and digging through his small carry sack on his belt. He pulled out the missive that was still sealed with the royal signet and passed it across the table to her. Gabrielle popped the seal and read the note, then set it aside.

"Thank you Lucius. You can return to the King and Queen and tell them I will be there within a month. I have a few things to take care of first, but I will be there."

"But...I thought...."

"I travel alone, Lucius. I prefer it that way. But I'll be there. I give you my word and I'll give you a note to carry back with you, all right?" realizing the man was afraid of being punished for failure if she did not return with him.

Lucius nodded, glad Gabrielle understood where his fear was coming from. He went to offer her paper and quill, astounded when she pulled out some of her own from what appeared to be a beautiful, custom-made leather case. He wondered at the sad expression that crossed her face as she took a moment to caress it, then she quickly got down to business, writing a note and sealing it with an unknown sigil.

Lucius accepted the note, tucking it carefully into his belt pouch. Then he finished his breakfast and without further adieu bid Gabrielle goodbye. Lucius crossed himself as he crossed the threshold, hoping beyond hope that Gabrielle was true to her word.

Lucius arrived back at the palace in less than a fortnight and delivered the message Gabrielle had given him to the King and Queen. They granted him mercy, dependant on Gabrielle's appearance and he spent the remainder of the month doing menial chores around the palace.

As the end of the month rapidly approached, Lucius grew more and more nervous. But he recognized the sound of redemption as a voice asking for admittance to the palace was heard in the forecourt of the castle.

Lucius dashed down the steps and escorted Gabrielle into the main audience chamber and performed the introductions with nary a quiver in his voice. But he spent the rest of the day alternating between being sick and giving thanks.

"Come in. Come in, Gabrielle," Isabella beckoned. "We've heard so much about you. Please, welcome. Come in and be comfortable."

Gabrielle was a little overwhelmed. She didn't really understand the invitation and it had been a long time since she'd had to do the royal thing. Still, she called upon her years of experience and her Amazon training, letting them serve her now in this unknown.

"Thank you, Queen Isabella," she nodded graciously. "I was caught somewhat unaware by the invitation. I'm still not sure why I'm here."

"We really have heard a lot about you, Gabrielle...." King Ferdinand broke off a little confused. "It is all right to call you Gabrielle, yes? It was the only name Lucius gave us for you. You can't imagine the time the man had searching for someone with no name and the most varied descriptions and...."

Gabrielle interrupted him with a wave of her hand. "Gabrielle is fine."

"Good. So we wanted to find out what all the talk was about... WHO all the talk was about. And then well, we'll just have to see how things go. We might have a proposition or two."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that, quite frankly."

Queen Isabella spoke. "I promise you, Gabrielle. You won't have to do anything you don't want to. You are free to leave at any time. Though we do hope you will at least stay and break bread with us."

Gabrielle agreed. "I think I can do that much. After that...." She shrugged. "We'll see."

Dinner was an interesting and enjoyable affair for Gabrielle. The talk back and forth was of world affairs and she found that Ferdinand and Isabella would take opposite sides of an issue just to argue the logic points, then turn to her and ask for her opinion. On several things she was able to bring out obscure facts to back up her position on a subject that would cause both monarchs to stop and think.

By mutual consent, Gabrielle remained with Ferdinand and Isabella. It took several weeks before they broached the idea of her leading an expedition to found more Spanish colonies. Gabrielle was quick to refuse.

"But why, Gabrielle?" Isabella asked honestly. "You're a perfect candidate."

"There are several reasons, Isabella; some of them very personal to me. Suffice it to say that it's not my destiny."

"You're so sure?" Ferdinand questioned.

"Yep. I sure am. But I have heard a few rumors."

Isabella leaned forward. "Oh? Do tell."

"Well, it seems as though an Italian explorer named Columbus is looking for backing to go west to find a sea route to China and India."

"Yes? And?"

"And my sources tell me that he's been turned down by the Italian king. It would be very easy to let him know his petition would be welcome here."

"And do you think we should... welcome his petition, I mean?"

Gabrielle appeared thoughtful, pursing her lips slightly and stroking her chin. Finally she signaled her tacit agreement. "Yes, I do. He seems to have the drive and the initiative and he has a firm theory in place. I think he could be very successful."

Ferdinand nodded sagely. "This could be a very good thing for us, Bella. Perhaps we should ask Gabrielle to put a bug in his ear, eh?"

"I think it's a good idea, Andy." The Queen turned to Gabrielle. "Would you mind?"

Gabrielle smiled. "You leave everything to me. I'll bring him here myself personally."

Italy was much changed in the centuries since Gabrielle had last set foot on Roman soil. Instead of the death and decay she remembered from the Roman Empire, there was a sense of renewal.

So many things were different. On street corners, vendors hawked books and pamphlets and everyone was reading. It was so different from what had been that Gabrielle was able to ignore the stench of the city. New ideas and philosophies ran rampant through the streets and Gabrielle breathed in the scent of renaissance with happiness.

It took a little time, but eventually someone was able to point Gabrielle in the direction of Christopher Columbus.

Columbus was nothing like Gabrielle expected, though she'd tried not to build up expectations. She knew how misleading impressions could be, but she'd been given enough descriptions that she fully believed Columbus to be a giant of a man with a brash personality.

What she found was a man of middling stature who was soft-spoken and well-thought. While she was somewhat amazed at his processes and conclusions, he was a thinking man and very ambitious.

He looked at her somewhat dubiously when she first approached him. After all, she was a woman... and a woman who refused to bow to convention. Still, what she had to say was interesting to the explorer, especially since she carried with her a royal missive inviting him to the court of the Spanish monarchs.

"Tell me, Gabrielle. How did you hear of me?" Columbus asked as they walked towards his family villa. The family was having a celebration in his honor and Mama had commanded that he bring the woman who had brought such opportunity to their doorstep to the party. Gabrielle had tried to decline, but she knew better than most how hard it was to refuse Mama sometimes, remembering well Cyrene's tenacity.

"It really wasn't hard, Chris. I have an interest in the scientific community and your theories are well espoused there."

Columbus nodded. He knew it to be true. They were silent as they walked together a ways, then he cleared his throat to speak again.

"Do you find them to be valid theories?"

Gabrielle thought about the question for a few moments to formulate her answer. "I do believe the earth is round," she finally said, honestly. "I'm not sure traveling west to get to the east will necessarily get you there, but I do think there are things out there waiting to be discovered."

He watched her face carefully and realized that she truly did believe. It made him smile. So many didn't, even in his own family. It was nice to hear something positive for a change.

"Well, I hope King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella agree with your outlook, Gabrielle. It'll be nice to be able to prove my theories once and for all."

"I think I can fairly say they will give you every opportunity to prove yourself, Chris. What you do with the chance is strictly up to you."

They were welcomed heartily by Columbus' many family members. Gabrielle soon found out that everyone who had any claim at all towards being counted as family had been invited and attended the gathering. More times than she could count, she was introduced to this cousin or that in-law until she was sure her head would fall off from overload.

Finally, late in the evening, she found a quiet corner in the garden and simply sat absorbing the peace.

"Excuse me?"

Gabrielle let her eyes flutter open in the darkness. She had sensed no malevolence, only a bit of curiosity, though she'd vainly hoped to be left alone. She sighed quietly.

"Excuse me, miss?" came the soft voice again and this time she turned her head to see who it was.

"Can I help you?"

"Don't think me too forward, but do you think I could possibly paint you?"

Gabrielle blinked, not sure she wanted to understand just what the man in front of her was asking. Before she could open her mouth to answer, though, Columbus came into the garden looking for her.

"Oh, here you are. Mama sent me to fetch you. It is time for our final toast and you simply must be there." He noticed the man still standing patiently to one side. "Leo! How've you been? I haven't seen you in forever!"

Columbus turned back to Gabrielle. "This is Leo, my second cousin, twice-removed on my mother's side. Leo, this is Gabrielle." He turned back to the bard. "He's a bit of an artist, something of a genius really."

Gabrielle looked at the shy young man who was now blushing visibly in the moonlight. "Really? Well, once I get Columbus squared away with the King and Queen of Spain, perhaps you'd welcome me back to see your work?"

Leo nodded and Gabrielle smiled. "Good. I'll look forward to it." Then they all went inside to toast Columbus' proposed voyage.

Convincing Ferdinand and Isabella to back him wasn't nearly as hard as Columbus presumed it would be. Though they did want specific details involving his theories and plans, they were more than willing to mentor him once they were satisfied that he had indeed done his research.

"Why were you so willing to hear me?" Columbus asked frankly when the negotiations were complete. "The Italian monarch barely gave me the time of day before refusing to back me."

Isabella shrugged gracefully. "Gabrielle. She convinced us you were the man we were looking for."

"But she didn't even know me," he said perplexed. "Have you known her so long that you trust her judgment implicitly?"

"Not really. But she has given us every reason to trust her and like you, she did her homework." Isabella paused. "She was actually our first choice."

"She turned you down?" A nod. "Why? This is a great honor."

"It was not something she desired to do. So she recommended you. Count yourself lucky."

"Guess this means she won't captain a ship then, huh?"

"I'd say that was a good guess, Captain. Go with God."

"I will, your majesty. And will come back with new trade for Spain."

Gabrielle stayed in Spain near Isabella and Ferdinand during the months that Columbus was gone on his voyage. She wasn't comfortable remaining with them constantly, but she did keep in touch with them regularly.

She went through the countryside much as she had with Xena in their early travels together. She met people and continued to reconnect with the bard side of her that had been dormant for too long. Her skill at arms was seldom tested, once word of her defeat of Ferdinand and his best weapons master at court began to circulate throughout the countryside.

There were always incidents of course... people who did not believe the reputation that preceded her. And always Gabrielle tried talking first and only then would she resort to violence. And afterward she went off by herself for a bit to satisfy the bloodlust that burned so easily given the opportunity.

But for the most part, Gabrielle had a peaceful repose and she welcomed the chance to talk to common people again.

Finally, months after Columbus had set sail for what he hoped was China and India, Lucius came searching for Gabrielle again. This time, though, he knew whom he sought and he found her with all due haste.

At the sight of him, Gabrielle finished up her conversation with the merchants and moved to his side. He smiled and bowed his head.

"Greetings, Gabrielle. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella have requested your presence will all expediency. Columbus has returned and has had much to report."

She accepted the horse he offered her and mounted with graceful ease. "The report is good then, Lucius?"

"I believe so, yes. He did not find India, but he found a new land that has been claimed in the name of Spain. Looks like the King and Queen will have the new colony they sought after all."

"Very interesting." Then they pushed the horses to a gallop and raced towards the castle.

Columbus was unhappy with his discovery, though it brought him some wealth and fame. It had not been what he had sought and he felt compelled to return to sea again to continue to search for the route he was sure existed.

For their part, the Spanish monarchs were pleased with his find, as this would give them new territories to conquer and explore. Gabrielle grew weary of the politics and soon made preparations to return to Italy.

"But why, Gabrielle?" Ferdinand asked. "You've been so valuable to us."

Gabrielle accepted the words with a nod. "Perhaps," she allowed. "But there are other places I need to be now and I have to return to Italy to see Leo's art. I promised."

"Leo?"

"A relative of Chris's. I met him when I went to find Chris to bring him here for you."

Now the monarchs nodded in tandem, thinking they understood something they did not. "Of course, Gabrielle. Our apologies. We never meant to keep you from your lover so long. Go now, with our blessing."

Gabrielle's mouth hung open in shock from the assumption the king and queen had erroneously jumped to. Then she shook her head in disbelief, not bothering to correct them. It just wasn't worth the argument or the justification.

"I don't think Tony would appreciate having to share Leo that way," she muttered to herself, remembering the big man's protective fierceness of the artist and knowing the source of that protectiveness intimately. The familiarity had made her heart ache all over again, even as it did now just remembering.

The trip to Italy was long and arduous as it was winter when she set out. Gabrielle took her time though, appreciating the fury of nature as a beauty unto itself. Still she was happy to see the spring rains take the place of the winter snows and even the stench of too much long unwashed humanity couldn't remove the smile that the sunshine put on her face.

Gabrielle took the time to see what a difference a little knowledge made for so many people. Again people were reading and discussing philosophy. Painters were set up along the broad boulevard and it the distance, Gabrielle could clearly hear chamber music... both vocal and instrumental.

She found her way through the maze of streets and finally knocked on the door of the number she'd been given. She'd only met him once, but he remembered her and with a smiling flourish, Tony opened the door widely and bowed.

"Welcome to our humble abode, Gabrielle. We are delighted to have you here at last."

## Chapter XXIX

Tony had taken her bag and dropped it in a spare room before guiding her out to where Leo was busy working. The workshop was completely different from what Gabrielle expected. All over were plans and sketches... ideas she and Xena had discussed brought to life on paper.

Hanging from the ceiling were several models - a couple she recognized, but the rest.... A large glass box held water and in the water were other models... working models that moved and functioned as she suspected their life sized counterparts were supposed to do.

On the walls were sketches and pencil drawings so detailed, Gabrielle nearly cried at the beauty of them. She stood still in the middle of the room for a long time simply absorbing the magnitude of creative genius and the two men watched in silence, appreciating her wonder.

After a few minutes, Gabrielle took a deep breath and looked squarely at the artist she'd come to see. "Leonardo da Vinci! You're a fraud!"

Two sets of dark eyes bulged from their sockets at both her words and tone. Da Vinci took a step in her direction and was outmaneuvered by Tony. Leo saw the twinkle in Gabrielle's green eyes, though and he held Tony back.

Tony turned to look at Leo's face and he caught the sparkle in Leo's eyes. He twisted around to catch a grin of sheer delight on Gabrielle's face. He cocked an inquisitive brow in her direction."

"A bit of an artist', Chris said. 'Something of a genius'. \*Something\*?? Leo, this stuff is fantastic," walking around a model of a flying machine and reaching out delicately, stopping before her hands actually touched.

"Does it fly?"

She didn't give him a chance to answer before she bent down to observe the underwater ship and was reminded of the time she and Xena had found themselves caught in that situation.

"Is this intentional? Did you really mean to put the boat underwater?"

"Oh yes! I think boats could be made to travel underwater. See...." He motioned to the water turbines he had running in one corner of the tank. "I think these could be made to push a boat beneath the water."

"Okay," Gabrielle said slowly. "But why would you \*want\* to?"

"Well, I have this theory," Leo started saying, taking Gabrielle's hands and pulling her with him to his work table. Tony shook his head and went back to the house to start some dinner for them all.

For hours Leonardo shared his ideas and theories with Gabrielle and her eyes sparkled and shone at the thoughts that circulated through the conversation. So many of the things were ideas she and Xena had discussed all those years ago in the many fireside chats they'd shared in their travels. To know that others had finally come to the same beliefs and conclusions was gratifying.

For his part, da Vinci loved having someone new to talk to. He loved Tony, but Tony didn't talk much. He listened really well, but he rarely felt the need to contribute ideas to any conversation. Gabrielle, on the other hand, was happy to discuss, argue and converse on all sorts of points and ideas.

Days this went on from morning til night, though they spent a majority of their time in the house to include Tony, until he would run them out for a bit of peace and quiet. Leo would bring up an idea and Gabrielle would listen. Then she would formulate her own opinions and the discussion would be off and running. Many were the times when she would bring up a salient point, only to have him halt the talk so he could add it to his notes. Then they would pick up the thread and begin again.

After almost a week of discussion on every subject under the sun and some of the sun itself, Leo finally broached his initial reason for inviting Gabrielle to his villa.

"So, have you decided to let me paint you?"

Gabrielle shook her head. She had seen some of Leo's other paintings and felt fairly sure it was an easy way to become immortalized. She had enough immortality issues without putting a face to them.

"Um, no," she said at last. "I was wondering if instead you might be willing to apprentice me for a while... let me learn from you."

Leo thought about this for a time, then shrugged. "I can try. I can teach you technique, color mixing, brushstrokes, but the art itself...." He tapped her on the chest. "That has to come from inside. I cannot teach you heart."

She nodded. "That I understand, Leo. All my best stories come from here," patting her own chest. "And it's not something I can explain. It's something I have to feel to be able to relate to others."

Da Vinci nodded sagely. "You understand the most important part then already. The rest is simple mechanics and any good teacher can instruct an eager student."

So the following morning Leo set Gabrielle up at an easel in the corner of his workshop. He took several hours explaining perception and shading and showed her several of his sketches.

"I do a preliminary sketch of my ideas before I actually get the paints out. It helps me to picture what I want to show people with my art... shows me all the possibilities within the piece that I can convey." He paused. "Can you sketch?"

Gabrielle turned her gaze inward. "I've never tried, but...." She trailed off. "I think I could."

Leo looked at her a long moment, waiting for her gaze to track back to him. When she finally saw him staring, she smiled nervously at him and rubbed the back of her neck.

"What?"

He walked to his desk, shuffling things around and pulling out drawers. Without a word, Tony came into the room and neatly moved Leo out of the way before reaching into the pile of papers on the desk and grasping a neatly bound sheaf of paper. He handed it to Leonardo.

"Dinner is ready," Tony announced without preamble, knowing they would follow him back into the villa.

"How did he...." Gabrielle asked, gesturing to the pad Leo now held in his hands. Da Vinci smiled as he looked at the bundle and shrugged.

"I dunno. He's always known when I've needed something and can pretty much put his hands right on it." He paused when all the implications of that statement sank in and blushed faintly. Gabrielle was kind enough to keep her reaction to a look of devilish merriment in her eyes. Leo cleared his throat and continued.

"Anyway, I made up a few of these. I've been tinkering on improving the printing press and found that the binding plays a huge role in book quality. So I put a few of these together and use them for sketch pads now." He handed the paper to Gabrielle, who accepted it delicately. "Enjoy it in good health, my dear."

"Thank you, Leo. I look forward to seeing if this is one of my many skills."

He wondered at the sadness of her tone, but the distant look in her eyes kept him from asking questions. Instead, they went inside to share the lovely meal that Tony had prepared for them.

Over the course of the next few days, Gabrielle spent hours outdoors. Leonardo found he missed Gabrielle's companionship, but he turned his attention back to his scientific studies, incorporating some of the ideas that he and she had discussed. Tony missed her as well because she had added something to his kitchen.

Every time either of them checked on her, she seemed to be staring out into space accomplishing very little. Only occasionally did they see the charcoal move across the paper at all.

Finally, after nearly a week of this, Gabrielle came back in quietly late one afternoon. She put the sketch pad down carefully and sank into da Vinci's padded thinking chair near the workroom's vast window.

She turned her attention out across the vista, not even realizing when Leo set his own work aside and approached her.

"Problem?"

Gabrielle looked at him and gave a brief smile before shrugging and returning her focus back to the view outside the window.

Leo rubbed his hands over his beard, trying to figure out how to ask without being too nosey or condescending. Finally, he just spoke.

"You shouldn't be too disappointed, Gabrielle. Not everyone can draw, you know. Perhaps you should try simply painting instead."

Now she smiled at him again and he could see the sadness lurking behind the slight mischief her saw in those green depths. She reached for the sketch pad and shook her head.

"Drawing wasn't the problem, Leo. I seem to have a knack for it. But I can't paint these. The images are just too personal for me."

"May I see?" Leo asked hesitantly. "I know they aren't for public consumption," he said holding up a hand. "Believe me when I say I can totally understand that. I have some of those myself. I have several sketches that will never see the light of day because of... well, here... see for yourself."

He moved to a small box tucked in a corner of the room. Lifting the lid, he removed several sheets, the topmost one bringing a smile to his face.

"I always wanted to paint Tony. He has such a beautiful face and body. I thought it would make an incredible picture." Leo passed the sheaf to Gabrielle. "I was right."

Gabrielle accepted the papers hesitantly, feeling like she was prying even though Leo was offering them to her for her perusal. She looked in his eyes a minute longer and he nodded. Gabrielle turned her attention to the pages and felt her eyes widen.

The love the artist had for his subject was apparent in every stroke of the pencil. Gabrielle felt as though she stumbled into the privacy of someone's bedroom and she turned back to Leonardo.

"These are... so personal."

"Yes, so you see, I do understand. But I would also like to see your work if you feel you can share... one artist to another. No one else will see them... not even Tony, without your permission."

Gabrielle stared at him for a long moment, weighing his words and his honesty against the need she felt for privacy. And found, surprisingly, that she wanted his honest opinion... knowing he understood at least part of her dilemma.

She hesitated, then handed him the sketch pad and turned her attention back to the window while he studied them. For a while, the only sound in the room was the occasional turn of pages and the breathing of two people. Then only the breathing could be heard as the rustle of paper ceased. The sharp silence went on interminably, until Gabrielle looked at Leo's face to try and gauge his reaction.

The tears in his eyes surprised her and she moved to kneel beside him. Leonardo gazed at the picture, not acknowledging her presence. She laid her hand on his arm and asked softly, "Are they that bad?"

He shook his head, then asked in a whispered voice, "They're incredible. Who is she?"

"Someone who is everything to me... someone that has been gone from my life for a very long time."

The pictures were all memories of Xena she most cherished, but the one Leo was focused on was particularly precious. It was Xena as she had appeared to Gabrielle when their souls had left the cross before they had ascended into heaven. The look of sheer love and joy on Xena's face was so intense, it was palpable even on paper.

"She loved you." A statement.

"Yes and I love her."

"Still?"

A nod. "Always."

"I see your problem, Gabrielle," matter-of-factly. "Perhaps you would do better to simply paint... something you can see instead of something you remember."

Gabrielle nodded slowly. "I can try," she said at last.

Leo nodded. "You are very gifted. The skill is there. Just let it work for you." He motioned to the easel he'd set up in the corner for her a week prior. "It's here and set up, ready to go when you are ready to start. Just let the art lead you."

Everyday after that, for a least a little while, Gabrielle stood in front of the wood. She added a little at a time... sometimes no more than a single brushstroke and other times she would stand there for hours working on tiny details.

Leo and Tony neither one got to see the work before it was completed. They could have peeked, of course, but Gabrielle kept a cloth over it when she was not working and they respected her need for privacy.

Finally, the day came when she was finished and Gabrielle left the cloth covering off the painting and went for a walk. She was fairly certain neither man would resist the temptation to look given the opportunity and she wanted a chance to prepare for whatever reaction they might have.

When she returned to the villa, the house was silent. She was glad for that little fact. It gave her time to take a bath and she relished the experience to the fullest. Leonardo had contrived to produce a bathroom complete with indoor plumbing and Gabrielle loved the efficiency.

The house was still empty when she finished and she figured she'd stalled as long as she could. Gathering up her courage, she walked to the workshop and poked her head in the door.

Leo and Tony sat in front of the painting, studying it silently. They merely turned to look at her a moment when Gabrielle crossed the threshold, then they resumed they contemplation of the portrait before them.

"Who is she?" Tony asked when the silence grew heavy.

Gabrielle shrugged. "She is many people. She has your eyes, Tony and Lisa's hands. Her facial shape is Leo's and the clothes belong to the bishop's wife. Her hair is part of a memory for me and the body shape belongs to the baker."

"She's remarkable," Leo commented finally. "What is she called?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "I dunno. You can call her whatever you want. I'm giving her to you."

Leonardo gave a slight gasp. "Gabrielle... that is... she is.... Thank you. She is simply amazing."

"One condition, Leo." He tilted his head and waited for her to elaborate. "She is YOURS. Your work, your art, your name."

"But... why?" This from Tony with a perplexed look on his face.

"It's the best thing for me, Tony and everyone already knows Leo is 'something of a genius' when it comes to art," Gabrielle said with a sly snicker. Leonardo gave her the appropriate adult response and stuck out his tongue.

"But...."

"Tony," Leo cut in quietly. "Let it go. I understand." And the look he shared with Gabrielle assured her that his understanding went deeper than she imagined it could.

"So what are you gonna call her?"

"I don't know. Mona maybe? For Many Odd, Nefarious Assets... Lifted In Sacrilegious Accord From All Things Surrounding...."

Gabrielle burst into laughter. "Mona Lisa Fats?!?" She paused, still chuckling. "Although Mona Lisa has a nice ring to it." She shrugged again. "You can name it whatever you want, Leo. It's yours." He voice softened and she reached around to give him a firm hug, gratified when it was returned in full measure.

"Thanks, Leo."

"For what, my friend?" brushing the blonde locks back out of her eyes.

"For teaching me. For talking and listening. For allowing me to stay here and for just being my friend. You'll never know the difference you have made in my life."

Leonardo kissed the top of Gabrielle's head. "And you'll never know the difference you have made in mine."

"Hey!" Tony's voice suddenly cut in. "Is this a private hug, or can anyone here get in on the action?"

Gabrielle and Leo stepped back a pace from one another to allow the big man to participate and Tony promptly scooped them into an all-encompassing hug. It lasted for several minutes before Tony pulled back.

"Now, let me go see what I can throw together for supper."

They waited until he was gone back into the villa before turning to one another again. "How much longer can you stay?" Leo asked after a moment's silence.

"A little while. I just take it one day at a time."

Leo chuckled. "We should all do that. The world would be a better place." He paused. "You know you're welcome here as long as you're comfortable."

"I know. Thanks, Leo."

As it was, Gabrielle stayed longer than she'd planned. Within just a few months, Leo's father passed away, then a beloved uncle. And then without warning, Tony died in the darkness of night. No sickness than anyone was aware of, no pain that he ever spoke about - he simply drew his last breath in his sleep.

Leo was devastated and Gabrielle stayed with him for a while as he recovered. They spent many hours talking and finally the day came when Leo smiled again.

"I'm sorry to have changed your plans so drastically," da Vinci said the night before Gabrielle was leaving. "I hope you didn't miss something important."

Gabrielle took his hands in hers. "Nothing was more important than this. Tony was good people and I consider myself lucky to have known him."

Leo released her hold and turned to the window. "I still miss him," he said simply.

Gabrielle smiled sadly. "You always will, but the fact that you loved and remember him is important. It allows him to live still."

"You live with this everyday, don't you?" asked without turning from the view.

"And have for longer than I remember," Gabrielle replied softly.

Now, finally, Leonardo turned from the window. "You are a woman of great strength and courage, Gabrielle. Thank you for coming here. Thank you for sharing with me. I wish you much success on your journey... and your search."

Though they had never spoken of it, Gabrielle could see that Leo understood... far more than she'd explained to him. She looked questioningly at him and he smiled.

"It shows... in your words and your actions... and your art. Good luck, my friend."

"You too, Leo."

For reasons she could only later put down to a macabre curiosity, Gabrielle headed to Rome. She had heard some comments about the art that could be found there and wanted to see for herself how it compared to Leo's work. Besides, she and Rome had a long history and she was interested in seeing how the old city was holding up under the weight of years that had passed.

What she found was both surprising and disheartening. Much of what she had known was crumbling around her and it reminded her just how old she really was. On the other hand, she didn't mind the fact that the Coliseum that had brought her and Xena such repeated misery was becoming a heap of rubble.

She walked the streets of the city slowly, her bright eyes taking in the many new sights that graced the walkways and boulevards of the capital city. As in other parts of Italy, the arts abounded in Rome. Everywhere Gabrielle looked, philosophers and scholars thrived and she caught bits and pieces of conversation that reminded her of her talks with Xena so many years before.

"Looks like the world may finally be catching up with us, love," she whispered under her breath, before beginning her search for a comfortable lodging.

She spent several days just looking around the sights of the city, impressed again by the quality of workmanship in so much of the artwork now flowing all around her. The sculptures, in wood, brass and marble, had such exquisite detail that Gabrielle could only marvel at its intricacy. She had rolled her eyes when she realized that most of it was devoted to some aspect of religion or another, then set that fact aside and simply enjoyed the work for the beauty of the art itself.

As she crossed into yet another cathedral, she came across a piece simply labeled 'David.' She started laughing so hard it brought tears to her eyes and a man to her side in concern.

"Is there a problem, Miss?"

Gabrielle calmed her chuckles and wiped her eyes, trying not to look at the sculpture for fear it would bring the laughter all over again. "No... no. I'm fine, thank you."

"Can I ask what was so funny?"

Gabrielle gestured to the statue. "David didn't look like that. And he certainly never left himself flapping in the C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

wind that way." She chuckled again and headed out the door, the man following rapidly behind her.

"You speak as though you knew him."

Gabrielle answered him absently as she gazed out across the boulevard. "I did."

The man did a double take at her matter-of-fact response. He caught her eyes and noted they were the eyes of a dreamer, an artist like himself. He smiled at her and extended his hand in greeting.

"People call me Mike. That's my sculpture," pointing back to the church.

Gabrielle blushed lightly. "Well, it's very well done." She rubbed her nose. "It's just not very, um... realistic."

Mike laughed. "No, but it is good art. Come. Have some lunch with me and I'll take you to my latest project, so you can critique it as well."

Gabrielle looked at him for a long moment. "You sure your boyfriend won't mind?" she asked impishly, watching for the shocked reaction she knew was coming.

"I don't.... How did...? Never mind. You wanna come, or am I eating alone?"

She took his arm and Mike led her down the boulevard towards the chapel where he was working.

"So what brought you to the cathedral in the middle of a work day if you're working way down here?" Gabrielle asked as they entered the chapel. It was large as far as chapels went, Gabrielle thought, then stopped abruptly as she realized the interior was completely covered in scaffolding. "Wha...?" She turned and looked at Mike's face.

"I've been commissioned to repaint the ceiling in Bible stories. Sometimes, it gets a little overwhelming. So I take some time and go look at David. Sorta puts things in perspective for me. Reminds me I can do this, even if it takes me years."

Gabrielle glanced at the ceiling and noted a small portion of it was covered in murals. But with her lack of height and the imposing scaffolding, all she could see were bright colors occasionally. She looked back at Michelangelo who was watching her face with an amused expression.

"Do you think we could get a little closer? All I can see from here is a lot of pretty color." Now it was Mike's turn to laugh.

"Sure. Um, you don't have a problem with heights, do you?"

"Not for years," Gabrielle said drolly, thinking back to her first experiences with the Amazons and learning to walk in the trees. Mike didn't notice her distant expression.

"Good," he mumbled, "because it's a long way up."

It was a long way up, but well worth the climb, Gabrielle decided when she reached the top of the ladder. The little bit that had been completed was so rich in detail, it brought tears to her eyes.

"This is fabulous!" she said breathlessly, after taking a long time to look around at each panel. "The storytelling involved here is just incredible."

Mike smiled. Though he and Leo were rivals and had been for years, it was almost a friendly rivalry and something both men secretly enjoyed. When he'd received the missive from Leo detailing Gabrielle's arrival in Rome and the subtle favor asking Mike to look out for the bard, it had piqued the artist's curiosity enough to make him go looking for Gabrielle.

So what he'd told Gabrielle about David was the truth, just not the entire truth. He'd spent the last seven days waiting for her arrival there, knowing that if what Leo had said about her was true, she'd be there sooner or later. Personally, he was glad it was sooner. The Pope and his archbishops were getting a little perturbed at his continued absence.

"Thanks," he said with a blush. He wasn't much for the girls, but there was just something about Gabrielle....
"Say, I got a note from a mutual friend the other day."

Gabrielle cocked her brow in question.

"Leo told me there was a beautiful artist headed my way and that...." He cleared his throat self-consciously before affecting a nasally voice. "It would behoove me to make your acquaintance."

Gabrielle chuckled. "That sounds like Leo." She paused. "So it wasn't just dumb luck running into you?"

"Not exactly, but I'm glad I took the chance to find you. I haven't laughed like I did at your critique of David in a while," motioning to the ceiling. "This is such tedious, exacting work." He went on before she could answer. "Not that I don't love it, but still." He hesitated. "I don't suppose you'd like to do some, would you?"

"How do you know I have the talent?"

"Because for all the grief Leo and I give one another, we never lie about artistic talent," he said without delay. "There's no room for fakers in this business."

"You don't know me or anything about me. How do you know I won't take you for a ride or screw things up for you?"

"I know Leo. He'd never get taken in by that and I know you spent a while with him and Tony. He trusts you."

Gabrielle watched his face, gauging the sincerity of his words and voice. Finally she nodded, satisfied with what she found. "I'll help, on two conditions," she said at last.

"Yes?" Michelangelo was curious now. Given what Leonardo had shared, he had a fairly good idea what was coming.

"You keep my name out of it and you feed me."

"I can do that," Mike said with a smile and an extended arm.

Gabrielle accepted his handshake. "Then you've got yourself a deal."

Gabrielle came back to the present with a start. It had been a while since she'd either sketched or painted and now she carefully withdrew the pad Leonardo had given her those centuries ago. The feel of the thick paper brought a smile to her face and the pictures still brought a teary twinkle to her eyes.

"I'll have to take you to Rome again, Xena and show you what I painted. You can't tell the difference, but I remember. It was an amazing work of art... still is. That time made me appreciate so many things."

She put the sketch book away and pulled the feather out of her diary that marked her place and twirled it in her fingers, remembering the time long ago when she'd watched Xena repair her Queen's mask before a festival.

"One day, when we have time, you're gonna have to teach me how to make an Amazon mask, Xena. I know you've got the skills and though I have no use for one now, I'd like to have my Queen's mask again. I'll never get the one Ephiny made for me back." She shuddered. "Not that I'd want it with the memories attached to it now."

Then she picked up her diary, closed the door and headed for the sunlight.

## Chapter XXX

Xena twirled the feather Keto had given her in her fingers as she made her way across the plains towards the Mexican part of the continent. Only two days out and it had been rough going so far - her animal companions were still greatly put out with her and the feather brought so many memories of Gabrielle to the forefront of her mind. She decided to focus on the animals first. The trip was going to allow her plenty of time to explore her memories of Gabrielle.

"C'mon, guys. I said I'm sorry I went without you."

She wasn't sure how, but they managed to look at her with complete disdain. Xena sighed and stopped walking. The animals kept their slow pace in front of her.

"I know... I should have waited until spring, but I... just.... I need to find the totems. As fast as I can. I've got to get back to Gabrielle."

They didn't forgive her exactly, but they did stop walking and look at her, waiting for her to catch up to them. Xena smiled. It wasn't the warm welcome she wanted, but it was a good first step.

They walked along in silence for a time. It was what they were all most comfortable with. Eventually, Xena's attention turned back to the feather she still held in her hand.

It was long, thin and the same shade of dark gold that Xena remembered the feathers of Gabrielle's mask being on top. She could still clearly see the defiance the bard's face had worn as she accepted the responsibility away from Velaska. Xena had been pretty damn proud of Gabrielle at that moment.

Xena let the memory run, remembering what she'd felt when her spirit had taken over Gabrielle's body. It was the first time she was sure that what she felt for Gabrielle was returned in full measure and it had been the most wonderful, terrifying feeling. And it had been the first step on a journey she desperately wanted to get back to.

She twirled the feather absently, letting it caress her lips as she let her mind wander over the few times after that she'd seen Gabrielle don her ceremonial clothing. She rarely wore the mask, claiming it hot and confining. She preferred to leave it hanging in the small hut set aside for their use.

Xena knew there was more to it than that and she made it her own personal mission to insure that the mask was in pristine shape on the rare occasion Gabrielle had deigned to wear it. They had actually discussed it once, just before Ephiny was killed.

"It's a symbol of honor, Gabrielle. Of tradition."

"I know that, Xena." Gabrielle scrubbed her hands through her recently shortened hair in frustration. "I'm proud of the symbolism, the honor and the tradition that goes with it. But I should no more wear that mask than Ares should. I'm not an Amazon Queen." She sighed. "I never have been," finishing on a much softer note.

"I disagree with you, Gabrielle, and so would many of the women of your tribe. Why do you think Ephiny is holding it for you? Why else would it hang in your hut and not hers?" Xena gently brushed the shaggy bangs off Gabrielle's forehead. "One day... one day, you'll wear that mask and you'll understand why you really are a true Amazon Queen."

Xena came back to the present, realizing that the sun was going down and she was going to have to make camp for the night.

The two animals went off on their own hunt while Xena conducted hers and once the large rabbit had been drained of blood, she set it over a spit to cook. Not that she was ever particularly hungry, but she had quickly realized that if gave her body a regular ration of food, her need to feed on blood significantly decreased.

Xena hated this facet of her immortality... the price she paid for her continued existence. Her thoughts wandered to how Gabrielle would be coping with something similar. The loss of dignity and control were humiliating and Gabrielle had always been much more sensitive to killing and death than Xena, even after becoming a warrior.

It had been much easier and here Xena smiled broadly, *much* more pleasant when they had been together. Not even something they acknowledged between them, but there nevertheless. Now her smile faded completely. Why hadn't she thought of that \*before\* she made her decision in Japan? She shook her head to clear it. No matter how many times she went over it, how many regrets she lived with, it would never change what she had done... to herself and to Gabrielle.

Would you change it if you could?

Xena's head whipped around, her hyper-alert senses scanning the area for anything to clue her in to what could have been a whisper of the wind or her over-active imagination. She snorted in derision. No one had \*ever\* accused her of THAT particular malady. Gabrielle had always been the part of their partnership that could imagine all sorts of possibilities. Xena loved listening to the bard's musings, but tended to stick to cold,

hard facts.

So she waited, patiently, trying to sense... something, anything... to explain what she had heard, what she had literally felt as a caress of her skin as it crossed her hearing. Only silence and stillness greeted her senses, however and Xena knew there would be no rest for her as the question continued to play over and over in her mind.

The next several days passed the same, though now that question weighed most heavily in her thoughts. Though she knew the answer without a doubt was an unequivocal YES, the query remained as a constant reminder... a constant thought. At times, Xena felt sure she would go mad from the unending cycle, sure that the Furies had returned to haunt her once more.

Finally, through sheer force of her will alone, Xena set the question aside and turned her attention back to the mask she needed to find.

When he'd given her the feather, Keto had explained that finding the mask would be a little more involved than her search for the staff had been

"Kya not share much, but took two full cycles of seasons before he return to us. Feather you hold is all left from mask."

"He destroyed it??"

"No. Was left with single feather when totems returned home."

Xena nodded and wondered what it had taken for Keto to obtain the feather from Kya. The young man still harbored a huge grudge towards Xena and the fact that she had undertaken a quest he felt was rightfully his. She had no way of knowing that the rest of the tribe had insured he understood the penalty for dishonoring Xena again.

"Will need stealth to find... many traps, well-hidden."

Xena nodded and took the scroll and the staff in hand and headed southwest, into what had once been Aztec territory.

Now she found herself well into the journey, though she knew it would take some time on foot. She didn't feel right taking one of the few horses the tribe had, though Keto had made one readily available for her use. There were so many fights and little wars that plagued them and Xena didn't want the warriors to get caught short.

So she walked, finding a new appreciation for the world around her and for Gabrielle's strength those many years ago. Of course, having no horse, she carried a bit more than Gabrielle had to. In addition to the backpack that carried her spare set of clothing, towel and some foodstuffs, she also carried the pot for her tea and her lone cup and plate. Her bedroll was tied to the bottom of the pack and rested snugly at the small of her back.

Around her waist she wore the gun Michael had given her with a quiver on the other side and slung over one shoulder was a short bow. She was thankful for the staff in a way she hadn't expected to be. *No wonder Gabrielle had taken to riding once she'd given up her staff.* 

Slowly, Etor and Melo were warming up to her again, though they'd made it clear she had made them angry but good. The fox looked as though it wanted to forgive and forget... there was an almost forlorn look in the green eyes that watched her from across the campfire. The panther, though, continued to glare and growl in her direction. Knowing that they were similar in temperament to Gabrielle and herself, she couldn't help but wonder if it was an indication of what her welcome from Gabrielle would be. She almost hoped so. At least Melo wanted to forgive her, even if it was taking a while. Etor still looked ready to bite.

For days and weeks they walked on together in relative silence. There was little to bother them along the way except the expected predators and the trio gave off enough of a predatory scent themselves to make everything else move away from them.

The plains melted into mountains and the mountains fell away into desert sands before the sand gave way to the jungle the scroll had told her to search for. The air was much heavier here, wet with the scent of age and decay.

They walked stealthily for a long time, careful not to disturb the silence that was as heavy as the air. Finally, they reached a pyramid and Xena began her search.

It was oppressive here and there was no evidence that anyone had been here in a very long time. She walked around the area slowly, noting absently the crumbling remains of what appeared to have been a once-thriving civilization.

She searched carefully. Though she had definite ideas of where she suspected the mask would be, it wouldn't do to overlook either the obvious possibilities or the obscure ones.

Xena checked the area around the temple first, working in a spiral pattern that slowly closed the circle. Eventually she reached the temple and not seeing an obvious way in began the trek towards the top.

She looked around each side of the pyramid, knowing the mask could have been lost or hidden, but fairly certain that it was somewhere inside, given the excellent condition of the feather now in her possession.

She reached the top and the altar area and let the revulsion she felt at what she found there wash over her in waves. Quite without her conscious permission she felt her eye teeth elongate as her nose picked up the scent of very old blood. Her eyes noted the stains still on the altar and she cringed inwardly at both the horror of the place and her uncontrollable reaction to it.

She was pretty sure the evidence before her attested to human sacrifice and would have prayed, had she had any faith left at all, that Gabrielle had been spared the ghastly experience of seeing that atrocity in the name of a god. Knowing the memories that would invoke, she swallowed the bile it brought to her own throat.

A meticulous search around the altar area finally turned up the trigger she'd been hunting for. She moved it, then waited patiently for the door to slide open, allowing her entrance to mysteries that had been hidden from prying eyes for generations.

The air was old and stale, though it was relatively free from the scent of blood Xena noted happily. She explored the opening carefully, then fashioned several torches from the materials she could scrounge from the vicinity. It took her until nearly dark, but she decided she preferred to be inside and away from the smell of blood and death. So she lit a torch and slipped inside feeling the two animals slide in beside her.

The darkness was thick and cloying and the torch made little headway against the oppressiveness the heavy air conveyed. The going was slow as Xena didn't want to trigger potential traps, nor did she want to allow the possibility of the mask she was searching for to escape her notice.

The steps lead downward and Xena figured that they led to ground level and probably a main chamber. So she followed the stairs slowly and methodically, watching as bugs and beetles scurried out of her path and careful not to disturb the snakes and other more deadly creatures that watched her passing.

The blackness pressed around her and Xena stood still a moment once she reached the floor. The area here was free of anything living and it made the warrior wonder. It made no sense... either that anything could survive inside the temple, or that those that did avoided the openness of the floor. Then something caught her attention in the darkness and she put her confusing thoughts aside to get a closer look.

It was another altar, but utterly different from the one she'd seen outside. This one was in pristine condition, save the coating of dust and laid out across its surface were a variety of knives. They were very similar in hilt and form... only the length of the blade differentiated them from each other. They were clean and still razor sharp, though Xena's senses detected the faintest traces of blood where the hilt and blades met.

She walked slowly around the altar, aware of a variety of things hanging on the nearby walls, though nothing was clear in the thick shadows outside the small circle of light. Xena moved closer to the walls to investigate. She didn't notice when the panther and the fox wandered away together.

Directly behind the altar hung a large blue and green feathered cape with a gash on one side at the neck and bloodstains around the whole itself. A decorated mask hung neatly above it and Xena reached the torch higher to examine it more closely.

The mask was made of wood and feathers, but the only feathers Xena found evidence of were the blue and green of the cape and not the gold she sought. Xena lifted a hand to touch it, but a low rumble from beside and slightly behind her changed her mind.

Her torch began to sputter and dim, so Xena took another from her stash and lit it, leaving the first one to give her extra light until it died of natural causes.

On one side of the robe was a staff of sorts with beading and decoration Xena did not readily recognize. On the other hung a shield... again more decorative than useful. Xena fingered it lightly, the slowly continued her trek around the chamber.

Various other bits of artifacts hung well preserved on the walls and she had cause to wonder where they had come from and why they remained still when no one was left to appreciate them or understand their place in the society that had one obviously thrived here.

When she reached the wall directly across from the altar, a familiar tingling skittered up her spine. "Gabrielle?" she whispered, even though her conscious mind knew the impossibility of that prospect. Still the feeling lingered and she slowed even more, desperate not to miss the slightest clue.

Here there was a pile of bloody weapons, none of them cleaned from their last use and all of them randomly thrown on the floor. Her nose twitched and she wondered why the weapons had been left in such a condition.

Her eyes moved around and up the wall slowly, lighting at last on another mask. This one was held in place by virtue of a knife buried to the hilt between the eyes of the mask and into the wall itself. Xena brought the light closer to the wall, unable to stop the slight gasp that escaped her when she could clearly see the mask in front of her.

It was an Amazon war mask and more precisely, it was the war mask of a Queen.

Xena wondered how it had come to be in this time and place and then put her questions aside to remove it from the wall. She pushed the bloodied weapons aside and planted the torch in the ground. Then she jumped straight up, removing the knife from the wall and catching the mask with her free had as it slipped free.

Xena dropped the knife and grasped the mask in two faintly shaking hands. There was blood spattered all over the front. She let her fingers trace the familiar form, remembering the rare few times she'd held a mask similar to this one in her hands before offering it to Gabrielle.

She looked around again, hoping to find some clue as to where the mask came from and why it was here. Seeing nothing, Xena turned it over in her hands and froze. Nestled in the straps and crevices of the backing were blonde hairs the shade of which Xena had only ever seen on one person in her lifetime.

"Gabrielle?" She reached towards them then pulled back, not wanting them to be real and at the same time needing the tactile confirmation her eyes were insisting was the truth.

Xena removed her backpack and set the mask calmly on top of it. Then she sat and leaned against the wall, refusing the comfort of tears and simply letting her mind wander.

She hated this... hated where she was; hated what she'd done; especially hated not knowing the whole truth about WHY she was here and HOW to go home. And the thought that Gabrielle had been here without her sent a pain through Xena so sharp it made her gasp in reaction.

The fox left its place near the panther and curled up without hesitation in Xena's lap. Xena let her hands gently stroke the red-gold fur, feeling the satisfied rumbling purr in the warm body. The panther came closer, maintaining a sentinel watch but not approaching within Xena's reach.

"Why was she here, Melo? Because I know she was. I can feel that truth in my very bones. When was she here? By all accounts the people of the valley have been gone for centuries. She's alive... and immortal. I'm positive of that much now. Question is - how do I find her?"

Xena shifted to make herself more comfortable, lighting another torch. "May as well wait until morning before starting out again," she muttered to her two companions before turning her attention back to her wayward thoughts.

"What do you think, Melo? Will Gabrielle be happy to see me when I find her? Does she want me too? Will she want to go home or will she want to stay here? She's been alone for a long time... maybe she'd rather...." Xena slapped her hands to her face and scrubbed them hard.

"Sorry," she mumbled again. "Being stupid." And just why are you being stupid, Xena? Where is this bout of insecurity coming from, hmm? Gabrielle has never given you reason to doubt or mistrust and if she wants to stay here, then you'll find a way to stay here and make it work. Her choice this time, warrior!

Xena knew the sentiment was her own and heartfelt, but the words felt as though they belonged to another. She briefly wondered again if the Furies had been sent to punish her, then pushed the idea aside. There was nothing they could do to her worse than she could manage on her own. And right now, she seemed to be managing just fine... if driving herself nuts was on the agenda.

Xena knew those kinds of thoughts were pointless, but it was so much harder to dismiss them here. Maybe because she'd had no transition time; maybe because Gabrielle wasn't here; maybe... maybe this place is just depressing and I should just let it go.

She closed her eyes and deliberately let her mind take her into some of her happier memories with Gabrielle.

With morning came a better perspective and Xena put her mood down to the darkness of the temple. She hadn't let her torch go out through the night and now was down to her last one.

"C'mon guys. We've got other places to be besides here."

Xena looked around, hoping to find a way out at the bottom. After much searching, she finally found a crack in the wall that resembled a door and went about hunting for a key to unlock it. Just as she found the keystone, the torch sputtered and went out. Xena breathed a sigh of relief when the stone door swung soundlessly open, allowing fresh air and sunshine through the portal.

The respite from the darkness and the stale air was a welcome one and the trio slowly made its way back out of the temple area with the mask strapped to Xena's backpack and the staff still well in hand.

After many days travel northward, Xena finally reached an inhabited area of the country, but the number of soldiers she'd seen in the area was unnerving. It made her blood burn... and then the unthinkable happened.

A soldier pushed a young boy down and raised his rifle. The boy's mother, frantic and distraught, threw herself in front of the child in an effort to protect him. The soldier laughed derisively and reached for the woman, thrusting her aside and raised his gun again.

This time the mother jumped him from behind and the soldier threw her off him and onto the ground, lifting the gun like a club and swinging it backwards....

... only to find it caught and held by a blue-eyed demon woman.

Xena pulled back her arm and punched him hard enough that she felt his brains rattle before he fell solidly to the ground. The woman screamed and Xena had just time to kick out before several soldiers fell on top of her and started hitting with a will.

She let them swing for a while... they were mostly hitting one another and she saw no reason to stop them. One of them landed a lucky punch on her nose however and as soon as the blood started flowing, everything changed.

Xena's focus closed and her world narrowed to just the men on top of her. She felt her fangs grow and the burning howled in her blood and she let it, drawing strength from it for the coming battle.

Without warning, she pushed herself from the ground and slowly, methodically decimated the squad of soldiers that had jumped on her. When all was said and done, she was the only living thing left standing in the small town. The people had scattered to their homes and only bits remained of what had moments before been proud Mexican soldiers.

Slowly, her fangs receded and she stepped back, bloody and sated from what was in essence, the remnants of a war zone.

Xena walked over to her gear where the fox and the cat sat patiently guarding her things. She lifted the backpack carefully, not wanting to get more blood on the mask, or any of her other gear for that matter. She bent to retrieve the staff when a hissing sound caught her attention.

She turned and there stood the woman she'd stood up for only moments before. With a tug on the warrior's sleeve, the woman made it clear she wanted Xena to follow her and since her senses no longer prickled, Xena complied.

The woman and her family offered Xena a place to bathe off and a hot meal while the woman scrubbed the blood from Xena's clothes. They didn't talk much, which was fine with Xena. She felt more drained than she'd been in years. They offered her a bed that she fully intended to refuse, until the boy she had saved looked at her with pleading eyes that reminded her so much of Gabrielle.

Xena smiled then and riffled his hair and he gave her a big grin in return. Tomorrow would bring more soldiers and problems, but for the night they had their very own hero.

The family looked askance at the two animals that followed Xena calmly to the tiny bedroom they'd given her, but both panther and fox casually strolled in and promptly disappeared.

When dinner was over, Xena went to her room and opened the window to look out at the stars. Most of the night she laid that way, thinking about how good it felt to fight the good fight again. It wasn't like it had been in Greece. Even without the bacchae curse, fighting was different in this place and this time.

With guns, it was much easier to kill... much easier to die. And without Gabrielle to watch her back, it changed the dynamics of the way Xena fought. It had taken her years to think of Gabrielle as a partner, an equal and now the habit was so ingrained Xena found it almost impossible to fight differently.

"I miss you, my bard... in more ways than I ever imagined I could," she whispered to the stars as they faded with the dawn. "But I think I've gotta find a way to do the 'greater good' thing again, at least for a while. It seems like the best way to cope without you, until I find you again. I've always been proud of you, Gabrielle and I want you to be able to say the same thing of me."

Then she rose from the bed and dressed, eager to head out for her next destination.

The scroll had been less than specific on where she needed to go, but Xena knew enough to move west towards the ocean. Along the way she helped those who needed it - nursing the sick, building homes and corrals, mending fences and occasionally fighting the bad guys.

Xena took great joy in her fighting and found a renewed optimism in herself and her abilities as she allowed

herself to indulge her skills and instincts. Word began to spread of a fierce, blue-eyed defender and champion of the weak, but now, no one knew her name.

She simply swept in, did what needed to be done and moved on without much conversation. Occasionally, her spirit guides would be seen, but by and large, Xena was seen as a lone warrior. Not that people didn't want to get closer... a few even tried. But Xena made it clear she wasn't interested in making friends or anything else. She would accept a meal and sometimes a bed and bath, but she that was enough to satisfy her need for human contact.

That and the fighting that is. It was then that she felt whole again and she was careful to try and contain her enthusiasm to the point that no one was exposed to the bacchae side of her personality.

So she slowly made her way up the coast, hoping she would sense where she needed to be to find the fishhook. The description in the scroll made it sound very familiar... something she remembered seeing Ephiny wear in the Amazon village.

Xena easily recognized the representation of skill it afforded, but she was at a loss to explain how an Amazon necklace had ended up halfway around the world. Surely she wasn't simply following Gabrielle while chasing these clues. She shook her head. No, she'd know if Gabrielle were that close, she was sure of that. Her Gabsense had rarely failed her and it had been so long since she'd felt it, she'd identify the change immediately.

Still she contemplated the whys and wherefores of the objects she was forced to track down. Their being here in this time and place was a mystery of no small proportion and it was interesting, if not always fun to speculate on the reasoning behind it.

Not many folks had made it so far west yet and Xena could go for days without encountering another living soul besides the animals that were so prevalent. Once in a while, she would run into a native tribe and do a bit of bartering, but by and large, it was wide open country.

*Or it had been,* Xena thought wryly as the stench of a shanty town hit her nose. It still amazed her the way humanity smelled when it congregated and she couldn't believe it didn't make people as nauseas as it did her. And adding cattle to the mix....

Her first impulse was to turn around and head for the hills and the fresh air she knew she could find there. But she'd been there and found nothing. Her instincts had brought her here and if there was one thing in the world Xena still trusted implicitly, it was the instincts she had honed from her days as a warlord.

Somewhere in this tiny, stinking shanty town was the next piece to her puzzle.

Xena got a job on the building crew. Not what she wanted to do really, but it beat the only 'work' that was available to most women in this town. It had taken a bit of convincing on her part, but when the boss saw she did the same amount of work as the men with less effort, he nodded his approval of her into his crew. The men watched her for a while and with grudging acknowledgement accepted her as one of them.

Slowly the town began transforming from a shanty town to something more respectable and once or twice Xena caught the profile of someone who stirred ancient memories. But she was never able to see clearly

enough to confirm her suspicions.

Days passed and Xena found she missed the clean air and quiet she'd reveled in since coming to this land. Her animal companions had abandoned her when she reached the edge of town, disdaining the noise and smell for the peace they could maintain away from the mass of humanity. Xena missed them.

Several times she felt the wanderlust calling her, remembering so clearly the call of the open road she had shared with Gabrielle. Only that innate sense she'd come to respect held her in the town though she'd investigated as much of the surrounding area as she could reasonably manage. And still she was without the talisman she sought.

Building slowed as the weather turned colder and nastier and Xena found it increasingly hard to stay in one place... especially this one. But her nightly talks to Gabrielle eased the frustration and loneliness and Xena took comfort from them. She imagined she could feel Gabrielle's presence growing closer and felt better just sharing her day.

Then came a day in the beginning of the New Year when three things happened that brought both satisfaction and a frightening, disturbing annoyance into Xena's life.

Xena entered her small room at dusk and flopped on the bed gracelessly, looking up at the wooden ceiling. For the first time in several months she felt optimism and she smiled as she clutched the fishbone to her breast.

"Oh, Gabrielle... do I have a story to tell you."

## Chapter XXXI

"Oh, Xena... do I have a story to tell you."

Gabrielle chuckled as she read those words in her diary, clearly remembering the day they were written.

The Renaissance was widespread and when she got wind of a bardic competition in Brittana, *I mean England*, Gabrielle reminded herself, she decided it was time to put her dislike of the place aside and go check it out. *Time those memories were replaced with something better* she mused to herself as she finally set foot on the shore, mentally crossing her fingers that that would be the case.

The place had much changed in the centuries since she had been in this place and yet it still had a wild untamed feeling for all the veer of civility it wore. Gabrielle made her way slowly towards the city, attracting as little attention as she could manage. A lone woman traveling the countryside was still seen as an invitation to take liberties from by brigands and thieves, though there were a few more safeguards against them in this time and place. Still, Gabrielle had no desire to become a target for them, even though she could clearly and easily destroy anyone who tried.

Finally she arrived in the city and cautiously made her way to the palace courtyard where the competition would be held. Lots of people were milling about and Gabrielle found herself near the registration table. She'd told herself that she was simply coming to listen, but she felt her blood stir in the most pleasant way as the

atmosphere soaked its way into her consciousness.

A thrill skittered down her spine in the most pleasant way and before she had time for second thoughts, Gabrielle found herself entered in the challenge.

The morning and afternoon passed agreeably and Gabrielle enjoyed herself in a way she hadn't in years. Many storytellers took the stage - some good, others not so. But all of them were entertaining... even if only as they ran from the stage to avoid being pelted with rotten fruit.

Due to the lateness of her entry, Gabrielle was scheduled last and there were a number of entrants. So it was nearly sunset when a young man... the next to last entry, got up.

He was clearly a crowd favorite, judging by the applause he received when he was introduced and even Gabrielle was carried along on his tale of intrigue and woe. When he was finished, the crowd cheered and whooped until Gabrielle wondered if she should even bother. Then the master of ceremonies signaled for silence and the crowd quieted down.

"That was fine, Will," smiling at the young man who looked insufferably pleased with himself. "Now," the MC said, "We have one more bard, a late entry... please welcome Bard Gabrielle."

The applause was polite, but the silence was filled with expectancy. Aside from the fact that the crowd favorite, Will, ALWAYS went last, the fact that the interloper was a woman was almost unheard of so publicly in this day and age. Storytelling wasn't something most women chose to do, at least outside the home.

So they waited patiently and each of them found themselves captured by verdant green eyes and a slight smile as Gabrielle turned her gaze to the audience, attempting to make contact with everyone. Then she opened her mouth to speak.

The tale she told them was a simple one - her own story in her own words. Or part of it at any rate. Parts of it were too personal to share and others were simply unbelievable. She told of a faulty, human warrior hero, who didn't always make the right decision, but did always try. She told of her companion, left alone because of those decisions and her quest to find the warrior. Lastly, she told them of their triumphant reunion and all the joy it entailed.

There was dead silence when Gabrielle finished and she stepped back, feeling more drained than she had in many years. Without warning, the crowd favorite, Will, jumped up on the stage and lifted her arm in triumph. Stunned, the crowd raised its voice in roaring approval.

Gabrielle found herself surrounded by the many performers who were all eager to congratulate her. The master of ceremonies had to push and shove people out of his way to reach the middle of the stage where Gabrielle stood, talking to the performers and accepting the adulations of the crowd.

He held up a hand for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen... I believe we have our winner. Bard Gabrielle."

Cheers rang out over the square again and the MC let it roll on for several long moments before raising his hands again.

"On behalf of their majesties, I present this year's purse to Gabrielle. Congratulations!"

Gabrielle accepted the small pouch with a smile and a nod and the performers surrounded her once again. More than once she felt hands reaching for the purse, but Xena's patiently taught lessons on pressure points came in handy for more than just seasickness and healing.

Eventually, the crowd began to disperse back to their homes and the villages surrounding the castle. Gabrielle took a moment to look around before a touch on her elbow caused her to turn around.

"Yes?" She paused. "Will, right?"

"Yes, Bard Gabrielle," he started, then halted at the shake of her head and upright hand. "I'm sorry... I...."

"Will, take a deep breath, all right? My name is just Gabrielle; not Bard Gabrielle, not Mistress Gabrielle, not Lady Gabrielle, or any other title you can think of. Just plain Gabrielle."

Will smiled at her. "All right then, just plain Gabrielle. I was wondering if you might like to come home with me."

Blonde brows rose to an equally blonde hairline and warm green eyes turned to ice. "Excuse me?"

"Wha... oh... OH!!" He shook his head and chuckled a bit. "No, no... I'm sorry, Gabrielle. That's not what I meant... at least not that way. Sorry. For a bard, I have a terrible habit of not conveying what I mean very clearly in normal speech. Let me begin again."

Gabrielle nodded, noting the blush that covered Will's face. He sighed. "I think that is the reason I normally win," he muttered to himself. He looked back at Gabrielle and motioned her to a seat before assuming on himself. "When I talk, I make all kinds of gaffes - say things I shouldn't or don't mean to say and generally embarrass myself greatly." His eyes took on a shine. "But when I tell stories...."

Gabrielle waited before finishing his thought. "When you tell stories, you become someone else. You tell their stories with their words."

"Exactly!" Will said excitedly, thrilled that she understood. "I disappear into the background as the characters emerge." He hesitated. "But you didn't do that. You became a part of the story. It was so real... so personal... like you had really experienced it. I'd like for you to teach me."

Gabrielle shook her head. "Will, it's not something that can be taught. Technique, sure. Cadence, absolutely. But the stories have to be a part of you. And you can't just tell them. You have to live them, experience them, believe in them so much that they become your truth."

Will gazed at her for a long self-conscious moment. "That story was true wasn't it? You're one of the people in your story."

Gabrielle had no need to answer. The truth was evident in her eyes when Will looked at her.

He slapped his hands on his thighs and stood. "Well, my invitation stands. You're welcome to come stay with me... or not. I'd like to spend some time getting to know you, I mean, as a friend. I mean...."

Gabrielle finally took compassion on him. "I understand, Will, really. Trust me... when you've been around as long as I have, you learn to gauge the signs. That is why your first offer took me so by surprise. It just didn't seem..." She waved him off. "Nevermind. Buy me a drink and then we'll see what we can do.

"Aren't you afraid that people will talk, Will? I mean, I'm just passing through."

"Gabrielle, I assure you that anything people think about me having you stay in my house will only improve any reputation I have. I'm considered the local idiot... another reason I think the humor me by letting me win the bardic challenge. Preparing for them keeps me busy and out of trouble."

"You don't have a whole lot of confidence in yourself there, do ya, Will?"

He shrugged. "Never had much reason to. All my life, people have told me how stupid I am. Kinda hard to get around it when it is all you ever hear."

Gabrielle bit her lip, remembering all too clearly her life before Xena and the core of confidence Xena had managed to plant deep in her soul.

"I'll tell ya what, Will. I'll come stay with you for a while. Maybe... maybe we can find your truth."

The walk back to Avon wasn't a long one, but it was fully dark by the time they reached Will's home. "C'mon in. It's not much, but it's home."

Will lit the candles, handing one to Gabrielle and keeping the other for himself as he walked around the house lighting others. The cottage was small but neatly kept and Gabrielle looked around with pleased surprise. The main living area contained a good-sized sitting room with a large fireplace at one end. The kitchen where she now stood took up the other part of the main room and it had a large fireplace as well.

Off to one side were two doors and Will opened one bashfully. "This was my parent's room. It's not much, but I've tried to keep it clean."

"Are they dead?" Gabrielle asked kindly.

Will laughed. "Oh no. My father was called to be a conner for the king. I saw them today, as a matter of fact."

"And they won't mind...?" gesturing to the room in front of them.

"No. They're not here and I wasn't kidding when I said your being here could only enhance my reputation." The young man colored. "I just hope you don't mind some of the things that will get said about you for being here... alone with me, I mean."

Gabrielle placed a tender hand on his arm, causing him to blush even further. "Will, if there is one thing I have learned in my life, it's not to let what other folks think of me become a concern. I have to do what is right and best for me; the rest of it just falls to the wayside."

Will thought about that for a long moment before smiling at her brightly. "I like your philosophy, Gabrielle. Goodnight."

Without waiting for her response, Will closed the door and went into his own room. Gabrielle looked around the tiny room with its neatly made bed and strong, plain furniture and nodded her head in satisfaction. This could turn out to be a very pleasant interlude.

"Will, I'm telling you... that is NOT how it happened."

The man threw up his hands in disgust. "But Gabrielle, there's just no drama... no tragedy."

Gabrielle sat back and rubbed her tired eyes. They had been working steadily for several weeks. Or rather, she had been relating stories to Will and he had been twisting them around to 'give them dramatic flair' as he called it. To Gabrielle, it was just messing up the facts.

"Will, why does there need to be drama? Or tragedy? Isn't life hard enough without adding more ugliness to it as a form of entertainment?"

She rose from the desk. "This was a classic love story, Will. Feuding families, petty intrigues and a girl determined not to live without her beloved. To the point she was willing to die rather than be wed to someone she didn't love, or watch the one she loved do the same."

Gabrielle started pacing. "A boy who went so far as to cause time to repeat itself until a way was found to stop his beloved from committing suicide. Not only that, but until a way was found to finally bring them together."

"And it happened, Will. I was there. That day repeated itself for eight straight days until every single detail was taken care of. And the couple did live happily ever after. Rare, I know, but it does occasionally happen and it did this time. I know. We went back and visited them several years later. They were still as happy and in love as they had been the first time I met them."

Gabrielle blew out an exasperated breath. "Why is it so hard to let them live happily ever after?"

She turned and looked at him for a hard moment before moving to the window. "Is happiness worth so little anymore that you can just throw it away for the sake of drama?"

Will scrubbed his eyes and began speaking softly. "No, it isn't but the truth is, Gabrielle, true love is so, so rare...." He held up his hand when she would have spoken. "Let me finish, please."

Gabrielle nodded and resumed a seat on the couch. Will walked to the window and stood looking out with his back to the room.

"True love is so very rare Gabrielle. Most of the world will never see it, much less be fortunate enough to experience it for themselves. It's like a faery tale. If you end up liking your mate, your marriage is generally considered a huge success."

He sighed. "And the sad truth of the matter is tragedy appeals to people because it reminds them that things could always be much worse than they are. Knowing that your neighbor is worse off than you tends to make you feel better about yourself. It's a terrible fact of the human condition, but it is also a very true one."

"Besides," he continued in a tone so soft Gabrielle had to strain to hear him. "You told me to write what I know. And I certainly have had my share of heartache in the romance department."

Gabrielle put a hand to the back of her neck and rubbed it. "All right, Will. You do what you want with this one. I'll sit down and see if I can come up with a REAL tragedy for you."

Will wondered what Gabrielle was doing. It seemed to him she was simply sitting staring out into space for hours at a time. He had no way of knowing she was reviewing centuries' worth of memories trying to decide which tragic event she could share with him.

She reviewed her life at home, in Poteidaia before she'd met Xena. Boring, perhaps, but somehow a missing lamb really didn't qualify on the tragic scale. Xena's 'death' by Callisto's dart; Xena's death by the tree; her own near death by being burned alive. None of them tragic because of their ending.

Her murder of Meridian; her rape by Dahok; Hope; her betrayal of Xena and Solon's subsequent death; the months they had spent hurting and almost hating one another. Very tragic and far too personal to share. Just thinking of those memories made the bile rise in her throat.

Hope's final death; Eve's destruction. Still not things she felt comfortable sharing. And there was no way she was going to share Xena's final act. She had exposed far more of that story than she'd ever planned to share and she wouldn't use it as the basis for yet another tragedy, although after all the time that had passed, the recitation of that story was as likely to make her mad as it was to hurt.

Her mind continued to wander through history, remembering the many different people she'd met along the way. Finally near noon on her fourth day of contemplation, Gabrielle sat up straight and reached for pen and paper. She knew what story she wanted to tell... very tragic and very true.

For days she sat, filling sheet after sheet of heavy paper with her long, fine strokes. Will wondered if she stopped for anything. She was writing when he got up in the morning and was still at it when he fell asleep at night.

Finally, after several weeks of writing, Gabrielle turned from her chair with a satisfied smile on her face. She gathered the manuscript into her hands and held it for a long moment.

"Now, the events in these pages actually happened. I was there, so I know. This is a first hand account of what I saw and the things I know." She looked up at Will's earnest face. "If you decide to use this, you're gonna have to change things so that the true story is hidden. I have some ideas on how you can do that, but I'll let you read the true history first."

Silence reigned in the house then except for the occasional rustle of paper as William read. Gabrielle waited until she was sure he was completely engrossed in the tale before she disappeared to take a bath. She figured she was due a long soak after the hours she'd put in to crafting the story she given to Will.

Will was quietly setting the table by the time Gabrielle arrived back at the cottage. She still had a thing for the great outdoors and she was so glad Will had a bit of a creek running through his property. She loved a hot bath, but so much of her time in the last few weeks had been spent thinking of her life with Xena that she felt compelled to bathe as she had during that part of her life. Besides, she had really needed to feed and that gave her the opportunity to do both without causing talk.

The smell of stew was thick in the air and Gabrielle seated herself at Will's indication. He placed a bowl at each place and set the bread between them. Then he began eating, all without saying a word.

Gabrielle left him to his silence, respecting this need to process the story she'd given him. How many times had Xena done the same thing, though with Xena, it had been as much in her nature to simply be quiet as anything else.

Will finished his bowl and rose to refill it, judiciously checking Gabrielle's as well. When he resumed his seat, he stirred the stew and cleared his throat to speak.

"That was a true story?" his voice was slightly hoarse.

"Yep," Gabrielle said succinctly. She didn't want to influence his thinking.

"Um... well... uh, you were um... you were right about the tragedy involved. I would never have come up with something like that in a million years of thinking. It probably would have driven me to drink, actually," he offered with a wry smile.

She raised her cup to him and he returned the salute.

"It's a powerful story though. Do you really think we can change it enough so people don't recognize the basis of truth in it?"

"Oh yeah. I've been thinking about it for a while. Let's finish dinner and we can sit down with a pen a paper. Then we'll see what we can come up with."

Will rushed his meal, obviously anxious to get into the creative process. As soon as he was sure Gabrielle was done, he removed their bowls and brought the paper to the table. With a jar of ink in front of him and a sharpened quill in his hands, he sat ready for her comments.

Gabrielle cleared her throat. "Well, the first thing I think we should do is add the Fates... make them witches if you like, but they need to be a consistent theme throughout, tying things together."

"Oh, I like that... a little mysticism and occultism is just the thing to add an edge. What else?"

"How 'bout we make the feudal lord a king? And instead of revenge, make the motive greed?"

The quill was moving swiftly as Gabrielle made suggestions and Will struggled to keep up.

"You want intrigue... instead of two sisters, have a husband and wife. The wife wants her husband to become king and convinces him murder is the only way to achieve it. The Fates... the witches could insure that the act will drive him mad."

"Oh, I like this a lot. What shall we call it?

"Well, where do you want to set it? That will make a difference in the names that get chosen. Only...." she paused. "You can't put it in Germany. That's where this happened. We need to remove it from its origins."

"Hmm... Scotland maybe? We could call it... Mac... something. MacDuff? MacDonald? Macbeth?"

Gabrielle thought about that for a long moment. "I like that... Macbeth, Lady Macbeth... has a certain ring to it, doesn't it?"

Will grinned big. "Yeah, it really does. Bet we could stir up some nice rumors about the name too." He laughed heartily. "Thanks, Gabrielle. I think I have found my voice. This is gonna make us famous. They'll be putting this play on everywhere... indoor theatres, in the park, maybe even open air theatres by the sea.""

Gabrielle smiled. "I'm glad, Will. You've been very kind to me and a good friend. Will you do something for me though?"

"Anything, Gabrielle. Name it."

"Keep my name out of it. All I did was put you on the right path, but these stories are gonna make you famous. I don't want to be famous, Will. I can't be."

Will gazed into the green eyes across the table and suddenly saw an ancientness there that he hadn't noticed before. Whatever her secret was, it was one she had carried for a long time and he felt himself nodding his agreement.

"I feel funny taking your stories, though. I expected we'd share credit...."

Gabrielle clasped her hands over his.

"Will, I'm giving you the stories. You can take them and rewrite them anyway you want to. Give them your special touch of dramatic appeal, all right? It'll be my pleasure to say I knew you when."

Shakespeare flushed. "You're a very special woman, Gabrielle. Thank you."

Gabrielle shrugged. "I just do what I do, Will. It's the only way I know to be."

"Well, I'm glad to have had the chance to know and work with you, even if it has to stay between us."

"Trust me when I tell you it's better this way. You're destined for great things, William Shakespeare."

He blushed again and rose rapidly, trying to cover his embarrassment. In his haste, he knocked his wine over, landing cup and liquid squarely in Gabrielle's lap. She stood and grabbed her napkin, brushing the stain briskly.

"Out, damned spot! I just washed this outfit!"

"Sorry, Gabrielle. I...."

"Don't worry about it, Will. It'll come out with a bit of scrubbing. Let me go change and we can get back to work."

"Where will you go now, Gabrielle?" Shakespeare asked her as they walked together back towards the town where they had met a year earlier. Gabrielle was not competing, but she had promised Will that she would stay long enough to watch him win.

"Germany, I think. I have a hankering for a good beer and they make the best I've ever had."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You should make a trip over and try it."

"Maybe one day," Will commented. "Thanks to you, I have so many ideas... so many stories I want to tell, it's gonna be years before I get done telling them."

"I know how you feel, Will. That's why I know you'll succeed."

Shakespeare won the contest and he split his winnings with Gabrielle. She tried to refuse, but he wouldn't let her and rather than make a scene, she accepted the purse gracefully. Then she hugged him tightly and kissed his cheek, disappearing into the fog of the night.

Gabrielle was happy to set foot on solid land again, though sea travel really didn't bother her much, thanks to Dite's talisman. But she needed to feed again and she really was looking forward to a good beer.

She made her way into Munich. It hadn't been quite a century since her last visit, so she was shocked speechless to see a credible likeness of herself set up in one of the market squares. Gabrielle approached a vendor who looked hard at her, turning and deliberately studying the statue before looking back to Gabrielle.

"You a descendent?" the man asked, motioning to the statue. "Never seen anyone who looked like her come through here before."

Gabrielle shrugged. "I dunno. Who is she?"

The man shook his head. "I don't rightly know her name. It's not mentioned in any of the stories. But she's the one who convinced Duke Wilhelm IV that beer needed to be nothing more than barley, hops and pure water. Made all the difference in our brewing process and our beer."

Gabrielle rubbed the back of her neck remembering clearly the fight she'd had to convince them and the gratitude they'd responded with when they had tasted the difference. She had never counted on a statue, though. She looked up and realized the man was waiting for her response.

"That's an incredible story. Um, where can I get one of these beers?"

The man pointed. "Tavern's three buildings down. Got the best beer in town."

Gabrielle nodded. "Thanks, friend... for the tip and the tale."

"Anytime, pretty lady," doffing his cap and giving her a half bow.

Gabrielle moved towards the tavern when her talisman ring began to glow and tingle. It was the pre-arranged signal she and Dite had agreed upon to indicate a safe time for Gabrielle to visit Olympus. She smiled. It had been a long time since she'd seen her friend the love goddess and she missed the somewhat ditzy, blonde presence as a constant in her life. She was looking forward to the opportunity to see Aphrodite again.

"But first, I'm gonna have that beer."

## Chapter XXXII

"Ooo, Sweet Cheeks!" Aphrodite cooed excitedly as she wrapped Gabrielle in a fierce hug. "I can't tell you how totally stoked I am about having you here. I have missed you sooo much!"

Gabrielle returned the hug fiercely. It had been forever since they'd seen one another and it felt so good just to be back with someone who knew her, knew things about her that no one else could and someone that she knew and trusted.

For long moments, they simply held one another, until Dite finally pulled back to take a good look at Gabrielle. She ran a hand through the long blonde hair, gently tracing the plains of her face before coming to rest on Gabrielle's shoulder.

"You look really good, Sweet Thing. Totally radical." She tugged on Gabrielle's hand and drew her over to the chaise, plopping down and patting the space beside her.

"I just can't get over how different you look... so strong, so bodaciously fit, so... I dunno, at peace, maybe?"

"Maybe," Gabrielle answered. "I've learned to live my life to its very fullest. I've made some great friends, done some fabulous things, experienced a lot of new discoveries first-hand. And I know now, without a doubt, where Xena is... well, relatively speaking. I just have to wait for her to get there."

Dite shimmied. "I sooo cannot tell you how I am like, looking forward to \*that\* reunion. Gives me the tingles just thinking about it."

The love goddess was so completely lost in her fantasies that she missed the shadow that crossed Gabrielle's face at the mention of her reunion with Xena.

"So," Gabrielle said after a few minutes of silence. "What happened? I mean, I didn't actually expect to ever get to come back here... not with Ares here and knowing the way the rest of the Pantheon feels about me."

Aphrodite picked at the silky material on the chaise. "Well, Ares isn't, like, ya know here... stirring up more of those radical war things in Turkey or some such. As for the others," she shrugged gracefully. "It took 'em a

little while to, you know, get over the bitchin' and moanin', but they did eventually realize that Xena did them a totally awesome favor."

Gabrielle looked up at her in surprise. Dite looked up through her lashes, easily reading the unbelief on Gabrielle's expression.

"No kiddin', babe! The move to Rome did some totally awesome thing to their power bases. They had you know, centuries of massive power they wouldn't have otherwise. It was a majorly bitchin' rush while it lasted. Besides, Artemis was absolutely whacked over the fact that her Amazon babes found a new place to like, flourish."

"And the rest?"

"They really don't have the power to waste worrying about something that happened nearly two millennia ago that was ultimately a good thing for them, ya know?"

"So they just don't care?"

"Nah, not really. They mostly just get together with some of the other gods, ya know, like I do with Ch'uang. They spend a major amount of time just rehashing the past."

"Do they know about me?"

Aphrodite shook her head. "No one has said a word and trust me, babe. I would aheard. These chicks gossip worse than a bunch of old hens after a night with a rooster."

Gabrielle couldn't help the laughter that bubbled up, though whether it was due to the expression falling from Aphrodite's lips or the comical look on her face as she said it, it would have been hard to say. Regardless, she laughed until the tears streamed down her face and Dite couldn't help but join in, though she didn't know \*why\* she was laughing except that the sound of Gabrielle's laughter was infectious.

Finally the laughter slowed with only the occasional giggle or hiccup to mar the silence. It took several attempts, but eventually Gabrielle was able to look at Aphrodite without sputtering back into laughter again.

"Whew!" she said with a grin, waving her hands in front of her face to help cool the flush she'd developed with all her laughing. "Gods, I needed that. I haven't laughed like that in... ever."

Dite chuckled. "Me either. But what were we like, laughing about anyway?"

The question was enough to nearly send Gabrielle back into the throes of laughter, but she quelled the urge with supreme effort. Taking a deep breath, she turned to Aphrodite. "Well, \*I\* was laughing at the visual you gave me... Somehow picturing Athena and Artemis and the rest as chickens strutting around in the yard was just not something I ever expected to hear coming from your lips."

Aphrodite sat there for a long time thinking about this with a very serious face. Finally she nodded. "Okay... whatever. Now," brightening and changing the subject, "I have a totally gnarly surprise for ya."

Gabrielle blinked. "A surprise. Aphrodite... you didn't have to...."

Dite covered Gabrielle's mouth. "I know I didn't. But trust me, Cutie. This is one rockin' surprise. You're gonna love it... I promise. Now, close your eyes."

Gabrielle gave her a look and she waved her hands impatiently. "Close 'em and no peeking." Dite rose and reached for Gabrielle's hands. "C'mon. It's in the other room."

Gabrielle walked slowly, holding onto Dite's hand and trusting the goddess not to run her into anything. When they crossed the threshold, Gabrielle heard the slight whirring noise of the world wide god web and figured maybe Aphrodite had news of Xena. She clenched Dite's hand in reaction.

"Whoa, babe! Chill! You're gonna damage the merchandise holding on like that. Take it easy, will ya? It's not Xena," she started, then felt the slump of the body behind her. Aphrodite turned and pulled Gabrielle into her arms and simply held her as the tears slid down her cheeks. Tenderly she wiped the wetness from Gabrielle's face.

"Im so sorry, Gab. I never thought about this raising your hopes. I would never, ever tease or set you up like that."

"I know, Dite. I'm just so tired of waiting. I don't think I realized how long eternity was until just then. I feel like I have been alone forever and sometimes...." She stepped back from Aphrodite and wiped her eyes before opening them. Dite sucked in a breath at the loneliness that was apparent in the depths of those green eyes.

"Sometimes I wonder what will happen to me if I don't find her. Aphrodite, I'm not sure I could bear that."

"Oh you will, Little One and I for one am sooo totally looking forward to that rockin', reunion," wiggling her hips and shimmying just the slightest bit. "I am expecting serious love vibrations and a way gnarly power surge to be headed my way over that one."

Gabrielle chuckled wryly. "Yeah, well, I'm still waffling between kissing her and killing her when I do find her."

Aphrodite snorted, glad to see Gabrielle's sense of humor reasserting itself. "Well, if you kill her first, you can kiss and make up later." She paused in thought pinching her lips between her fingers. "Though, you could skip the fighting and go straight to the making up... although I'm betting a good fight would make the making up even more delicious. On the other hand...."

"Dite!!"

Aphrodite stopped her vocal musing when Gabrielle said her name so emphatically. "Hmph?" she hummed against Gabrielle's hand on her lips.

"Please, you're making my head spin with all the coulds and could nots. I have to find her first. Now," deliberately changing the conversation, "where's my surprise??"

Dite squealed and clapped her hands together. "Oh, this is so cool. Check this out."

She led Gabrielle over to a small marble table near the god web. "I know you've been hiding your scrolls whenever you pass through Greece." She put her hands behind her and began pacing allowing her glasses to appear when she resumed speaking.

"I've taken them, a few at a time and transcribed them, putting them into book form for you. Then I put them back where you hid them." Dite looked directly at Gabrielle. "I, you know, figured you like, had them there for a reason."

"You read my scrolls?" Gabrielle swallowed, never having thought that anyone would ever read her scrolls. She'd made sure to put them in the one place she was sure no one, not even the gods would look.

Dite shook her head. "No, not really. I mean, not much. I mostly saw bits, um... little things. The um, the god web scanned them in and when I was done with everything I could, you know, find, I printed them up."

"Why?" a hoarse whisper. She knew very well how personal some of those scrolls had been.

"Why what?" She turned and noted with alarm that Gabrielle was sporting a pallor instead of her normal healthy complexion. "Gabrielle?!?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes and focused on breathing. When she felt her world equalize, she opened her eyes and gave Dite a tremulous smile.

"I'm sorry, Aphrodite. You just caught me a little off guard. I never thought anyone would ever \*find\* my scrolls... much less \*read\* them. There was some really personal stuff in there. That's why I hid them in the...."

"... tomb Hephaestus created. I know. I wondered why you went in there. When I found the scrolls, well, I thought it would be a radical surprise for you." Dite took off her glasses and faced Gabrielle squarely.

"I'm sorry Gabrielle. I didn't mean to upset you. I was just tryin' to do something nice for ya."

Gabrielle covered Dite's hands. "You \*did\* do something nice for me. I just wasn't expecting anything like it. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings going off like that. I know you better than that. Now, can I see them?"

Dite looked at Gabrielle for another long minute, seeing her color return. Then she walked over to her desk and removed four large, leather-bound volumes. Then she came back to the marble table and set them down with a loud thump.

"You've written a lot there, girlfriend, you know that?"

Gabrielle nodded, too stunned by the intricate tooling on the covers to say a word. She let her hand run over each cover, noting the different insignia Aphrodite had inscribed into each one. Finally, she drew a shuddering breath.

"Thank you, Aphrodite. These are... fantastic. Can I... share them with you?"

Dite smiled and clapped her hands, bouncing around like a little kid in her excitement. "I was sooo hoping you were gonna share, cause it was mega hard to be good when I was puttin' these things together. You've had some gnarly adventures."

Gabrielle caressed the cover of the first journal. "I really have and I've met some of the most interesting people." She opened the book to the first entry and noted it was dated in the upper right corner.

"You put them in order?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, how else would you read it? That's how I got to see bits... you know, looking for the dates and stuff. You could get a massive amount of info on one of those scrolls of yours, ya know."

Gabrielle nodded and smiled. "I know. Xena used to tease me about that. She said I could get more stories onto a single scroll than should be physically possible," she added with a chuckle. She looked up at Aphrodite. "How did you get it all into four journals? I've done a lot in the centuries I've been around."

"No kiddin', babe! I will not tell you the massive amount of ink and paper it took to copy those scrolls. But it was worth it, if you like them." Aphrodite looked down bashfully. This was probably one of the most intensely personal and intimate things she had ever undertaken that didn't involve sex in some way. She was a little unsure given Gabrielle's initial reaction.

Gabrielle rose from her chair and moved around to where Dite sat hesitantly, opening her arms and embracing the love goddess when Dite clasped her in a hug.

"I love them, Dite and I love you as well. Thank you for looking out for me," she said softly.

Gabrielle didn't see Aphrodite catch the tears that fell from her eyes. But she felt the light kiss brush the top of her head and heard the whispered words, "That what friends do for each other, Gab!"

After a lengthy embrace, Dite had her emotions under control and pulled back. "Now, c'mon. I wanna read the good stuff!"

Gabrielle laughed and soon the two of them were pouring over the journals.

"I can't tell you how much I enjoyed this... how much I needed this."

"Me too, bardic babe! And I can honestly say I sooo haven't had this much radical fun or laughed so hard in like, ages. Now you be careful, will ya? I know my bro has been way busy with his war stuff lately. Otherwise, he'd have, you know, popped in on me."

"I will, Dite. Thanks for caring. It means a lot to me."

"Well, make sure you come say good bye to me before you leave, if you can, all right? Time's gotta be getting close."

Gabrielle nodded. "I hope so. I'm ready for this to be over."

Aphrodite pushed the bangs off Gabrielle's forehead. "I know," was her soft response.

Gabrielle sighed as she overlooked the city. Even from here she could smell the coppery scent of blood and felt her teeth elongate in response. It wasn't something she wanted to feel, but it had been so long since she'd

had the chance to hunt and feed, it was an involuntary reaction. The fact that humanity seemed to be at war with itself again simply exacerbated the problem.

Gabrielle hadn't been to Gaul in a very long time and nothing she saw now changed her attitude of the place. Poverty was rampant and many people looked filthy and gaunt... as though they had been run into the earth and hadn't eaten properly in years.

Gabrielle had to be careful as she hunted. She didn't want to cause problems in what was clearly a troubled society, but she needed the blood. She found a small pig and drained it, then carefully cured the meat to leave on some unfortunate's doorstep.

The troubles this country now known as France was suffering through were staggering, but still she had wanted to do her bit to further the greater good. So Gabrielle had traveled the countryside, doing what she could to alleviate the stress of the common people all around her.

Many thought her an angel and she didn't correct them, letting them think that a mythological creature had come to ease their distress.

So it had taken her a very long time to reach the center of the city that had stirred her hunger and she'd had to travel back out into the country under the cover of darkness to fill her need.

Finally sated and sure that her gift had been accepted by a family that had shown her kindness, Gabrielle headed into the city to see what she could do there to help.

She found a tavern, clean with a decent house wine and sat down to rest for a bit. After a bit of time, a group of French revolutionaries came in, loud and strident.

"Barkeep! Dinner and wine all around!"

The man behind the bar nodded and within minutes the group was served. Food and drink had calmed them all somewhat, much to Gabrielle's surprise. Her experience had taught her that spirits tended to make men rowdier and more rambunctious.

Without intending to, she found her senses sharpening and she easily honed in on the quiet conversation now flowing at the nearby table. She ordered a meal to keep them from becoming suspicious of her motives, though her dress made her stand out anyway.

With a mental shrug, she directed her attention to the revolutionaries, nodding her thanks to the waitress as she set the meal in front of her.

"I'm telling you, we have to fine a way to stop the Scarlet Pimpernel. Too many of the highbrow aristocrats are escaping because of him and his league. If we want this revolution to be successful, they all have to die!"

"C'mon, Pierre. The streets run red with their blood now. What difference does it make if a few get away? The country is ours. They will never get it back from us!"

A smack to the back of the head made the speaker bite his tongue and he glared at Pierre who returned the C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

look without flinching.

"Idiot!" he hissed. "Until we get them all, there is always a chance that they will return and try to recover what they think is their rightful place." Jacques nodded slowly, then Pierre continued speaking.

"Chauvelin has been ordered to find the Pimpernel. He has put the word out into the streets. One million francs for the Pimpernel, dead or alive. Five hundred thousand for any other league member. We can be patriotic and get rich at the same time."

Gabrielle's mind went back several months, to a time when she was working in a costal town.

When she had left Greece, Gabrielle had headed north and had walked until she reached the sea. Then she had turned her steps westward, determined to conquer the unreasoning dislike she still harbored towards Gaul and its inhabitants. She remembered far too easily what the land had been like under the Romans and she hoped sincerely that time had changed that.

She wandered near the coast for a while, finding plenty of families in need and realizing that they were in the midst of a revolution by the tales that floated across the countryside now and again. But there were so many to help that she hadn't made it into the city to confirm it. Given what was rumored, she really wasn't sure she wanted to.

Late one evening in July, she stood on a high cliff looking north towards England. She had much better memories of that country now and was reminiscing about her time spent with Will. He had surpassed her expectations and had become the most famous and prolific bard that country had ever seen. She was glad. He had been a good friend to her and had managed to turn many of the stories she'd shared with him into something greater than what she'd thought they could become.

Some were even stories he'd told her in the raw stages of their infancy and she was amazed at how polished the finished products had become.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of a British schooner approaching the coast. There was something furtive in its movements and Gabrielle easily dissolved into the shadows she was so familiar with.

The boat was hidden in a natural cove that kept prying eyes from seeing unless they knew exactly where to look. The men who exited the boat were dressed for stealth and secrecy and Gabrielle watched with interest as they made their way cautiously towards the city.

For several days she watched, wondering what had happened to the men, until finally, on the fourth night, they returned bearing one with them who walked blindfolded and gagged with arms pulled behind him and bound.

Gabrielle stepped out from the shadows, bringing the little parade to a sudden, unexpected halt.

"Step aside, m'lady," a cultured English voice commanded, brandishing a sword in her direction. "I have no desire to harm you, but you will not stand between us and the success of our mission."

Gabrielle batted the sword aside as though it were of no importance and even less threat. "You tell me your mission. I will determine whether your night will end in success or failure."

**Blood Bond** 17/02/2011

The masked man flung his cape back from his dark shoulders and laughed aloud. "A delicate flower such as yourself, my dear lady? Somehow...."

Whatever he had been about to say was cut off when two silk-clad arms flashed out and the man crumpled to his knees. Half a dozen swords were heard being drawn from the sheaths, but no one moved when they heard Gabrielle's words.

"I have just cut off the flow of blood to your brain. So tell your boys to put their swords away and we'll talk. You've got about twenty seconds left before your brain shuts down. Make your choice."

The man sputtered and signaled his men who immediately sheathed their weapons and stepped back a pace. Gabrielle walked forward again and her hands again rushed forward towards the man's neck. He gasped and fell forward, his arms catching him bare inches from the ground.

"Now that I have your attention... who are you and what are you doing?" Gabrielle walked over to the man who was bound and calmly untied the ropes holding his hands behind him.

The prisoner released his own gag and blindfold, then turned his attention to the group still standing silently around him. One rubbed his throat conspicuously and the others deferred to his action. The man caught sight of Gabrielle and gently clasped her hand, raising it to his lips for a kiss.

"Madame," he said with a deep voice and a French inflection to his words. "I am the Marquis du la Noire. And this gentleman who has saved my life from the mobs of Paris is none other than the Scarlet Pimpernel, if I am not mistaken."

The man still rubbing his throat rose stiffly to his knees and was then aided by one of the other of his band to stand on shaky legs. The second man waited until his leader had his balance, then stepped back respectfully.

The first man swirled his cape back over his shoulders and extended an arm to the Frenchman. "I am indeed, sir," he confirmed with a hoarse voice. Then he turned to Gabrielle. "My apologies, dear lady. I of all people should know better than to judge a book by its cover. Will you walk with us? I would be glad to explain our mission to you, but we need to get the Marquis to the ship with all due haste."

Gabrielle considered. The Pimpernel's men had made no move against her, though they had certainly wanted to and except for misjudging her delicacy, Gabrielle snorted at \*that\* particular thought, he had been quite the gentleman. Yet her doubt of him was plain, though she sensed no real danger from him. It was simply a bizarre situation and her bard's curiosity won out over whatever sense of danger the band of men had been projecting.

She nodded her consent. Without another word, the men formed up around the Marquis and the Pimpernel took Gabrielle's arm and placed it within his own. Then he began to tell his tale.

He finished just as they reached the ship and he was much winded for the telling. Gabrielle stood silently while he caught his breath, appalled at what she'd been told. Finally, the Pimpernel was able to speak again.

"Now do you understand why we do what we do? And why we make it look like a kidnapping? We C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

can't do any good if we are locked up or dead."

Gabrielle chuckled wryly. "Yeah, I supposed being dead could put a real crimp in your plans," thinking of the times it had caused her more problems than it had solved. "I will keep your secret, Pimpernel and wish you success in your efforts. I may not agree with the government, but I know I don't agree with wholesale slaughter."

"Neither do I, dear lady. Neither do I."

And since that time, Gabrielle had had several occasions to run into the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel and though she never directly contributed to their cause, she made sure he was aware of any goings on in the capital city that were relayed to her by the many travelers she met on her way.

This however, was the first time she herself had made it in and she wondered even now why she had finally come. It had been dark when she arrived and she was curious about the overwhelming scent of blood that made her hair stand on end.

When morning arrived, her curiosity turned to revulsion and for the first time in centuries, Gabrielle was physically sick to her stomach as she saw people cheer while others were beheaded. The memories the vision of the guillotine stirred in her were horribly unpleasant, but the peoples' rejoicing was sickening to a degree that Gabrielle could not abide.

She turned and pushed her way out of the press of bodies, shuddering each time she heard the blade fall and choking back bile with every glad cry that arose afterwards.

In her haste to leave, she didn't notice the short military man standing at the edge of a platform with a hand tucked into his waistcoat as he callously watched the proceedings. And she never saw the dark eyes of the taller man that flanked the general search the crowd, wondering what had suddenly caused his pulse to race. Only one had ever done that to him and she had been dead for nearly two millennia.

Ares shook his head, putting the delicious sensation down to the blood that flowed so freely through the streets of Paris. The purge was going quite well and soon the man who stood next to him would be ready to create a new empire.

"C'mon, Napoleon. We have plans to make."

The general looked at his mentor for a long moment before nodding his agreement. He had learned much from this man who was called after the ancient Greek god of war. But soon it would be \*his\* time and the world would tremble when it heard the name Napoleon Bonaparte.

Gabrielle waited for the Pimpernel, wanting to say goodbye and to warn him of the escalated price on his head. He thanked her for her warning and they parted as friends. It wouldn't be until years later that she learned his identity, as well as his whole story.

She turned her footsteps back towards Greece, having determined that she was ready to travel to the new land now known as the United States of America. It was there she was sure that she would find Xena again. There was something about it that called to her... had done so even when she was crossing through it the first

time. Besides which, Dite had practically confirmed it when they had traveled together briefly through it.

Gabrielle let her mind process all the places she'd traveled in that wild, untamed land and speculated just how much of it had changed in the centuries since she'd visited. She hoped not much. She wanted Xena to experience the beauty she'd seen.

Now her thoughts focused on Xena, wondering how she would react to being so far out of time and place. She would be disconcerted, certainly and confused, but would she be angry? Upset? How would she communicate? Would she make friends or would she try to do everything on her own?

Gabrielle smiled. Knowing her warrior, she'd find every challenge she possibly could while she tried to figure out how to get home.

The sound of music drew her attention and Gabrielle walked off the road and looked around to find where it was coming from. What she saw was something of a surprise and she made her way over to the young man who sat alone on the stage, apparently oblivious to the rest of the world.

She sat under the shade of a tree and let the music wash over her. There was a quality that spoke to her and brought to mind several of the events of her life. When it was over, she still sat, eyes closed, allowing the peace the memories had brought her to flow through her like sweet wine. She felt the youth approach, but waited until he blocked the sun before she allowed her eyes to flit open.

"Did you enjoy the concert?" the boy asked with a hint of arrogance.

"Yes, I did," she answered placidly. "You play very well."

"I wrote the piece myself."

"Well, it was lovely. I enjoyed it very much. Is there a story behind it?"

He tilted his head. He was used to a much different reaction, but strangely, he appreciated the honesty of this one. He smiled and offered Gabrielle his hand.

"Yes, there is actually. My name is Richard... Richard Wagner."

Gabrielle accepted his hand and let him pull her to her feet. "Well, Richard Wagner, it is nice to meet you. My name is Gabrielle. Perhaps you'd share the story with me? And then I'll share a story with you. Who knows, maybe you'll find something to write about from it."

Wagner laughed. "Come, Gabrielle. I think my maman would love to meet you."

And the teenager led the way to his parents' home.

## Chapter XXXIII

"Well, that was a lot different story than the one I saw when you played," Gabrielle said to Richard as they reached the front door. He opened it and motioned her inside.

"Really?" he said before he called out, "Maman? Maman, I'm home and I brought a guest."

A robust woman waddled in, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. "Richard, what have I told you about yelling in the house?" swatting him on the behind as he bent to kiss her cheek. "Introduce me to your friend, dear."

Wagner laughed again. "Yes, maman. "This is Gabrielle. Gabrielle, my mother, a true terror in the kitchen," laughing louder when she swatted at him again.

"Be nice, young man, or you'll do without supper and I made your favorite. Go wash up. Hello Gabrielle and welcome to our home. You will join us for even meal, yes?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I'd love to, thank you, if you're sure it's not an imposition."

"Pshaw, absolutely not, child. Richard is something of a loner, so if he took the time to make your acquaintance, there must be something pretty special about you."

"She sat and listened to my music maman," Wagner said as he pelted back down the stairs. There were water marks on his face and his hands were still fairly damp. His mother shook her head in despair. He was almost a man and still there was so much of the little boy in him.

"She listened with the expression of one who understood what the music was saying. Though now she tells me that what she saw and what it said was not the same thing." He ushered them into the kitchen where so many lovely smells were emanating from and fairly making Gabrielle's mouth water. Once more she was thankful she was still able to thoroughly enjoy this part of her humanity.

Frau Geyer set the dishes on the table and motioned them to a seat. A smile coming to her face as a hearty hail was shouted from the door. She looked at Gabrielle and rolled her eyes. "Men! No wonder I can teach the boy no manners," she joked good-naturedly. "Excuse me, please. My husband Ludwig is home."

In a moment she returned with a stout man trailing behind her and he grinned as he saw Gabrielle. "And who is this charming fraulein?"

The bard extended her hand and the man accepted it graciously and placed a kiss on her knuckles. The action drew him a smack from his wife and a chuckle from Gabrielle and Richard. "I'm called Gabrielle," she answered with a smile.

"And what brings you to our humble haus, Gabrielle?" Ludwig asked. They all resumed their seats and began to dish food out onto their plates.

"Richard's invitation," she replied honestly, though it brought a smile to her face.

"You are not German," a statement, though the question in the words was clear.

"No, actually, I'm Greek. I've just traveled the world a bit."

"Have you now? Sounds like a dangerous thing to do."

Gabrielle shrugged. "Sometimes, but it has also given me the chance to meet some interesting people and do some fascinating things." *Not to mention spend hundreds of years watching the time pass while I waited to catch up with Xena.* "Besides, I've learned to take care of myself pretty well."

Ludwig looked doubtful, but was too polite to say anything aloud. Instead he nodded and shoveled another mouthful of food in, smoothly preventing him from speaking without appearing rude.

The business of eating took precedence for a few minutes, but once it slowed down, Richard spoke up again.

"Tell me, Gabrielle. What did you see in the music if not war and triumph?"

Gabrielle smiled at Wagner's youthful enthusiasm. It had been a while since she'd felt so old... or so young. She chewed carefully and set her fork on her plate, then folded her hands and leaned her chin on them.

"It was more a feeling, Richard." Gabrielle closed her eyes. It's the feeling of an approaching storm. A meadow, holding its breath, waiting for the onslaught. The storm arrives and everything bows before its fury, but eventually it passes and life returns to the meadow once more."

Green eyes opened and beheld the wonder of the three faces looking back at her.

"What?" honest confusion coloring her voice.

"Even I did not see those things and I told Richard the story he based his piece on," Ludwig said. "That was amazing."

Gabrielle shrugged a little self-consciously. "I guess I've always seen things a little bit differently."

"Are you a poet, Gabrielle?"

"No, Maman," calling her as she had been introduced to her. "Not exactly. More of a... bard. A storyteller."

"Can you share some stories with us, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle thought for a moment, wondering what to share. Then she smiled. "Have you ever heard the story of the Rheingold?"

"You make it seem so real, Gabrielle... like you were really there."

The food had grown cold long before and now they sat in candlelight while Gabrielle told them her story of the Rheingold.

Gabrielle chuckled. "It all comes from knowing how to weave a good story, Richard... to believe in what you're telling so much that it makes everyone else believe too."

"Can you tell it again and go a little slower this time? I'd like to take some notes. I think I could tell the story with music." He blushed then stammered. "If you don't mind, that is."

"I don't mind, Richard. The difference in your craft and mine is that your work leaves things open to the imagination of the listener. Mine leads them along the path I want them to follow, creating the picture I want them to see."

"You should be a philosopher," Ludwig grumbled.

Gabrielle laughed aloud at the thought. "Like Plato and Socrates were, you mean?" She shook her head. "No thanks. I used to have to have their conversations interpreted for me when they waxed philosophical. It made my head hurt to try and think in circles."

Maman laughed at this pronouncement. "Oh, I can see you'd fit in very well with Ludwig and his group of friends."

Ludwig glowered, but couldn't stop the twinkle in his eye. "Well," he said as his glare dissolved into laughter. "It is getting late. You will stay with us, or...?" he asked Gabrielle with a raised eyebrow.

"Of course she will stay with us!" Maman said adamantly. "She is our guest!"

"I know Maman," Ludwig said, "But I didn't know if she already had a place to be or someone who was expecting her."

"Oh," Maman replied, crestfallen. She turned to Gabrielle. "You are most welcome in our home."

"Thank you, Maman. I accept your invitation, as long as you're sure...."

The woman brightened considerably. "I'm sure. Come."

Gabrielle gestured to the still laden table. "But...."

Maman waved her hands. "It is of no matter. Ludwig will help me. And tomorrow you can tell your story again and maybe share some others?"

Gabrielle smiled. "I can do that. Thank you, Maman."

The following morning, Richard raced down the stairs anxious to talk to Gabrielle again. He'd never heard a storyteller who could paint such beautiful pictures with just words and he was looking forward to hearing more.

Already he had an inkling in the back of his mind of how he'd like to tell the tale of the ring trilogy, as Gabrielle had called it. It would make an intriguing opera, if he could just get all the pieces in his hands and weave them together.

So as soon as breakfast was over, Richard and Gabrielle sat down in the shade outside where they could see the fields being harvested and smell the rich tang of earth as it was being shorn of its fruits.

And Gabrielle told Wagner the story of the Rheingold once more.

Richard scribbled furiously as Gabrielle slowly went over each point of the story, making notes of things he wanted to compose around.

"So the Valkyrie were like Odin's harem?"

Gabrielle snorted, thinking of Xena's expression at that particular description. "Not exactly. They were like... angels, I guess would be the closest description. It was their job to bring Odin's warriors to Valhalla to receive their reward."

"And they had horses that flew?"

"Oh, yes... magnificent creatures. They made it easier for the Valkyrie to find the warriors and bring them to Valhalla for judgment."

"What did you think of Odin?" Richard asked.

Gabrielle's eyebrow raised and she gave the question careful consideration. "He was a weak god; at least that is how the stories portrayed him. He is presented as somewhat gullible and spineless."

Richard though about it, then nodded. "And the Rheingold?"

"Well, that is one reason I think he ended up being seen as such a weak god. He couldn't take care of it and when it was stolen from the Rhein maidens, it unleashed a monster they never expected."

"Grinhilda."

"Yes. The power of the ring was that it made you invincible. It also stole that which you valued most. Since she valued her beauty...."

"... she became a hideous monster."

"Exactly. And it took a hero to take the ring from the monster and restore it to the Rhein maidens again."

"And was there a test... you know, for the hero?"

"Of course. Don't all good stories make the hero pass a test first?" Gabrielle said with a smile. "The test in this tale was one of fire... the hero had to cross through a ring of fire to claim the damsel that lay sleeping in the middle of it."

"Why? What key did the damsel hold that the hero needed to rescue her?"

Gabrielle's eyes went unfocused and her mind went back to the reality she had lived through. Remembering the dreams and the lost look in Xena's eyes. Remembering the joy that flowed between them when their lips met.

She turned back to Richard and blinked the past from her eyes. "She held the hero's heart."

Wagner nodded, but didn't comment. Already he had pictures forming in his mind, the basis for the opera he would one day write brewing in his imagination.

Gabrielle stayed with Richard and his parents for a couple more days, sharing stories of her own experience and legends she had learned as a child in Poteidaia.

Before she made ready to leave, Ludwig pulled her aside and offered her a small sum of money. Gabrielle looked at him questioningly.

"We, Maman and I, wanted to be sure you were taken care of, Gabrielle. We've never seen Richard as animated as he has been for the last few days around you. You've given him something and we didn't know any other way to say thank you, except to offer you a little money to help you in your travels."

"Ludwig, you took me in as a stranger, offered me your food and shelter with no thought of repayment. I can't let you do this. Your friendship is all the payment I need."

"I understand your feelings, Gabrielle. We value your friendship as well, but Maman and I don't feel right about letting a beautiful, young woman like yourself travel alone without providing for some sort of shelter for you along the way. Please. We'd feel better about it."

Gabrielle looked into his eyes, seeing genuine concern in them. There was no way she was going to show him her skills were more than they seemed. She had taken great pains to do her meditation and practice in privacy. Much like her bacchae behavior, her martial skills were hidden from the rest of the world except when she was called on to defend herself or someone in need. She was tired and not presenting herself as a target meant she fought less. A circumstance she was more than happy with after centuries of conflict.

She nodded slowly, seeing relief pass through his gaze. "Thank you, Ludwig. I... appreciate your concern. It's been a long time since someone besides me has looked after myself." She paused, not wanting to reveal too much. "Thanks."

Ludwig wondered at her statement, but clearly recognized he'd pushed as far as she would allow. So he nodded his acceptance of her words. And when morning came, the family stood outside the door of their home and bid Gabrielle godspeed on her journey.

Gabrielle reached the base of Olympus and wondered what had happened to Dite. She talked to the goddess nightly since she'd reached her homeland, knowing that Dite could hear her even if she couldn't respond. Usually the portal she used was open in expectation of her arrival, but it remained steadfastly shut. She started to knock, then realized that her blood was fairly tingling beneath her skin.

Gabrielle moved to an outcropping of rock and settled down to wait.

The tingling stopped suddenly and almost immediately Aphrodite appeared.

"Hey, there, Cutie. C'mon up." She took Gabrielle's hand and pulled her to her feet. "I tried to ya know, reach ya, but we like, didn't think about a way to keep you from here if something radical came up. Ares was here. He's been so majorly busy lately. Wars in Turkey. Civil unrest all over. A war in... what was... oh, you know, the United States and a totally nasty revolution in France. This is the first time he's been back here in

Blood Bond

17/02/2011 like, ages."

Gabrielle nodded. "It's all right, Dite. I should have realized when you didn't answer there was a problem. I just... I promised I'd come say goodbye."

"You're leaving? Have you like, felt Xena or ...?"

Gabriele shook her head. "No, but I'm ready for a change of scenery." She paused. "It's a gut feeling, but I think the time is close."

Dite put an arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and steered her towards her living quarters. "If it's any kind of consolation, babe, I think your gut's pretty much dead on the money."

"But you haven't seen her yet either?"

"Nope, but I totally believe it is just a matter of time... and really, not that much. Course, everything's pretty relative for you these days."

"That's the truth," Gabrielle acknowledged as she dropped onto a lounge chair. "It's been entertaining and I've met some of the most interesting characters...."

"But...?" Dite questioned offering Gabrielle a drink a sinking onto her own chaise.

"But I'm ready for it to be over. Given my choice it wouldn't have happened at all."

"Which part?" Aphrodite flinched at the look Gabrielle gave her. "Well, I didn't" she shrugged, "you know, know if you meant the bacchae part or the Xena part."

Gabrielle paused thoughtfully. "Ya know, the bacchae part was never an issue when Xena was alive. You had to tell me about it, remember? I think eternal life would be okay, even as a bacchae, as long as I had Xena to share it with." She hesitated, then added, "And you too, of course. I don't think I could have done this without you, Dite."

"Yeah, ya coulda, but I am so way glad you didn't."

Gabrielle grinned and opened her arms. Aphrodite slid from her chair to Gabrielle's and heartily accepted her embrace.

"I'm gonna miss you so much!" Gabrielle whispered into the hug.

"Me too, Cutie. But I'll be keeping an eye on ya and you can still, ya know, talk to me every night. Who knows? Maybe I'll even surprise ya sometime and answer," said with a shaky chuckle.

"I'll count it as a promise, Dite."

"Good," the goddess said. "You do that. Now, how long can ya stay?"

"Not long. I really do want to get started." Gabrielle gave Dite a look. "You know how I feel about sea travel."

"Ring working okay? You don't get radically seasick anymore, do ya?"

Gabrielle clasped Dite's hands as they trailed over the ring looking for flaws. "The ring is fine, Dite. I'm just not real big on the 'weeks on the open ocean' thing."

"Ah... gotcha. Don't blame ya... I'm sorta attached to the pop right in method myself."

Gabrielle looked at her wryly. "Dite, I'm pretty sure we'd ALL choose the pop right in method if it was an option open to us. Unfortunately, as far as I know, it has never been a possibility for me, so I have to do things the old-fashioned way."

Dite ran her hands through Gabrielle's hair, ending with a light touch on her chin. "You listen careful to old Dite, all right now?"

Gabrielle nodded, wondering why the conversation had suddenly become so serious.

"You take good care of yourself, especially now, 'kay?" Dite sighed and moved away from Gabrielle, walking over to the window and looking out with sightless eyes. "I dunno what Ares is up to, but he hasn't been himself since... well, you know. And he has been working himself into a frenzy, stirring up wars everywhere to accumulate every ounce of power he can muster. He hasn't said, but I think he is...." Aphrodite shook her head.

Gabrielle padded over to stand behind the goddess and out a hand on her shoulder. "You think what?" She pushed gently on Dite's shoulder, urging Dite to face her. "You think he knows what happened to Xena? You think he is looking for her??" Gabrielle's voice had dropped to a harsh whisper.

Dite shook her blonde head. "No... I don't think so. I think... I think he is looking for her replacement. Or something that comes as close to what she was as he can find. That is why it is doubly important for you to be careful. You have the same fire, the same warrior strength that Xena did... does... will have...." She waved her hand. "Whatever. You use it differently, channel it differently, but the strength is the same and that's what he needs. It's what he wants."

"And if he finds me...."

"If he finds you, it won't be hard for him to figure out that Xena is probably an immortal too."

"And he would destroy the world to find her."

"Yep."

"Well, I'll keep as low a profile as I can. I am ready to find her and come home. I think I've earned a rest."

Aphrodite smiled sadly. "You let her find you and get you home. I'll make sure you get your rest."

Gabrielle leaned forward and kissed Dite lightly on the cheek. "You've always been a good friend, Aphrodite. I'm proud to say I know you."

Dite teared up and smiled. "That has to be one of the totally nicest things you've ever said to me, Sweet C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

Cheeks. You're just trying to radically screw up my face, aren'tcha?" She dabbed at her eyes self-consciously. "Look at that. I'll be days trying to get rid of the red nose and eyes."

Gabrielle smiled. "You can still wow 'em, Dite."

Aphrodite laughed as she wiped her eyes again. "You're such a sweet talker, Gab. No wonder you do the bard thing so well."

"Well, that and I have LOTS of practice. Now," changing the subject rapidly, "Can we have one more night of girl talk before I head out?"

"Ooo, what a radical idea," Dite squealed, snapping her fingers and depositing the two of them in a huge hot tub, complete with pink bubbles and hot chocolate with marshmallows.

"Ya know what I miss most... aside from the obvious, I mean," Gabrielle asked as she sipped her chocolate. Dite shook her head as she swallowed her own cocoa.

"I miss sensible clothing. It was so nice when I could wear my Amazon clothes."

"Ooo, or that hot little velvet number you had. Va-va-va-voom!!" Dite said, waggling her eyebrows in Gabrielle's direction.

Gabrielle felt the flush run up her face and rubbed the back of her neck. She cleared her throat. "I mean, have you seen some of the outrageous costumes women are wearing these days?"

"Oh yeah. They are so bogus." Dite laughed. "I've noticed you wear them as little as possible."

Gabrielle giggled. "Yeah. Just long enough to introduce myself and get established. Then I go back to the trousers."

"I noticed. You totally wouldn't believe the envy vibes I felt from the women who saw them."

"Really? Wonder how long it will be before sensible clothes are fashionable again."

Gabrielle left the following morning, never knowing how close she'd come to being discovered.

"Hey, sis," Ares said as he walked into her chambers. As the centuries had passed and their powers had depleted, the Olympians tended to respect each others need for space and didn't pop into one another's area unannounced. Dite was personally convinced it had less to do with respect and more to do with the fact that no one wanted to waste the energy when they could walk, especially since no one had the strength for a fight besides her and Ares and they were simply too busy.

She looked up at him and removed her glasses, nonchalantly changing the screen on her world wide god web. Gabrielle had just exited the portal from Olympus and she'd been monitoring her progress.

"Whassup, bro?" cheerfully, noting the distracted look on his face. "You all right?"

"Hmm? Yeah, yeah. Déjà vu," Ares said shrugging off the tingling feeling he'd briefly experienced. "I just stopped by to say goodbye. I'm gonna be gone for a while."

"Really? Where ya headed now?"

"Couple places. Gotta keep those war fires stirred ya know."

"No, thanks and I totally don't wanna either," Dite answered lightly, though the feeling in her gut told her this could be bad news. "You gonna like, pop back and forth?"

"Nah, I need to travel conventionally for a while... you know, save up my strength for the important stuff."

She opened her arms and they embraced for a short time. For all their head-butting, they held a deep and genuine affection for one another.

"Well, you be careful out there. Not like the world is a totally gnarly place to be some days."

"I know. I'll talk to you and you do the same?"

"Count on it, bro."

"You can call me if you need me."

"Ditto, bro... right back atcha."

Ares didn't have a reply, so he kissed Dite's cheek and turned from the room without another word. Aphrodite watched him go, staring at the empty doorway for long moments after he disappeared through it. Then she focused her attention back on the god web, carefully tracking Gabrielle's progress while she busied herself with her many other concerns.

"So that catches you up to the present, Xena," Gabrielle mumbled softly to herself as she closed the journal. "Not like you can hear me," she said as she absently rubbed the cover, "but I felt like sharing anyway."

She looked around the deck, noticing the barest darkening at the horizon.

"I'm looking forward to being on land again. I wish Leo had figured out that flying machine. I think the heights issue would have been easier to bear than weeks at sea." She laughed to herself and shrugged.

"I hope it doesn't take long to find, you, Xena."

She returned her gaze to the horizon as the wind blew loose wisps of blonde hair around her face.

## Chapter XXXIV

Xena focused her eyes across the horizon as the sea breeze caressed her face. The town lay behind her and C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

here she could concentrate on the warmth in her soul that was Gabrielle to her.

"I hope it doesn't take long to find you, Gabrielle," she whispered to the wind and let her thoughts roam. She had some interesting stories to relay to the bard, but more than that, Xena missed Gabrielle with a soul-aching intensity. It reminded her greatly of the weeks she had been without the bard's presence in her life after Gabrielle had taken Hope into the pit.

Only this was worse. This had been going on for years and she knew that for Gabrielle it had been an eternity alone. Xena looked down at the fox and panther that had joined her on the hill overlooking the ocean.

"I'm gonna have to think of something really incredible to do for her when I finally find her." She chuckled at the look the panther cut in her direction. "I know. But I'm gonna try anyway."

Xena looked down at herself. The time she had spent in California had changed a few things - given her another piece of her puzzle, brought some old acquaintances into her life and.... She glanced down at herself again. Even given her better clothing. She kind of liked the new duds, though she still missed the freedom of her old leathers

She let her mind drift back over the last few years.

It was cold in January, but Sutter had wanted a mill built and Xena was glad to get out of the confines of the stinking cattle town. So for the last couple months, she'd been billeted about fifty miles away from the settlement town working on building a new mill.

It wasn't bad. The pay was all right, the food was decent and it was so nice to be outdoors and using muscles that were used to a different work out. Besides, it was a lot easier to feed out here undetected.

Idly, she wondered what had happened to her sword and chakram, feeling confident that Gabrielle would have taken good care of them. She felt a passing twinge of concern that the bard wouldn't have them with her and they would have to travel back to Greece to recover them. Part of her hoped for that; it would give her some much-needed time alone with Gabrielle. The other part simply wanted to return to the home and time she knew and understood. Then she and Gabrielle could take some time together... maybe they could visit this land. She'd like to see it before there were so many people around.

Xena realized that she had no doubt about the fact that Gabrielle would forgive her. She did wonder what sort of price she'd pay though. Not that Gabrielle was vindictive, but knowing the bard as well as she did, she was going to be frustrated at the very least. And that frustration was liable to take many forms before it was extinguished.

Gabrielle was also liable to be very angry as well, Xena knew and she almost hoped she was. Gabrielle would be more likely to forgive her faster if she was angry. Her anger would burn hot and fast and then be gone. If she was only hurt or upset, it could be a long time before Xena was out of the doghouse. Xena didn't want to be in the doghouse. It was cold there.

Xena recognized that she had no doubts about their finding one another either. It was taking longer than she hoped, but she was now sure in the very depths of her soul that it would happen.

She smiled and finished dressing, wrapping the palms of her hands carefully in leather strips before pulling her gloves on. Then she walked outdoors, ready to put in another day of mill construction.

She wasn't sure why it caught her attention, but Xena recognized the somewhat shiny rock for what it was as soon as she picked it up. She gazed at the nugget thoughtfully before slipping it into her britches pocket and continued her work.

A few minutes later she spotted another and then another. By the end of the day, her pockets were full of gold nuggets.

The following day, they were out again and this time Xena saw that she wasn't the only one who'd noticed the glittering surprise the riverbed seemed to hold. But the boss, Marshall, seemed determined to not only keep them busy finishing the mill, but also in keeping the gold a tightly held secret. Xena had to wonder how long it would last.

She didn't have long to wonder.

Almost overnight a new shanty town sprung up and people began streaming in infected with 'gold fever'. If Xena thought Sutter's original town had been bad, this was magnified a thousand fold. The crowds, stench, noise and lawlessness nearly drove her away, but she stayed, clinging with tenacity to the belief that her answer was here somewhere.

Out of necessity, Xena found herself playing the part of a lawman and she was very good at it. Amazing how universal the pinch was when is came to working on the bad guys. Not surprising, as it was much what she had been doing while she spent years wandering the length and breadth of Greece with Gabrielle.

It wasn't something she planned. More, it was something she fell into and did such a good job at it that the Federal Marshal made her a deputy, having seen her in action and knowing she was capable of getting the job done

She had been at the job for a number of months when she finally found what she had been seeking.

It was the darkest part of the night and Xena was out alone. It was time to feed again, something she'd noticed was occurring much more frequently with the influx of humanity and the increasing tensions they brought into her life.

She had to go quite some distance out of the town to find any wildlife, but eventually she found a trail she could track and it led to a den of bears. *Okay, a little wilder than I'd like*. Xena stood still, hands on hips, simply breathing and listening. Then she found a scent she recognized and followed it as quickly and silently as she could. It didn't take long for the jackrabbit die at her hands as she rapidly drained it of its life force.

She felt the second presence more than anything and her hyper-alert senses allowed her to pinpoint the intruder almost immediately. Xena place the now dry rabbit on the ground and turned yellow eyes to the spot

where her unwelcome visitor stood unmoving, watching her.

"Hello, Xena."

The voice was low and deep and Xena tilted her head in recognition. She closed her eyes, willing the burning away. She shivered a little and opened her now bright blue eyes, focusing on a spot in the darkness that finally stepped forward to establish its identity.

"Cecrops?"

"Hello, Xena. It's been a long time."

"A lifetime," she said, still without moving.

Cecrops moved closer to her with his arm extended in greeting. "More like an eternity," smiling when she took his hand. "I never expected to see you here."

"It's a very long story."

Cecrops smiled turned wry at her words. "I have as long as you need to share and possibly, I can fill in some bits for you as well. Come. Let's sit down and exchange stories. I have a feeling this could take a while."

He waited for her to seat herself crossed-legged on the ground before he seated himself across from her in the same fashion. He folded his hands, propping his elbows on his knees and resting his chin on his hands. Xena kept her hands loosely clasped in her lap, not sure where to start her story. So she waited, hoping Cecrops would speak first.

"It's been a very long road for me to get here," he said in a soft, musing voice. "I've seen the world - actually been around it a couple times now. Visited some interesting places and taken part in lots of history. Met some fascinating people and made the acquaintance of a lot of beautiful women along the way." Cecrops grinned rakishly at Xena.

"Love 'em and leave 'em?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, one of the perks of immortality. I know there's no future in it, so I don't invest everything in any relationship."

"Isn't that like cheating?"

"Not really. Come now, Xena. I've been alive and ALONE for over two thousand years and the only immortal I've encountered turned me down flat in favor of remaining faithful to someone who condemned her to a life alone. Somehow I don't think you have a right to criticize me for a dalliance now and then."

He never saw her straighten and it was only the searing pain in his jaw that clued him into her fury. He pushed her away from him.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Xena?" he said through clenched teeth, trying not to move his jaw too much. He rose and stood to his full height. She stood and went nose to nose to him, poking him in the chest to emphasize her words.

"Gabrielle?? Who do you think you are?"

"Someone who's been alone for a long, LONG time and could understand her loneliness as well. She's a beautiful woman, Xena and you left her alone. She didn't owe you fidelity. You made her fair game."

Xena's fists clenched and unclenched as she struggled not to put the pinch on a man she had once called friend. She lost the battle with her self control.

"How dare you...." She swung and connected with his nose this time, showering both of them in warm blood. Though satiated from her earlier feeding, she felt her teeth grow with the scent and rage now flowing in her veins.

Xena growled and lunged and for the first time, Cecrops raised a hand to defend himself. He felt she had a very good chance of actually killing him if she drained his body of blood and as tired as he got of living sometimes, he had no desire to die at Xena's hands in such a manner.

He caught her, spinning her away from him while holding her against his chest. "Xena, she turned me down. She's quite capable of taking care of herself and as far as I know, she has remained faithful to you and what the two of you shared together."

The rage died as quickly as it had flamed and Xena slumped in Cecrops arms. He eased an arm away from her, gingerly wiping the blood from his nose and sniffing. He grasped his jaw, wincing when he heard the bones grate together.

"Well, another perk of immortality is the ability to heal quickly," he said with a chuckle.

He released his hold on her. "Come. I know a place to go get a good stiff drink and a hot meal. Let's go trade stories. And I'll tell you about Gabrielle."

Xena stood still simply breathing, reigning in the emotions which were closer to the surface than she wanted them to be. Another moment and she drew a deep breath and nodded her head.

The Grass Valley Saloon was like nothing Xena had ever seen. She hadn't been in this town except to pick up the occasional troublemaker and she'd never stayed around long enough to visit. Something about the place just made her skin crawl.

So she entered with her warrior hackles up, giving her goosebumps and making the hair on the back of her neck stand straight up.

The interior was... gaudy was the first word that came to mind. The furniture was something that would be found in a palace - velvet, gilt mirrors, chintz curtains. Xena even spotted what appeared to be a Persian rug on the floor. And even though it was very early morning, the sconces that lined the walls flared with light so the stage could be clearly seen throughout the saloon.

Xena looked at Cecrops, the disdain visibly written on her face. He shrugged nonchalantly.

"The food is good."

"Damn well better be," she muttered. "I hate these kinds of places."

"Xena? You mean you never...?"

"No, not really." She shrugged. "And once Gabrielle came into my life, I wouldn't have anyway."

Cecrops gingerly shook his head. "You've both got it really bad, you know." He dropped his hand on hers and left it there, even when he felt her stiffen under his touch. "She's grown into a beautiful woman."

"She always was," Xena retuned quietly, as a server approached their table.

"Two specials and a pot of coffee," Cecrops said with a grimace. Maggie was a favorite and they had shared companionship many times since his arrival in the small town. She looked with concern at his bruised and busted face before she nodded and winked. Xena was a well-respected person in the territory and Cecrops had shared with Maggie the fact that he and Xena were old friends. He had in fact been out several times to find her, wanting their first meeting to be private. Maggie was glad he had finally been successful since this would hopefully mean an end to his nightly hunts, though she did wonder what had caused such damage to Cecrops' handsome visage.

"Tell me," Xena commanded with soft fierceness.

"It's been a few centuries, but I ran into her and we traveled together for a while."

Silence for a few minutes as Xena thought about his words. Then Maggie returned with their plates and coffee, coming back with a wet towel for Cecrops' face. He stroked her cheek and thanked her, then began to cautiously eat his food.

Xena mostly pushed hers from side to side of the plate. "How was she?" she asked after a while.

"Alone. Though she made friends wherever she went and had the favor of at least two goddesses that I'm aware of."

"Aphrodite?"

"Yes and Ch'uang-Mu... Chinese goddess of the bedroom."

"She was in China?"

"Then, yes... but she had already traveled much of the world. It was one of the things we enjoyed discussing... our experiences in different lands." He paused and chewed his food, pointing at her plate. "You really should eat. Even if it's just for appearances."

Blue eyes bore into him with searing intensity.

"Then again, maybe not." He shrugged.

"She was taken surprise by her immortality... and the reason behind it. Were you?" he asked with a bluntness C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

that was unexpected.

Xena thought about it for a bit, then shook her head. "Not exactly. It was...." she shrugged. "It wasn't something I thought about much." She signaled the waitress over and waited for Maggie to bring the bottle and two glasses to the table before she resumed speaking.

"I was aware of the... possibilities... though." She opened the bottle and poured two shots, swallowing one and refilling her glass to sip at the second glass.

"Does it bother you?" he pried, knowing her was pushing his luck, but figuring he was out of harm's way as far as her killing him was concerned.

"Not if it means I can be with Gabrielle again," she said without hesitation and the look in her eyes made him swallow any other questions he had about that particular subject.

Cecrops pushed his mostly finished plate away from himself. He opened his mouth to change the subject when he was interrupted by a shrill screech. He and Xena looked up to see a dark haired, dark eyed woman sauntering down the stairs. Halfway down, she stopped and bent over, shimmying just the slightest bit.

"Hello boys! Here comes trouble!!"

The majority of the crowd whooped and hollered and even Cecrops grinned as much as his broken face would allow him. Xena simply froze.

"Callisto?" she muttered, rising to her feet. By this point, the woman had reached the bottom of the stairs and wiggled her way through the crowd to stand in front of Xena. There was no hint of recognition in the brown eyes that faced her, but Xena knew who the woman was, even if she went by a different name now. They were that same eyes she had seen a lifetime ago in Greece. The same eyes that had held accusation in them whenever their eyes had met. There were some things... some souls... that once encountered, were never forgotten, no matter what shape they took.

Dark eyes trailed up and down her body until Xena felt the need for a bath. She simply returned the look with a sneer.

"My, my. Aren't you a big girl, dear? I'm Lola Montez, proprietor of this fine establishment. All my friends call me Lola. And you do want to be my friend, don't you?" She waited for a response and was greeted with silence. Anger burned bright in the brown eyes at the slight, but she shrugged as though it was of no consequence. "Your loss."

Then she hollered and took the stage, ready to perform her nightly review for the lonely men who flocked to see her dance.

Xena dropped a few coins on the table to cover her tab and started out of the Saloon. Cecrops hadn't missed the interplay between her and Lola and followed as rapidly as he could pay his own bill. He caught Maggie's eye and she nodded her understanding before he walked out the door into the cold night.

"Xena?" he called out. "Hey, Xena... wait up," he said to the rapidly retreating figure. He bent over at the waist, a little dizzy from the lack of air his slowly healing nose was allowing him. "Have mercy in an old man, Xena. I can't move like I used to."

Xena turned around slowly. "I dunno. You seem to be doing all right."

Cecrops caught his breath and slowly stood upright. "You want to tell me what happened in there?"

"Not really," Xena replied shortly. Her emotions had been rubbed raw and she was ready to fight. He held up his hands in supplication.

"All right. All right. Come on back to my place and you can tell me what you've been up to and what you're doing here in California."

She regarded him steadily. Cecrops had never struck her as being a stupid man, though the centuries of immortality had made him a little more lax about things. Still he didn't seem completely suicidal, his earlier behavior not withstanding and she had promised to share her story.

Finally she nodded at him and motioned for him to lead the way.

Cecrops actually had a fairly comfortable home on one of the quieter streets in town. It wasn't much to look at on the outside, but the inside had three small rooms and he motioned Xena to a chair in front of the fireplace, seating himself in the other after he stirred the embers up into a blaze.

"Now, I have two questions for you," he said in a low tone. She nodded and waited for him to continue. "First off, why are you here without Gabrielle?"

She looked at him askance, as though he had lost his mind. He knew the story of their separation... why did he need her to repeat it again. Cecrops held up a hand to forestall the retort he could see forming in her eyes and on her lips.

"Let me rephrase - I know \*how\* you were separated. Are you here looking for her, or...?"

Xena shook her head. "Not exactly. I know she's alive... I've felt her. But I don't know where she is. I'm... the ritual that brought me here can take me home, back to Gabrielle before this started. But first I have to find all the totems. All the pieces of the puzzle that were used in the ritual that brought me here."

Cecrops nodded his dark head slowly. "That makes sense, I guess. But why here? Why now?"

"The scroll that gives the ritual lists items that each represent different traits of a warrior and where they were originally found. Keto said that the mishandling of the ritual scattered the totems to the four winds and I would have to travel to the original location to find each one."

Cecrops nodded his relative understanding. Specifics weren't necessary yet. "So?"

"So, I'm here looking for the next item on my list. Only...."

"Only?"

"I've scoured every bit of earth and water within a hundred miles looking for this thing." Her shoulders C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

slumped. "I don't know where else to look."

"What are you looking for?"

"It's a ...." She rose from her spot and stood with her back to the fireplace. "A bone fishhook. About this big," holding her fingers about three inches apart. "From the description, it reminded me a lot of something the Amazons used to wear for decoration." She turned and looked at the flames. "But there aren't any Amazons here.

Cecrops reached up to his neck and removed his kerchief. Then he lifted a leather cord over his head. "Something like this, you mean?" he asked softly.

Xena swung to face him, clamping her jaw shut to keep it from swinging on its hinges in sheer surprise. Dangling from Cecrops fingers was exactly what she had just described to him... that for which she had been searching for more months than she wanted to remember at this point.

"How...? Where...?" Xena lifted slightly shaking hands to touch, clenching them into fists to stop their motion. She hesitated and Cecrops extended it to her.

"The Amazons are in the British colonies now known as Australia and New Zealand. Gabrielle moved them to the Australian continent more than fifteen hundred years ago. Then around five hundred years ago, several of them migrated to New Zealand."

"And you know this because...?"

"Gabrielle shared the tale just before she left China. I eventually traveled that way and spent a little time there. When I got to New Zealand, I was gifted with that necklace. Now I think I know why." He closed his larger hands over Xena's. "Keep it. It was meant for you. I was merely its guardian."

She smiled... the first genuine smile he had seen from her since they'd made land in Greece so many centuries ago. He tapped her cheek. "You should do that more often." She raised an eyebrow at him and he held up his hands in defeat. "Or not," he continued with a chuckle. "Now I have one more question."

"All right," she drawled, slipping the necklace over her own head and tucking it into her shirt.

"Those are great pants. Where can I get a pair?"

She looked down at her denim trousers and smiled. "I made these myself."

"You sew?"

"I have many skills," she said with a smirk, "and I was tired of cloth pants that wore out so fast. My friend Levi got the material for me from France, I think he said."

Cecrops reached out a hand, then stopped and looked directly at her. "May I?"

She nodded and he touched the material lightly.

"These are fantastic. Are they comfortable?"

"Yeah, they are."

"You think you could hook me up with your friend Levi? I can't sew, but I'd love a pair of these pants."

"Yeah. C'mon into town and I'll introduce you. He's a nice kid."

"Should I ask how you met?"

Xena shrugged. "Some men just aren't cut out for drinking. He's one of them."

"Got into trouble, huh?"

"Oh yeah," Xena said, chuckling a little at the memory. "When he sobered up, we got to talking a little and I found out he was a tailor. As thanks, he found me some material I could be almost as comfortable in as I was in leather. Though he was a little put out at first that I made the pants myself, I think."

"He got over it?" Cecrops asked with a chuckle.

"He got over it. And then he asked if he could borrow the design to make them to sell. He thinks he can make his fortune selling denim pants."

"You gonna let him?

"Sure, why not. He helped me out... if Levi Strauss wants to make his fortune with denim pants, I say more power to him."

Cecrops laughed heartily. "Stranger things have happened, my friend. Believe me... I've seen them." He paused. "So where to now?"

Xena shook her head. "I'm not sure. I've been here for so long searching...."

"Got kind of focused?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"I don't suppose I can talk you into hanging around, can I?"

"No. I need to get moving. I've... it feels like I've done nothing but waste time and I still have to find the dagger of Helios before I start searching earnestly for Gabrielle. I... I want to have everything in place when I find her, so we can go home together."

Cecrops cleared his throat. "And if she doesn't want to go back and relive the last two millennia again?"

Xena looked down at her hands, clasping them together as she acknowledged the very real possibility of that happening. "Then I guess we'll figure out a way to make it work here."

"Her choice, huh?"

Xena nodded. "Yeah. She deserves that much."

Cecrops rose from his spot and extended his hand. "I wish you much luck, my friend. And if you do decide to stay, look me up. I kind of like it here."

Xena nodded again. "We will." She motioned to his face. "I, uh...." But his upraised hand stopped her speech.

"No apologies, Xena. Had I been in your place it would have been much worse. I envy you, you know and I wish you much success on your journey."

She took his hand and shook it, then walked out the door, ready for the next step in her journey home.

## Chapter XXXV

Gabrielle's first step on her journey into the new world was mired in mud to her ankles. The constant rain had created massive sludge in the streets and Gabrielle spared a wistful thought for the short skirts and calf high boots she'd once been able to wear so freely.

She looked down again at her sodden skirts and shook her head. She would need to establish herself as a rich eccentric soon, so she could get back to the comfort of her silk trousers. She'd learned early that people excused what they saw as odd behavior if you had money and manners enough to be considered eccentric. And after nearly two millennia of living, Gabrielle had plenty of both to spare.

The Captain of the ship took her to the most fashionable hotel available in that time and place. It would be easy to establish herself here as it hosted many cotillions and balls that included the movers and shakers of the day.

As it happened, Gabrielle began meeting people right away and was readily accepted into their circles of society.

Not long after her arrival, Gabrielle chanced upon a middle-aged man who felt it improper for her to be walking the streets at dusk unescorted and took it upon himself to walk with her back to her hotel. She bit her tongue at the sheer antiquatedness of his attitude and allowed him to accompany her once he introduced himself to her.

Everyone knew Davy Crockett and Gabrielle had actually had the pleasure of making his wife's acquaintance several days prior. When Mr. Crockett realized to whom he was speaking, his conversation became much more animated.

"Miss Gabrielle, my wife Elizabeth has spoken of nothing else since meeting you the other day. Perhaps you would be gracious enough to be a guest in our home?"

"Mr. Crockett, you hardly know me. Why would you want me to be a guest in your home?" Always before when this question had come up, it had been to place Gabrielle in the role of teacher or bard. So his candor surprised her somewhat.

"We would like you to come as a friend." He paused thoughtfully. "I am going to be leaving for the Texas C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

territory very soon to join a legion of men there to help fight for independence. I'd like to know that Elizabeth had someone to look out for her while I was gone."

"But why me?"

They had reached the lobby of the posh hotel and stopped to finish their conversation.

"Miss Gabrielle, I learned a very long time ago to be a keen judge of human nature. Trust me when I say that you and Elizabeth would be very good friends." He clasped her hand. "Please promise me you'll think about it."

Gabrielle nodded. "I'll think about it, Mr. Crockett. It would be nice to have a real home and friends for a while," she murmured in afterthought.

He wondered about the statement, but the gentleman in him let it pass without comment. He squeezed her hand and bid her goodnight, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

The following afternoon, Gabrielle attended a garden party where Elizabeth Crockett was one of the women in attendance. She made it a point to speak to the seemingly older woman and after a bit of time decided that it would be a nice change to be welcomed somewhere as a friend, especially when Elizabeth hesitantly but excitedly extended the invitation herself.

For the first few months, it was interesting, though the society thing tended to wear on Gabrielle's nerves pretty quickly. She met many people and was warmly welcomed into their midst. But Gabrielle realized that the life of a social butterfly was not one she was happy living, especially seeing the conditions those around her and outside of the social circle were forced to survive in. Then came an event that changed all that.

Gabrielle had been brought into the Crockett household just before the holidays and she secretly found the customs regarding such more than a little strange. Especially Christmas... it seemed to have less to do with the birth of a child who hadn't even been born in the winter of the year than it did the fact that people wanted to celebrate and exchange gifts. She wondered why they hadn't simply kept it a solstice celebration and then realized it was a religious thing. She rolled her eyes and bit her tongue and partook in little of the merrymaking.

Instead she found time to sit and remember other lifetimes and holidays and Davy found her in the garden on solstice evening simply looking up at the heavens.

"Miss Gabrielle, are you all right?" his voice cut through the darkness.

"Yes, Mr. Cro... Davy. I'm fine. Just doing a little remembering. Thanks for asking though."

He continued to stand behind her silently, not having been invited to join her and not wanting to intrude. Finally he cleared his throat. "The holidays are always the hardest after you've lost someone dear to your heart. I'm glad you were able to share them with us instead."

"Thank you for having me here," she said noncommittally. "It's nice to be among friends."

The silence remained between them, Gabrielle feeling that Davy had more to say and was content to let him take his time. It didn't take long.

"You know I am leaving after the holidays," he stated, waiting for her to nod. "With your talents as a sharpshooter, I was wondering if I could beg a favor?"

Davy had seen Gabrielle practicing her martial forms one day and had asked for her to teach him some of the moves he'd never seen before. In exchange, he'd taught her to handle a rifle and had found to his surprise that she was as good a shot as he was. He wondered where she'd learned, but she hadn't offered any information and he hesitated to ask.

Now she turned to look at him in the darkness, her eyes glowing eerily in the moonlight. He cleared his throat.

"If something happens to me and I don't plan for it to," he added hastily. "But if something does, I am asking you to take Elizabeth back to Tennessee... to my family. They'll take care of her."

Gabrielle nodded and Davy accepted it for a promise, neither of them realizing that she would be called upon to fulfill it in a little more than three months time.

It took a couple months to get to Tennessee once they got word of Davy's death and another month for Gabrielle to be comfortable feeling she had satisfied the promise she'd made to Davy. But she eventually took her leave from Elizabeth and her family and decided to do some exploring as long as she was finally out and about.

It was summer and she glad to be out of the crowded city and back into wide open space. It wasn't like anything she remembered, even her first visit so many centuries before. It was also wonderful to be without the restrictions that society placed on women especially and to be able to hunt without worrying overly much about being caught was a blessing of untold value. Not that she needed it often, thankfully, but it was still an occasional necessity.

Gabrielle was enjoying the freedom of traipsing through the mountains alone, when without warning, an odd little man stepped in front of her and instinctively she reached for weapons well-hidden on her person. She stopped, realizing her mistake almost immediately and giving the man a second look. Her jaw nearly dropped in recognition.

"Joxer?" she whispered.

The man cocked his head, the pot that he wore as a hat slipping to one side before he reached up a hand to stop its motion. He resettled it, then extended a hand towards her.

"Name's John Chapman, but folks 'round here all call me Johnny Appleseed. You like an apple?"

"Not from you, buddy," Gabrielle muttered. "You don't know the power of an apple seed."

He looked a bit startled at her answer, but swallowed and bravely continued on. "Oh, but I do. I've made it C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

my job to spread them all over the country," he said, not understanding the strange look Gabrielle was giving him. "Please, take one," trying to press an apple into her hands.

"No, thanks," she answered adamantly. "I don't share that kind of thing with anyone but Xena."

He blinked hard once, twice and held up his hands. "All right. If you change your mind, I'm planting orchards all over. You're welcome to help yourself."

"Thanks," Gabrielle said as she moved away from him.

"Hey," he called just before she was out of sight. "What's your name?"

"They call me Gabrielle."

He opened his mouth to speak again, then shrugged his shoulders. She was nowhere to be seen. He turned his steps westward again and walked away... whistling.

Gabrielle walked from the middle of the country down to the far coast, adding a few twists of her own to the newly established Mardi Gras celebration when she reached New Orleans. Some debauchery was meant to be shared and this reminded her so much of the Bacchanalia party she and Xena had attended so long ago... when things had changed for them in ways they wouldn't realize for years.

It was a bittersweet experience and it drove her to continue her search.

She turned to the east and followed the coast, appreciating the clean, bright beaches and the water that reminded her so much of a combination of hers and Xena's eyes. The natives she met were friendly and curious, reminding her of her first trip through this land centuries prior.

It didn't take long for things to become increasingly uncomfortable, though. There were so many inhumanities and injustices being perpetuated on some people simply because of the color of their skin. Gabrielle tried to help, but so many of them had been beaten down, she was only able to bring minimal comfort and aid to those who were slaves.

The plantation owners and slave masters thought she was a little touched that she cared so much about the human property in their possession, but her natural charm made them accept her into their circles. She wasn't able to change anyone's minds though and the slaves, for the most part, didn't have the heart or the strength left for revolt.

She remembered well the story Xena had finally shared with her about her own slavery... when Xena had been given a choice by the Fates and had chosen the darkness for Gabrielle's sake. About how beaten and hate-filled Gabrielle had become because of the circumstances of her slavery.

Gabrielle easily saw the hate, fear and despair the slaves around her held for their masters, but it was the look in one little girl's despondent black eyes that brought it home to her and made it personal. The stripes on the girl's back were unbearable for the bard and the slave master found himself on the wrong side of an immortal's ire.

When she made it back to the capital, she found much had changed, though quite a few people remembered her from her previous time there. That opened doors for her and she found that the question of slavery was a concern for many. She was a little surprised by the amount of divisiveness that the discussion caused even among family members.

But what was most disheartening is that no one seemed to be \*doing\* anything to change it. It was all just talk. So despite her desire to find Xena, she felt the need to be proactive about this particular issue, easily remembering how close she'd come to being a slave herself. And she began traveling northward, putting in place the necessary means to provide a way out of slavery for those with the courage to leave.

Soon, Gabrielle was setting up the Underground Railroad.

It took a lot longer than Gabrielle expected it would to put things into place and even longer to travel back to the South and begin convincing slaves that they had rights and liberties too. Several times she was nearly caught and had to fight her way free. That brought a smile to her face as the memories washed over her.

Fortunately, her clothes were so different from what anyone had seen her in that no one recognized her and she escaped with her human cargo in tow. And it was all worth it the first time they realized they were truly free.

Gabrielle felt a sense of accomplishment like she hadn't experienced in years. Step by step, person by person she was making a difference and she felt confident, given the rumors that were making their way through both Northern and Southern states that the winds of change were in the air. The trickle could soon become a deluge.

"I should have known you'd be in the middle of all of this." The deep male voice was familiar and Gabrielle's head came up and tilted while she tried to place the sound that tickled the outer boundaries of her memories. A chuckle brought realization, even as the voice spoke again. "Hello, Gabrielle. It's been a very long time."

She turned towards the shadows from which the sound was emanating, waiting for the speaker to step from the shadows and coalesce into a live human being. She knew it wasn't one of her regular contacts. After half a dozen trips to show folks the way through to freedom, she knew everyone along the route. But the voice didn't set her alarm bells ringing and she figured she could wait until he was ready to reveal himself.

Gabrielle was glad she'd finished her feeding and was now cooking the rabbit that had sated her bloodlust. She was beginning to think she should have recognized the voice and she didn't want anyone, especially friends to be exposed to that side of her. Aside from Cecrops, she'd managed to keep her secret for almost two thousand years.

That thought sparked a connection and she recognized the voice just as the form of large, muscular man crossed into the light.

"Hercules!"

He opened his arms and she moved into his welcome embrace. It was like coming home to family... to a

favorite big brother that had been gone for years.

He felt her silent sobs and the tears trickled down his face in sympathy. He continued to hold her as her crying slowed and she gently pulled back to look at him briefly with wet green eyes.

"Better?" he smiled crookedly at her. Gabrielle chuckled.

"Yes, thanks." She cleared her throat with a bit of embarrassment and rubbed her nose as she dropped her eyes again. "Sorry. I don't usually fall apart on people like that."

"And just how many folks do you go back as far with, hmm?" He pushed a bit of blonde hair back off her forehead and let his hand trail down her cheek, casually wiping a bit of blood off her chin before cupping it gently and raising her eyes to his. "C'mon, Gabrielle. If anyone in the world understands how you feel, I do. I imagine you were due."

"You ever fall apart?"

He took her hand and led her back to sit beside the fire, gently removing the rabbit from the flames before it burned.

"May I?" he asked, holding it up and waiting for her nod. He took a plate from his kit and held out his hand for hers. Then he divided the meat, gave her a portion and sat back to eat. He took a bite and his eyes widened. "Wow! This is great stuff."

Gabrielle picked at her food while watching Hercules devour his share. She looked at him, noting the years had been kind to him. He wore the uniform of a high-ranking Union soldier and she wondered what had made him want to don the colors of a fighter. Finally he put his plate down and took a deep draw from the canteen he carried.

"Are you ignoring my question?" Gabrielle asked as he remained silent.

"No," he said. "I was trying to figure out how much to share."

Gabrielle nodded and waited, knowing he had lived through as much time as she had.

"I learned a long time ago that I sometimes have to take a break from humanity for a while; otherwise it gets to be too much. So yeah, I have, but it's been a while. I take some time for me now."

Gabrielle shrugged. "I've done the same thing, but like you said, it's been a while."

"Would you like somewhere to go... a place to get away for a while?"

She hesitated. "Is that why you came? To give me a chance to diffuse for a while?"

"I know I'm no Iolaus or Gabrielle," Herc said with a smile, "but let me tell you a story."

Gabrielle blushed and motioned for him to continue.

"My latest incarnation is of a Union Colonel. War is coming, Gabrielle and I need to... I dunno. It is just C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

important for me to be a part of this fight." He drew a deep breath. "I have eye and ears all over and several years ago I got the first murmurings of the presence of a short, blonde woman who freed slaves. They referred to her as the Liberator. Her description was so familiar to me, I decided to track her down and see if my suspicions were correct."

"You knew I was immortal?"

Hercules nodded. "Dite told me and I'm sorry, Gabrielle. I wouldn't have wished this on anyone."

Gabrielle shrugged. "I'm used to it... most of the time and if it gives me the chance to reunite with Xena, it'll be worth it."

They sat silently for a bit, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Gabrielle...."

"Hercules...."

They chuckled as they spoke simultaneously and Herc gestured at the bard. "Please, ladies first."

She cocked and eyebrow at his words, but ruined its effect by smiling at him. Then her smile turned sad. "I am so tired of war, so tired of injustice. For everything I do, things just mushroom a hundredfold in its place." She sighed. "I'm sorry, Hercules. You don't need to hear my whining."

He sat up and clasped her hands in his warm ones. "Gabrielle, I've done my share of whining. Every now and then I travel back to Greece and have a bitch fest with Aphrodite. Believe me, I know how you feel." He paused. "Do something for me?"

She tilted her head in question.

"Let me take you to my hideaway. I have a place in Banff that no one knows about... no one can find. It will get you out of the war."

"But...."

"Please Gabrielle. I promised Aphrodite I would look out for you if I could find you. I know a little of what you have been through to get to this point and you deserve some rest. This war... it's going to be especially ugly."

"War always is, Hercules. What makes this one worse?" asked a touch sardonically.

He shook his head. "I don't know if you remember the Thessolian-Mitoan war...."

"I \*died\* during the Thessolian-Mitoan war," Gabrielle answered fiercely. Then her expression softened in memory. "It was the first time I got to see what Xena truly felt for me... heart and soul."

Hercules hesitated. He hadn't known... so many things. He cleared his throat. "Well, this war will be much like that one, I'm afraid. Brother against brother, families divided. It has the feel of Ares handiwork."

"Why are you so sure it's coming?"

"The same reasons you are, Gabrielle. We've lived long enough to recognize the signs. Wishful thinking won't make it go away."

"I know," she said softly. "I just keep hoping that someday...."

"Me too," he commented. "But until then, Gabrielle, please. It's the least I can do for you... and for Xena."

"Have you seen her?"

"Yes, a few years ago. She was searching for a way back to you. I guess she hasn't found it yet, huh?" He grinned at her, trying to lighten the sadness he saw in her eyes. "Maybe when it's over, we can look for Xena together."

"I'd like that," she said finally. "It would be nice to just be for a while. And it would be nice to have a friend who understands... everything."

"So you'll let me take you to Banff? And you'll wait for me to come back once the war is over?"

"Yes. I've done all I can do here for a while. The Underground Railroad is in place and the word is being spread to the slaves. I can't make them use it - just provide the means and opportunity. Besides, I have no desire to run into Ares. Not now... I have come too far to let him get in my way now." She looked at Hercules closely. "How are you gonna get away from the Army with the war coming and all?"

He shrugged. "Family emergency. With my record, it shouldn't be hard. I haven't taken any leave, so...." He smiled at Gabrielle. "No problem."

"Can we start tomorrow morning?"

Now his smile became a full-fledged grin. "Yeah. I think we can."

Travel was slow since a majority of it was done on horseback through rough and rugged terrain. Much of it was accomplished in silence as Gabrielle had long since become accustomed to traveling alone. Nights around the campfire were spent talking, sharing stories and bits of their lives and experiences. Eventually, Hercules got around to asking Gabrielle about her immortality.

"Did it bother you... finding out... the immortality, I mean...."

"Finding out I was Bacchae?" She looked at him squarely and he met her eyes hesitantly, then nodded. "Yeah. Still does. Only the fact that I have the chance to find Xena because of it makes it bearable."

"You don't feed very often, I've noticed," Here commented curiously.

Gabrielle shook her head, glad she was able to wear it down again now that they were away from the trappings and finery of society. She preferred the freedom of travel they enjoyed together now more than any she could remember for the last several hundred years. Civilization had become increasingly backwards to her way of thinking and it felt so good to get back to the basics she knew and understood so well.

"Aphrodite made me a talisman that keeps the hunger at bay for long periods of time. It doesn't make it go away, but it does keep it under control."

Hercules nodded. "I'm glad."

Gabrielle nodded her head slowly. "So am I. Thank you for allowing me my dignity about this."

Hercules chuckled. "Not that I wouldn't have anyway," he said lightly, "but do you realize the trouble I would be in with Xena AND Dite if I thought to tease you about something so personal? I wouldn't want to be me."

Gabrielle laughed. "Neither would I," she agreed with a shudder. "But I still appreciate it. It's not like I can explain this to anyone and even if I could...."

Hercules held up his hands. "You've said enough Gabrielle. I'm sorry I brought it up. I just... I was just curious. I've never met anyone... I mean, you're not like any bacchae I ever dealt with before and the fact that it made you immortal...."

Gabrielle smiled wanly. "I know. It makes my head hurt if I think about it too long. I am glad for the immortality... at least I hope I will be soon. I would have been happy without the bacchae influences, though."

"I understand the sentiments, if not the actual feelings behind them. I can't imagine...."

"Don't please. It's not pretty, or pleasant. Not something I'd wish on anyone." She paused. "You didn't get to talk to Xena about this?"

He shook his head. "No. My time with Xena was very short and the conversation filled with other things." He paused a moment, not wanting to reveal too much but knowing Gabrielle deserved some hope. "I think she has a real chance of succeeding at her quest Gabrielle and I think it might make a difference in how she approaches things from now on."

"How so? I'm not sure I understand what you're saying, Herc."

"Let's just say I'm betting that this experience will change Xena's outlook on the greater good."

Gabrielle blushed but didn't say a word. Hercules just smiled.

"Get some rest, Gabrielle. Even immortals need that now and then and tomorrow's gonna be a long day. We start crossing the mountains into Banff. My cabin lies nestled in the deepest recesses there."

"No wonder you can keep this place hidden," Gabrielle exclaimed a few days later as they finally crested the last mountain and crossed into the hidden dell when Hercules' cabin sat dormant and empty. They had brought some foodstuffs with them, but a majority would come from the wilderness around them. Gabrielle was thankful that eating was an activity she participated in by choice.

"There is plenty of wildlife and game around when you need it and a number of things grow wild in this area as well," Here pointed out as they neared the cabin. "You should find most of it familiar, strangely enough and I'll

take you out and show you what I've found around before I leave."

Gabrielle nodded, her eyes sweeping back and forth as she took in everything around her.

"There's a hot spring up here as well and I'll help you dig out a garden plot before I leave too, if you'd like. I got good at that; my mother was big on gardens."

"I think I'd like that. It is beautiful here, Hercules. Thank you for sharing this with me."

"You're welcome anytime, Gabrielle. It's nice to have a kindred spirit to appreciate it."

Hercules stuck around for a couple weeks helping Gabrielle get settled in before he left to return to his duties as a United States Colonel. He'd extracted a promise from the bard that she would wait for him and once the war was over, they would travel together to search for Xena. Hercules, for one, didn't want to miss that reunion

Gabrielle watched him out of sight before she turned back to the small cabin to retrieve her journal, quill and ink before going back out into the sun to write a bit.

Dear Xena, (she wrote)

I found Hercules, or rather, he found me and it has been nice having his friendship around for the past few months. I will miss him while he is gone to war, but not like I continue to miss you, even after all these years. I hope you are not involved in the war... Herc has promised that we will begin searching for you in earnest when it is over if you haven't managed to find me first.

I hold out hope now that you are looking for me and for a way for us to be together again. As beautiful as it is here, I am ready to go home. And I won't be home until we are together again....

## Chapter XXXVI

Oh, Gabrielle, I think you could like it here... the openness, the freedom. We could call this home if you wanted. Though anywhere you want to be will be home for me. A hard lesson, but one I fully appreciate now.

Xena had crossed mountains and valleys and now walked through the open field, heading back to the plains that meant home to her here... at least until I find Gabrielle.

She was searching for her tribe, knowing they would be coming together for the summer festival very soon. She wanted to talk to Keto. The instructions for finding the dagger were less than clear and she found herself becoming needlessly frustrated over the vagueness of the directions she was following.

When she reached the camp, there was a solemnness to it that was unexpected. Slowly, she and her animal companions made their way through the village, returning the quiet greetings of those who knew her until she reached Hotassa's home. She called out with quiet respect.

"Hotassa? Keto?"

Hotassa stepped from the closed doorway, taking Xena's hands gently when she realized who called for her.

"Zee-nah. Come," motioning the warrior into her home. And instantly Xena became aware of the reason behind the pall, the very somber air that hung over the village. Keto lay dying.

Xena knelt down beside the dying shaman, taking his cold hands in hers. Keto opened his dark eyes and stared at her, smiling as recognition dawned.

"Zee-nah."

"Keto."

"Waited... for you," the shaman said slowly with a great deal of effort. "Knew... you would... come."

"Why didn't someone send for me?" Xena asked, looking first to Keto, then to Hotassa and Kya.

Kya was the one who answered. "Father said no. Is his time to go to his fathers. Your path along different road."

Xena turned back to Keto. "Is that true?"

Keto barely nodded, closing his eyes with the effort. "Zee-nah defend Cheyenne. What you seek will come to you."

Xena nodded, though she didn't understand all the Keto was saying to her. Instead she squeezed his hand gently. "Thank you, Keto. You've been a good friend."

Keto gave a brief smile. "Kya help guide you now."

"Good journey, my friend," Xena said before she rose to her feet and stepped from Hotassa's home, leaving the family to say their goodbyes in privacy.

It was another few hours before the family emerged, the shaman's body wrapped and ready for the pyre. The village gathered to speed him to his fathers beyond and for a week, everyone remained in mourning.

At dawn following the period of mourning, Kya approached Xena's dwelling, where the panther and the fox kept their own watch in front of it. Here they felt most comfortable and it was easy for them to remain a visible part of the native society. The cat lifted its lips and snarled at the shaman, growling low in its throat. Kya hesitated, then knocked on door frame.

"Zee-nah?"

The panther rose and stretched, then paced in front of the door, causing Kya to step back a pace but not leave. Xena stepped from the doorway, hair dripping from her recent bath.

"Kya?" She looked at the panther. "Etor, sit."

The panther growled at her but did her bidding and she motioned for Kya to take a seat at her fire. Xena stirred the embers to blaze and set a pot of water on to heat. Then she seated herself across from Kya and waited for him to speak.

And he did. He told Xena of the injustices that were being perpetuated by the Union soldiers on the native peoples in the white man's quest for more land and riches. How the Indians were being forced from the lands they had claimed since the beginning of time by the white man's greed.

She was impressed at the difference maturity had made in his outlook and demeanor. His concern now was for the good of his people and he had finally come to terms with the fact that the quest he followed as a youth was not his destiny in life.

Xena sat and listened quietly as Kya described in detail the suffering of his people and those of the other native nations, nodding her understanding, but able to keep her anger to a minimum. When he relayed the inhumanities visited upon innocent women and children, however, her reaction was swift and hard.

"Kya, can I have a small band of warriors? I think I know a way to... well, if not fix it, at least harass them enough to make it really hard for them."

"I will ask. Will be some willing."

Thanks, Kya." She hesitated then plowed ahead. "Do you know what Keto meant about my search for the dagger?"

He nodded. "Dagger with person, like staff. But dagger move from place to place. Keto foresaw."

Xena just shook her head and muttered. "It is never easy with us is it, my bard?" She turned to Kya, whose face was a picture of confusion. "Sorry, talking to myself." She extended her hand. "Thanks, Kya. I appreciate your help."

Kya took her hand and held it in his own, looking earnestly into her eyes. "I am glad. Owed sorry for...." He looked down.

"I understand, Kya. We're even, all right?"

Kya nodded and released her hand and she turned and added tea leaves to the now boiling water. "Good." He paused a moment. "Zee-nah?"

"Yeah?"

"Why you wear this?" pulling lightly on her denim trousers.

She sighed. "Long story. My skins got torn up while I was searching for the fishhook. These were the most comfortable alternative."

Kya screwed up his face in distaste. "Look bad, um... hard. Come. Hotassa fix."

Xena chuckled. "It's all right, Kya. They're not that bad."

He wrinkled his nose. "Yes, very bad." But he chuckled and waved to her as he went back to his own fire.

Xena moved her tea from the fire to the stone to let it cool a bit. She was not surprised to see Hotassa standing at her fire, waiting for the warrior's permission to join her. Xena waved the older woman into her circle and Hotassa approached with a smile.

Xena took a moment to study the older woman, dismayed to see what the ravages of time had wrought on the woman who had become a surrogate mother to her in this time and place. The sadness that the recent loss of her mate had brought only enhanced her frailty and yet there was a strength of will there that Xena could easily sense.

Hotassa held out the bowl of sweetened, cooked cornmeal and Xena accepted it with a smile. She had developed an odd fondness for the food and had missed it during her time away from the tribe. In exchange, Xena offered the older woman some tea and though taken aback by the unprecedented gesture, Hotassa nodded her agreement.

They sat in silence while Xena ate and Hotassa sipped at her tea. After a bit, Xena set the bowl aside for her two animal companions and directed her full attention to Hotassa.

"How are you, Hotassa?"

"I am ready to go to ancestors, but not yet my time." She turned and picked up another bundle which she had set aside while Xena ate. "This yours. Keto said."

Xena took the soft hide from the native woman, wondering what Keto had done for her. She couldn't quite contain the gasp that escaped her lips when she opened the leather and found a full set of warrior's clothing, beaded and decorated pants and shirt that effectively marked her as not only Cheyenne, but as part of the shaman's family.

"Hotassa, these are beautiful. I can't...."

Hotassa folded the warrior's hands over the clothing possessively. "Yours," she reiterated. "Keto said. Will need to fight white man."

Xena accepted the clothing with a nod, knowing that Keto was right. If she could maintain her identity in the white world, she could go and hear things that other warriors of the Nations would not be privy to. Then she could use her knowledge and figure out the best way to keep the white man from destroying her tribe.

Years passed while Xena organized hit and run raids on forts and encampments belonging to the soldiers who were trying to force the native tribes onto reservations. She was able to involve many of the different tribes - there was always a warrior or two anxious to bloody the nose of the Blue Coats they felt were oppressing their people.

The War Between the States made it easier for them, as there were very few troops to enforce the laws Washington found it convenient to pass. Hotassa died during this campaign and Xena took days to grieve for the woman who had taken her into heart and home when she had first arrived in the strange land she later

came to know as the United States. Xena was grateful that Hotassa's passing had been painless and in her sleep and that she had died of what was considered extreme old age. Xena was glad for the time she had known the older woman and honored her pyre by singing her soul on its way to its next destination.

Once the war was over, however, more and more troops began flooding the west, moving the Indians to reservations and allowing white men to claim and fence the land. So the Native tribes stepped up their harassment and that led Xena to Fort Riley in late September of eighteen hundred and sixty-seven.

The fort was more than just an Army encampment; a small town had grown up around it. Xena crossed the threshold into the town saloon and stood a moment to let her eyes adjust from the daylight outdoors to the dimness of the interior

Once she could see, Xena made her way to the back corner and took a seat, leaning her chair back on its hind legs against the wall. One of the girls came over and Xena ordered the special without even looking up. The woman tried to get the warrior's attention flirting and being coquettish but flounced off in a huff when Xena closed her eyes and fell into what appeared to be a light doze.

A man who was sitting one table over chuckled and picked up his drink, moving to sit across from Xena, only to find himself on the floor when the chair slid completely out from under him. Amazingly, he managed to fall without spilling a drop of his whiskey.

"I didn't invite you to sit down."

"Oh, well," the man stoked his mustache debonairly. "I just thought...."

"Don't," she said, all without opening her eyes.

He cleared his throat. "Perhaps I should start over," he muttered mostly to himself. He picked up the chair and put it under the table. Just then, the lady cum waitress slapped a plate down in front of Xena, stomping off when she still didn't get a response.

"You really know how to win friends and influence people, don't you?" the man asked as Xena dropped the front legs of her chair onto the floor and picked up her fork, stabbing it into the stew and shoving a bite into her mouth before looking up. When she did, it took all her self control to keep from choking.

The man took advantage of the fact that Xena's mouth was full of food to introduce himself. "I'm, uh... I'm Brett Alias, gambler. They call me the King of Queens," he said, smoothing his mustache again. Xena burst into laughter.

"I don't doubt it," gesturing to the dandified clothing the gambler wore.

Brett shook his head. "I have GOTTA come up with a better nickname," he mumbled under his breath. "May I?"

Xena looked at him another long moment before she pushed the chair out enough for him to grasp and nodded her head. She wiped a hand on her pants and reached across the table. "Xena," she said succinctly, then resumed eating without another word.

He nursed his drink while Xena finished her food, then motioned to the bartender for another round when Xena pushed her plate away from her. She accepted the drink though she didn't partake.

"So, Prince of Poker, whaddya want?"

Dark bushy eyebrows rose into Brett's hairline at the new moniker. He shook his head and withdrew a deck of cards from his coat pocket. "Thought maybe I could interest you in a game. I need a bit of a stake to take to the Calgary poker invitational in July."

"You looked at me and saw sucker?"

"Um, no... well, not really... I mean...." He sighed. "I saw you stake a game a few months back...." Brett's suavity flew right out the window when ice blue eyes pinned him to the wall. "Ya see, I lost the dagger I was gonna put up...."

"Dagger??" The word cut through the air like a razor-sharp blade.

"Oh, yeah," he answered slyly. "Very valuable. A family heirloom... wavy silver blade, gold handle and older than the hills. A real collector's item."

Xena's eyes didn't show any change, but inside she was jumping up and down for joy. This was the first clue she'd had in years as to the location of the Dagger of Helios she was seeking. She looked at him with a bored expression and pursed her lips before speaking.

"Uh huh... so what happened?"

"I got snookered by an Army Colonel who came through here a couple weeks back. Name of Custer."

Not even the twitch of an eyebrow gave away Xena's thoughts. Custer had been the cause of several of her hit and run skirmishes with Union forces and was one reason she was here now. Silence fell while Xena considered the information. Finally she nodded to herself and grinned evilly at Brett.

"I'll tell ya what there, Duke of the Deck. You go get that dagger back from your Army friend and I'll trade you a five thousand dollar stake for it."

Brett's eyes got so big Xena was afraid they were going to fall out of his head.

"Fi... fi... five thousand dollars??" His whisper was harsh but subdued. "Why?" He got a crafty look in his eyes. "Why is this worth so much to you? Maybe I should wait for a better offer."

Xena removed her hands from her glass and wrapped them around his, squeezing tightly enough that Brett swore he could hear his bones creaking. "Maybe I'll just go find this Custer myself and not worry about a middleman."

"All right! All right! I'll go get the dagger and meet you in Calgary at the end of June. I hear they have a mustang roundup around that time too."

Xena arched an eyebrow, but she didn't say a word.

Brett chuckled and shrugged. "Just a thought... or not," he added when her expression didn't change. "So, do we have a deal?"

Xena let him sweat a minute before she gave him a crooked grin. "Yeah, we've got a deal."

She threw the whiskey back like a pro and slapped the glass back on the table upside down. Then she dropped a bill on the table to pay for her food. "Thanks for the drink. I'll see you in Calgary in nine months. Don't be late."

"How do I know you've got the money?"

"You don't," she answered. "You're just gonna have to trust me," she said, standing and moving towards the door in a singular, fluid motion.

"Hey," he called out just as she reached the doors. Xena stopped but didn't turn around. "How will I know where to find you?"

She turned then and flashed what could only be described as a completely sexy grin. "Don't worry, Bet Baron... I'll find you. Oh and a word to the wise... find somewhere else to be."

And she disappeared into the sunset without another word.

"Damn woman..." he muttered again before signaling one of the girls over. "What did I just get myself into?"

Then he forgot to worry about it as he became occupied with other, more pressing concerns.

Xena watched Brett leave the confines of the fort town early the following morning, headed north. Then she gave the signal to her warriors and they attacked the fort itself. Before the sun had set, the fort was burning, razed to the ground by Xena and her war party. The remnants of the town were scattered, mostly unharmed except for the few men who had raised weapons against the band of natives who were causing the destruction of their homes.

The Indians had escaped mostly unscathed and were now hiding in the low hills they had called home for years before they'd been forced off their lands. They were in high spirits, though they calmed immediately when Xena edged her pony into their midst.

Using hand signals mostly and a few words, Xena sent them all back to their tribes, advising them to lay low for the duration. Havoc of this magnitude would be answered with swift retaliation and she wanted them all home to protect their tribes and families.

They nodded their understanding and silently pledged to return to the field of war whenever she beckoned them. She offered her pony to Kya's son Kepo. He looked at her questioningly for a moment, before finally giving it voice.

"Zee-nah? Why? You need."

She nodded absently, then continued. "Yes, but the people need him more. I am going north for a while. I'll find a new horse there."

"Not coming home then?" he asked sadly. Kepo had grown up on the tales of Xena's quest and he secretly found them romantic. Though it was never spoken of, it was obvious that she was unlike other humans. In the thirty plus years she had been part of the tribe, she had not changed - physically at least. Kepo suspected that difference was one of the reasons she was always on the move and only came into the clan's encampment for brief, sporadic bits of time.

"No. The totem I am searching for should be in the North by summer. I need to be there before it is."

Kepo took the reins in his hand and with a final look at Xena's determined face, headed their feet towards home.

Xena watched them in the distance, until they became mere specks on the horizon. Then she looked down as the fox and panther stepped out of the hillock they been nestled in waiting for her. She smiled. It had taken them a while to accept that she was a warrior well capable of defending herself, but once she'd convinced them, they let her handle her own battles unless she asked them to help. Though they did stick close to the action and occasionally got involved just because they could.

"C'mon, guys. We've got a long walk ahead of us." And they turned their steps towards Calgary.

The winter weather made travel difficult and several times they were forced to hold up with a frontier family to survive. Xena didn't like doing that though, so they mostly kept a slow steady pace on their way north. They arrived in Calgary just ahead of spring and still some weeks before the poker tournament and mustang roundup.

She found a boarding house on the outskirts of town that allowed her to work off her room and board by helping out around the place. Not that she couldn't afford the room, but the opportunity reminded her vaguely of her mother's inn and the time she had spent making things better for Cyrene. She sighed, wishing she had done more, often. But she applied herself wholeheartedly to her tasks and before long the boarding house took on a brand new appearance.

As the end of June approached, so did warmer weather. Xena, for one, was glad to see the change. The winter had dragged on and on in her opinion and, though the heat made her sweat profusely now, she breathed deeply, enjoying the fresh air that smelled of green, growing things.

Rosalie, her elderly landlady, stepped from the kitchen with a glass of lemonade in her hand. She looked around in amazed gratitude and handed the glass to Xena. She watched in bemusement as the warrior drained it in a very few gulps, then handed it back to her empty.

"My goodness... maybe I should have brought the pitcher with me," Rosalie teased lightly, watching as a crooked smile briefly flitted across Xena's face.

"I'm finally working up a real sweat, Rosalie," Xena quipped, before pulling the last weed on the garden she and the landlady had planted together several weeks earlier.

"I know and I can't tell you how much I appreciate...." Xena held up her hand to stop the woman's gratitude. Rosalie gave a tiny shake of her head. "Regardless, you've been a lifesaver, Xena. I wouldn't have... anyway, thank you."

Xena gave the woman another fleeting smile. "Works both ways, Rosalie. You took in a perfect stranger."

"Best gamble of my life," Rosalie chuckled. "Speaking of... you still going into town for the tournament?"

"Yep. I've got a friend coming in and I'd like to see about getting me a horse."

"From the round-up?"

"Yep."

"You ride?"

Xena shrugged. "Yeah, a little."

"Well, you be careful. Those mustangs are wild. Some of them break to the saddle and some...."

Xena bent down and picked up the tools she'd brought with her. "Don't worry, Rosalie. Me and horses understand each other well."

They stepped into the house and the landlady pushed Xena into a chair with a gentle nudge on her shoulder. "Sit. Dinner is ready and you have to be starving having been out in that garden patch all day."

Rosalie set a loaf of fresh bread at Xena's elbow, then jumped back when the warrior abruptly stood. She held up her filthy hands.

"Think I better wash them."

"Goodness gracious! I think you're right!" Rosalie said with a chuckled. "You get cleaned up and I'll put the pot roast on the table."

Once the meal was well underway, Rosalie broached the subject she'd been dreading. "You're leaving soon, aren't you?"

The startled blue eyes that met her tired brown ones held their own answer and a question as well. Rosalie chuckled softly.

"You're a tumbleweed, Xena," answering the question. "Never staying long in one place. I've seen it before... I even experienced it a time or two in my youth." She hesitated. "You've done so much for me, let me...."

"No, Rosalie. We're even." Xena allowed her personality to flow from her eyes forcefully. "All right?" she added with a quiet voice.

Rosalie nodded, realizing that Xena felt as indebted to her for her home and friendship and she herself did for all the work the warrior had done. "All right, we're even. But you be careful going into town. The round-up by itself tends to be somewhat wild and who knows what kinds of things will happen with all those gamblers

there besides."

Xena smiled. "I'll be careful and I'll even come show ya my new horse before we leave."

Rosalie laughed merrily. "You're so sure then?"

"Oh yeah. You bet I am."

Xena was astounded at the changes a day's absence had wrought in the town, but she walked purposefully towards the hotel she suspected Brett would choose for his lodging. She'd used her knowledge of his ancestor Autolycus and had figured out exactly where he would be if he had the funds. The men were simply too similar for him NOT to.

Even in the early dawn hours, folks were milling about, most of them men and many of them coming from the saloon. Still they had sense enough to get out of her path and Xena smiled to herself. *I still got it*, she smirked, before crossing the threshold of the Palace Hotel.

There was no night clerk around the front counter, though Xena easily heard the scuffling in the kitchen as workers began preparations for the morning meal. She pulled the register over to her and ran a long finger down the page, stopping and smiling when she reached Brett's name and room number.

She took the steps two at a time until she reached the second level and she stopped in front of the door marked twelve. Then she knocked... loudly.

A moan and groan was heard from within and she smiled sardonically as she heard Brett stumble and cuss as he floundered to the door. When he opened it, he squinted into the dim light provided by the sconces on the wall trying to see who had the nerve to disturb him so early. His eyes widened when he realized who it was.

"You're late," she growled, before pushing into his room. The woman in his bed gasped at the intrusion. Brett reached for his wallet.

"Honey, why don't you go down and get us some breakfast? Xena and I have a little business to take care of before the game starts this morning."

The woman dressed rapidly and snatched the bill from his hand before stomping out, slamming the door behind her forcefully. Xena snickered.

"You couldn't have waited until a decent hour?" Brett asked, before swallowing hard from the ice in her eyes. "No," he chuckled nervously. "I guess you couldn't. Look, I'm sorry I was late, but Custer gave me a hell of a time getting the blade back."

"Do you have it?"

The look he gave her was almost insulted. He grasped his bag and opened it. "Do I have it, she says," muttering as he rummaged around. "I am Brett Alias. I always get what I go for," he answered cockily as he withdrew a wrapped object.

Xena reached for it and Brett pulled it away. "Uh, uh, uh. Show me the money first."

Xena growled. "Unwrap it."

Brett hesitated, wanting to protest until he saw the fierce look in her eyes. He carefully undid the binding and let the soft cloth fall away from the blade. "All right?" he asked a little more politely.

She nodded and reached into her vest, taking the dagger as she tossed Brett a wad of bills. "Nice doing business with you, Count Cardula."

Brett looked up from where he was counting. "Uh huh... you too."

She left him still counting. Then she went out to find her a bit of breakfast before the round-up.

It was still early when Xena made her way out to the corral that held the wild horses that had been driven into town for the round-up. Mustangs reminded her of the pinto ponies the tribes had running free around the encampments and the thought brought a sad smile to her face.

Many of the horses were chestnut in color, some darker brown, a few black and a couple red. She stood quietly at the fence just watching them, when an odd flash of color caught her attention. Xena watched in awe as a cream colored mustang slowly separated itself from the pack and wandered close enough to be clearly seen.

Xena sucked in a breath. Except for the size and the slightly darker mane and tail, the horse reminded her of Argo. The mustang stood still and majestic, simply looking at Xena. Xena smiled in reflex.

"Well," Xena started, then ducked her head to be sure. "Boy. You sure do remind me of an old friend. Any chance we can be friends?"

She chuckled soundlessly, watching the golden nostrils twitch in thought. "Gabrielle would love you. You're much closer to the ground than Argo was." Xena circled the corral, picturing that introduction with a smile, letting her mind imagine... possibilities.

## Chapter XXXVII

It was close to three years after the end of the war before Hercules was able to return to his sanctuary in Banff and when he arrived, he almost didn't recognize the place from the changes Gabrielle had wrought in her time there.

Gone was his tiny, one-room cabin and in its place stood a three room home. Gabrielle had added a private bedroom and a bathing room that had real hot and cold running water. He simply stood and marveled as she showed him around the place.

He hugged her hard again, just as he had when he'd first come over the final ridge and found her out in the small garden patch.

"This is wonderful, Gabrielle. You've turned it into a home. How did you manage?" He noted the large logs that made up the walls of the new rooms and remembered all too well the struggle he himself had had building the original room alone. He saw too the furniture she had added, including a neat writing desk for herself at an angle near the fireplace.

She gave him a look. "After nearly two thousand years, I hope I've learned to work smarter. Besides, I had plenty of time and little else to do," said without a hint of reproach, though Hercules took it as such.

"I'm sorry it took so long, Gabrielle," Herc said as he scrubbed a hand across his face, trying to hide the weariness and disillusionment he felt so deeply. She pushed on his shoulder lightly and he took the hint, easing himself into a kitchen chair he had crafted himself many years before. Gabrielle moved the tea kettle into the center of the stove and took a seat beside him and covered his hand lightly with her own.

"Hercules, it wasn't a problem, really. War is rarely short-lived in mortal terms and I used the time to catch up on a lot of things... my writing, for one. Do you know how many stories I was able to go back and flesh out from my journal entries?" She laughed softly. "I didn't realize I had been so busy."

Herc chuckled. How well he understood \*that\* feeling.

"Besides," she continued with a smile. "I created a new writing instrument. It made things even easier for me. Wanna see?"

Hercules knew what Gabrielle was doing and he appreciated the effort. So he matched her enthusiasm in his answer. "Sure!"

The kettle started hissing as she rose and he motioned her away. "Go get your new quill. I can pour up hot water." He grabbed his saddle bags from where he had dropped them by the door when he came in and rummaged around inside until he found what he was looking for. He stepped back to the counter just as Gabrielle came back out of the bedroom.

Gabrielle set down what appeared to be a stick of wood before going to a cabinet and retrieving the honey. Here's eyes lit at the prospect and he brought both cups over to the table setting one at each place before picking up the odd writing instrument she'd laid down.

Gabrielle grabbed two spoons from the drawer and handed one to Hercules before resuming her seat. She watched with fascinated eyes as he studied the object, finally managing to pull it apart and realizing....

"It's a quill with no feather!" he exclaimed with delighted astonishment. "This is very clever, Gabrielle. It must last much longer than feathered quills... even those with metal tips like this."

Green eyes sparkled in merriment. "It's even better than you think. I call this a fountain pen. It actually sucks up and holds the ink so it doesn't need to be dipped into the well as often. The only thing I have had to change since I crafted it has been the metal tip. It wears down to a nub after a while... at least it does the way I use it." She giggled and Hercules chuckled in sympathy.

He understood then that she was much changed from the chattery, impulsive child she had been when they'd first met, nor was she the tired, pursued warrior she had been during the twilight. She was even different from the woman he'd found helping escaping slaves get out along the Underground Railroad.

The woman before him had a poise and confidence that her many years on earth had given her. And now there was also a peace about he that he suspected had long been missing. He decided it was time to share some of his news, but he was roundabout in his methods.

"How do you like the tea?" he asked as she took her first sip.

Gabrielle took a second sip and held it on her tongue, letting the flavor waft into her senses. Finally she swallowed and nodded. "It's very good, but different from anything I've had in a long time. It reminds me of... spring and sunshine and... blackberries."

Hercules swallowed his own gulp, then winced at the burning as it went down his throat. It brought tears to his eyes and he drew a deep breath. Without a word, Gabrielle stood and pumped him a glass of cold well water, then waited patiently for him to drink. He chugged it down gratefully and set the empty glass on the table.

"Thanks," he croaked. "That wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done."

"You all right?" she questioned gently. "You need a little more?"

He held up a hand. "No. I'll be fine in a minute. Please sit." Herc waited until Gabrielle resumed her seat. "Xena is a very lucky woman," he said as she blushed then continued on before she could respond. "Let me tell you what took me so long to get back here."

Gabrielle nodded and picked up her tea, sipping it gingerly and waiting for Hercules to speak.

"The war was only four years long, but the ugliness... the senselessness of it...." Hercules scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair. "Gabrielle, it reminded me so much of the Trojan, or the Thessilian-Mitoan wars. It was vicious and really I'm not sure it managed to do anything except divide a nation and get a lot of people killed."

He drew a deep breath.

"I saw so many lives and homes destroyed and near the end... Gabrielle, have you run into any old friends?"

"You mean besides you and Cecrops?"

Hercules shook his head. "No, not other immortals. Reincarnations of souls you've known before."

"No, not re... wait. I did run into a funny little man thirty-odd years ago. He wore a pot on his head and he reminded me of Joxer. So much so I had to consciously realize that he wasn't. Is that what you mean?"

"Uh huh." Herc scratched his head. "Near the end of the war, I was riding with a general named Sherman. He was a brutal man, burning everything in his path, but he was also a big reason the war finally ended. His tactics caused the Southern forces to become trapped between Northern ones."

Gabrielle nodded her understanding, the harshness of war all too familiar to her.

"When we reached the sea in Georgia, we turned and headed back north. In North Carolina, I came upon a C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

Rebel soldier who was no longer fighting. He had gone home to protect his mother and all he wanted was to be left alone."

Hercules looked at Gabrielle, the anguish now apparent in his eyes. "Gabrielle, it was Iolaus. As sure as I am sitting here, I recognized his soul." Here he chuckled. "And his fierceness. Some things just don't change."

Gabrielle smiled sympathetically. This had obviously rocked Hercules to the core. "So what happened?"

"I convinced Sherman to leave him alone. He wasn't any danger to us. And his mama fed us... well, we provided the rations and she cooked one night. We almost didn't get the troops to leave the next morning."

"That good?"

"Oh yeah. The tea you're drinking is one of her special blends."

"Umm, it's good. So then what?"

"Well, as soon as Lee surrendered and the Confederate units were dispersed to go home, I asked for extended leave. The last leave I had was when I brought you up here, so there wasn't a lot anyone could say, especially since all the others had had leaves during the war. Some of them more regularly than others."

"You went back to North Carolina." Gabrielle made it a statement and not a question.

"Yeah. I felt I owed Isaac and his mother."

"Because of Iolaus?"

"Mostly, yeah." Hercules paused and drew another deep breath. "I'm glad I went, Gabrielle. The months hadn't been kind to either of them and they were trying to eke out a living on land that was singed and battered and bruised."

He chuckled as he remembered the looks of astonishment on both Isaac's and Mama's faces when he knocked on the door and Gabrielle laughed in delight when he shared the experience with her.

"So you stayed long enough to help them get back on their feet?" Gabrielle asked when her curiosity outweighed the silence that had fallen between them.

Hercules shook his head. "No. I convinced them to move west. To get a new start." He grinned at her sheepishly. "And then I helped them move. We had quite a wagon train by the time we pulled out. There were a number of folks who wanted a fresh start."

Gabrielle nodded sagely. How many times had she been glad for each new chance she got? And after war... she knew only too well how desperate people were to put that kind of unpleasantness behind them and sometimes the easiest and best way to do that was to simply start over somewhere else.

"So where did you go?"

"Well, we rode a ways. There was so much destruction until we reached almost the middle of the country. Isaac decided he wanted to try his hand a being a lawman and Mama said she wanted wide open spaces. So

we headed down into Texas. An old Army buddy is the Federal Marshal in those parts and I told Isaac I'd talk to Daniel about making him a deputy."

"And...?"

"And Daniel made Isaac a deputy Marshal in a little town called Nocona Corners. Beautiful place. Already has a stable and livery with a blacksmith, a dry goods store, stagecoach office, marshal's office, a church, a saloon, a mill and Mama set up a boarding house."

"No school for the children?"

"No teacher... yet. But if you'd be willing...."

"Hercules, what makes you think I can teach children English? I still write in the now dead language of ancient Greek. Or history... I haven't been in this country that long, relatively speaking, ya know. And Xena did all the math when we were together. I hated math... still do."

Hercules covered Gabrielle's hands and waited for her to calm down. He didn't realize he would throw her for such a loop with his suggestion and wondered what was behind it.

"Gabrielle, even if you agreed to do it, it wouldn't be this year. I'm tired. We wouldn't leave here til next spring anyway. Okay?" He waited for her to take a deep breath and nod. "Besides, you read and write English better than most that were born to it... you told me about Shakespeare, remember?"

Gabrielle smiled, remembering fondly the times she and Will had spent creating with words.

"And you've lived history... even if it wasn't American history. And that is short enough you can learn it over the winter if you want." He hesitated. "Gabrielle, I didn't commit you to anything. Honestly, I would never do that. I didn't mention your many skills to anyone."

Gabrielle drew a hand over her eyes. "I know you wouldn't and I'm not sure why that spooked me so bad. It's not like I haven't done that during my life." She paused. "Maybe it is the fact that I have been alone here for the last few years. I haven't interacted with anyone."

"Well, I did mention the fact that I had a sister who I had moved out of the war's path and Mama told me to bring you to visit. She wants to meet you."

"Oh, she does?"

"Yep. She didn't believe me when I told her my sister was a wee bit of a thing."

"You didn't?!"

"Sure I did. Gabrielle, you \*are\* a wee bit of a thing next to me. And you'll like Mama. She Irish and spunky and as fine a woman as you'll ever hope to meet."

"Uh huh. Did you at least bring me some books to study?"

"Yep and I brought books just for reading too. Figured it would help pass the winter months."

"True. I can quote a few of the ones here," Gabrielle said with a wry smile.

"And when spring comes...."

"Yes?"

"When spring comes we'll take a trip to Texas. If you like it we can stay a while; if not, well, we'll figure that out when the time comes."

He waited until she nodded and rose before he spoke again. "There's one more thing, Gabrielle. Something I think you should know."

She looked up from where she was rinsing her cup and Hercules stood and stepped up beside her to do the same. Gabrielle arched an eyebrow at him and waited.

"I think if we go to Texas you have a better chance of finding Xena."

Hercules didn't miss the flare of hope that lit her eyes. The tone of her voice remained cool though.

"Why? Some insight or just a gut feeling?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "A little of both, I think. I've heard some rumors - rumors about hit-and-run raids that the Indians are perpetuating on the white settlers, trying to keep them off Indian land. Not all, but a lot of them have a very familiar feel. The tactics are similar to what Xena was using as a warlord."

Now the hope flared into a dangerous fire. "You think Xena has reverted to being a warlord again?" Gabrielle asked in a perilous purr.

Herc shook his head and noticed the slight relaxation of the bard's rigid posture. "No!" he said emphatically. "No," he reiterated in a softer tone. "Gabrielle, when Xena was brought to this country, she was adopted into the Cheyenne nation. They are a nation of fierce, proud warriors and Xena looks at them as part of her extended family. For years the white man has made and broken treaties with all the native tribes. I think Xena is just using the skills she has to the Cheyenne's best advantage."

"Why not unite all the tribes against the whites?" Gabrielle asked pragmatically. "They'd win with Xena leading them."

Hercules nodded his agreement. "Yes, they would. But there is a lot of conflict between the tribes and many of them would never accept a woman as their leader in a war party. Especially one who's untried."

Gabrielle burst into laughter and Hercules joined her heartily.

"I know," he said when he caught his breath. "Knowing her like we do makes that absurd in the extreme. But they don't and there just isn't time to convince them all. But thank you for the laugh... I haven't done that in years."

"How did you find all this out?"

"About the raids? Or Xena's involvement in Indian affairs?"

"Yes."

Herc chuckled. "Well, Xena told me a little about her involvement with the Cheyenne tribe when I saw her. She was explaining her quest."

"Did she tell you what her quest was exactly?"

"I just know there are a number of sacred objects she has to find before she can attempt to return to the Greece she was taken from."

"But we were in Ja... Japan."

Hercules shrugged broad shoulders. "I dunno. She seems to think she can go back to Greece. I think she's got enough determination to find a way to do just that." He hesitated. "You're part of that, you know."

"You think so?"

Hercules shook his tawny head. "Uh uh. I \*know\* so."

Gradually the days settled into a pattern and it wasn't long before the warmth of summer turned to the coolness of fall. Together Hercules and Gabrielle took in the garden produce and prepared the cabin for the coming winter. Hercules stood amazed more than once at Gabrielle's strength and determined capabilities, but instead of saying anything and making her self-conscious about them, he simply shook his head and got back to work.

When everything around the cabin was done and ready for the coming storms, Gabrielle decided to approach Hercules about hunting.

"Hercules, would you be terribly offended if I asked you not to go out hunting with me?"

He took her hands in his and chafed them lightly. "Gabrielle, I know you need to feed and I would never embarrass you... well, you know what I mean. If you're more comfortable out there alone, I know there are still things around here for me to take care of. But be careful, will ya?"

She smiled impishly at him. "I always am," she said saucily, conveniently forgetting what Xena had always referred to as the 'Gabrielle Effect'.

"Uh huh," he teased. "Like I haven't heard some stories."

Gabrielle smacked his muscular arm. "Be nice to me," she growled.

He laughed and absently noted that he tended to do that a lot around her. That went a long way to explaining the extreme changes he'd noticed in Xena and he put that thought aside to ponder more when he was alone.

"Go on," he said with a pat on her back. "I'd like some venison steaks."

Gabrielle's eyes twinkled. Since the weather hadn't turned completely cold, most of the furs and all of the ones she had tanned were still put away. She decided to yank Hercules' chain... just a little.

"Oh you would, huh? I'll see what I can do, though it's not usually what I go looking for at this time of year. In the meantime, the furs and bedding probably needs to be aired out. See ya."

Then she disappeared down the slight path and into the woods beyond.

Hercules watched for a while, his eyes remaining on the spot where Gabrielle stepped into the trees for long moments after she was lost from sight. "Now I wonder what she meant by that. She's got that 'I'm up to something' twinkle going. Poor Xena," he said, chuckling to himself as he moved towards the lean-to that served as the storage shed. "She's gonna have a hell of a time trying to keep up with Gabrielle anymore."

Hercules sat outside on the tiny porch when he saw Gabrielle's blonde head pop through the opening in the trees. He thought about letting her struggle with her burden herself after the surprise he'd been handed earlier in the day, but his nature wouldn't let him and he got up and jogged over to the tree line.

"Did you get another bear?" he asked with a small smirk.

"Yep and I got you your deer too."

An eyebrow rose on his forehead. "You didn't have to...."

I know," she cut in, "but I could." She shrugged gracefully. "So I did."

He noticed a skin pouch on her waist and figured she must have drained the blood she needed for the coming winter. He shuddered, but pushed the thought aside, knowing she hadn't chosen the destiny she'd been handed. Besides, he'd never her take more than she needed and from what he'd seen in the short time he'd been back in Banff, she put back into the earth at least as much as she used.

"Well, thank you, Gabrielle," he said, focusing his mind on other things. "How 'bout I take this stuff and start preparing it and once you get cleaned up, you could maybe, um... cook us some steaks?"

"You saying I stink?"

"Nonononono!" Hercules said, backpedaling a bit as Gabrielle took a step forward. "Just thinking you might like a soak after lugging this big old bear back."

Gabrielle let him worry for a moment as she continued to advance. She giggled when she reached him. "Nice save," she said. "And you're right, I would."

"Cook?" he ventured.

Gabrielle walked by him laughing. "That too."

Hercules was very thankful for Gabrielle's hunting skills when the weather suddenly dropped from chilly to frigid. His bed was a stuffed mattress on the floor in the main room and he noticed an immediate difference when the furs she had captured became rugs and blankets and window coverings. He couldn't believe how much snugger and cozier the cabin became with the addition.

Winter passed pleasantly enough for the two immortals. There was plenty to keep them occupied and they respected the silence as much as they indulged in conversation. Gabrielle studied American history and Hercules found out she was better at math than he was. Hercules decided it was nice to have family to share with again, even if only for a little while and Gabrielle came to the conclusion that having an older brother was nice, especially one who respected your skills.

Days turned into weeks and then into months and eventually the storms went from fierce blizzards to lazy snowfall to spring rain. Finally the weather cleared enough that traveling down out of the mountains and into Banff was not treacherous and after making sure everything was well-tended and put away, they began their journey back to civilization with only a single glance at the cabin that had been their sanctuary.

"What was that all about?" Gabrielle asked Hercules as he stepped from the small office. Banff was not too greatly changed since Gabrielle's arrival years ago - a few more shops, but it mostly retained its rustic flavor and appearance. Hercules walked slowly, allowing Gabrielle to soak up the renewing of connecting with humanity on a personal level again.

The first thing Gabrielle noticed was that many of the women in this small frontier town wore trousers much like she herself had on, though they were certainly not stylish or well-fitting. Then she realized that since many of them had come to climb the mountains, they simply had to wear smaller versions of men's pants to be able to do so safely. *Maybe there was some hope for society after all.* She couldn't imagine anyone not choosing trousers over the confining garb that was considered fashionable for women if they were given the chance to choose.

She looked in many windows, fascinated by the changes a few short years had brought. Then she remembered the pen she had crafted from necessity. Probably that same need was behind many of the new gadgets and contraptions she saw in the small town.

"Ya know," Hercules commented, breaking in on her thoughts. "Maybe you should market that fountain pen of yours. I imagine that could become quite popular." He looked around. "Not here necessarily, but in the big cities." He shrugged. "Something to think about."

Gabrielle nodded. "Maybe, but that still doesn't answer my question."

"Huh?" he blinked. "Oh, I sent a telegraph off to an old friend in Calgary. Asked him to have a couple good horses ready for us." A blonde brow rose and he answered what he felt was an obvious question. "So we don't have to walk all the way to Texas."

"Uh huh... and how is he gonna know when to have them ready and waiting?"

"Well, he'll be in town for the mustang round up and we should arrive pretty close to then as well. "Whoever gets there first will wait for the other."

"And you're sure he'll get that telegraph thing you just sent?"

"Yep... in two to three days if there are no lines down the man in the office said."

Gabrielle let her eyes follow the long thin wires that were strung precariously high above her head and tracked them through the mountainous area until they were well out of sight. She shook her head. "If you say so. I've seen enough strange new things in my life not to discount something just because I don't understand it."

Hercules grinned and clapped her on the shoulder. "That's the spirit." He took her arm. "Now c'mon. I'd like a hot meal and a bed tonight. We start a long walk into Calgary in the morning."

Gabrielle laughed infectiously and soon Hercules joined her without understanding the reason why. When she was able to draw breath and wipe her eyes she looked at him seriously. "Herc, I have walked the diameter of the world several times in my lifetime. Walking from here to Calgary will be a day in the park."

Of course, he never mentioned that walk in the park was gonna be mostly through the mountains, Gabrielle groused silently as the duo approached Calgary. The walk had taken longer than Gabrielle remembered, though in all fairness she was so anxious to get there she didn't recall much of the trip in.

They weren't in Calgary yet, but they had slowly started seeing the occasional ranch with its accompanying outbuildings. To Gabrielle's surprise, Hercules turned down a long lane without a word and she kept pace beside him. Just as the sun reached its zenith, Hercules removed his hat and wiped the sweat off his forehead before raising his hand and knocking loudly on the front door.

An older woman came to the door, wiping her hands on a towel, then squealing and opening her arms to the big man when she recognized him.

"Harrison Tillman!" addressing Hercules by the moniker he wore in his present incarnation. "What are you doin' here? Phillip got your telegram and was making plans to meet you in Calgary next week." She looked past his broad shoulder. "You gonna introduce me?"

"Oh, yeah... sorry Maggie. "Maggie, this is my sister, Gabrielle. Gabrielle, this is Maggie Atkins. Maggie and her husband Philip and I knew each other in the States before the war."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am."

"It's Maggie, child, though you must be older than a child to be Harrison's sister." Maggie looked at Hercules. "Sure do wish you'd share the secret of your eternal youth though. We seem to get older every year and you still look as good as you did the first time I met ya."

Maggie stepped back and gestured them inside. "Ya'll come on in and be comfortable. I'll call Daddy in from the field." She stepped onto the porch and rang the heavy iron bell that hung from the side of the house. "He'll hear that and be right in."

Sure enough, it wasn't long before Phillip was stomping his boots just outside the kitchen door. And after another surprised round of greetings and introductions, they settled into visiting.

"So what brings ya by here instead of meetin' me in Calgary?"

"We made better time than I expected, actually. Thought maybe we could just pick up the horses and leave from here. It's a long ride into Texas."

"Can you stay a day or two? Visit a little bit?"

Hercules looked at Gabrielle who nodded ever so slightly in agreement. He smiled. "We'd love to, thanks."

The rest of the day was spent catching up, though Philip promised them a tour of the ranch and the mustangs he was taking to the round-up in Calgary the next week. And with the early morning light, he did just that.

The spread was beautiful, nestled into the heart of the valley and framed by the craggy mountains that stood majestic behind it. There were a few trees and a stream, but what captured Gabrielle's imagination was the vast space around them. Similar to what she had known in Banff, yet not the same at all. What seized her attention however, were the wild horses running circles around each other in the corral. They were beautiful in a fierce rowdy way that simply awed her in a way she hadn't felt in a very long time.

Gabrielle edged the horse Hercules had purchased for her up to the corral, close enough to brush the fence post with her leg. The mustangs ceased their movement, only their breathing making their sides quiver. Gabrielle sat completely still, simply watching, feeling her breath catch as one mustang separated itself from the pack and stepped forward towards her.

The two men sat back a little simply watching the tableau that was taking place before them. Hercules had felt Gabrielle's start and quickly realized the reason behind it.

The horse approaching her bore an uncanny resemblance to Argo. It was a little smaller and its mane and tail were a little darker, but the similarities were astounding.

"I'll be damned," Phillip muttered sotto voce to Hercules.

"No kidding," Here mumbled back.

"No, you don't understand. That 'stang... I have never seen one that color before and until today... until right now, he has been the meanest, orneriest critter I have ever had the displeasure to meet." The two men watched in silence as the horse eased up beside Gabrielle and not only allowed her to pet him, but actually encouraged it.

They remained that way for sometime before Gabrielle whispered in the mustang's ear. He whickered and shook his head and she laughed aloud. The horse nudged her gently and she kissed his head on the white mark between his eyes before moving back to where the two stunned men sat watching her.

"What??" she asked, looking at herself for marks.

Hercules just shook his head with a smile. Phillip cleared his throat. "Wow," was all he managed to whisper.

Gabrielle grinned real big and started to make her way back towards the ranch house.

"Oh!" she exclaimed and stopped the big horse in its tracks, turning to face the two who had yet to move. "His name is Shamrock." Then she continued on her way, grin still plastered to her face.

Hercules laughed heartily and clapped Philip's shoulder as the two friends watched the mustangs scurry away at the rolling sound. Then they turned and headed their own horses for home.

Phillip waited until he thought she was out of hearing. "Well, I'll be damned," he repeated again.

## Chapter XXXVIII

"Well, I'll be damned," the grizzled cowboy commented as he came up to lean on the corral fence next to Xena. "Ya know, you're the second beautiful lady to tame him this week. Must be a trend." Then he was forced to step back from the fence when the horse reared in his direction.

Xena snorted and so did the horse. The man just chuckled at the similarities between the two until he was pinned with ice blue eyes. Then he swallowed his laughter with an audible gulp. The horse whickered and Xena smirked.

"First of all, this horse isn't tamed. He's his own spirit." She gave a small smile when the horse nodded his agreement. "And secondly, I'm no lady." Her feral grin made the man straighten uncomfortably, but he held his ground and extended his hand.

"Name's Phillip Atkins." He motioned to the horse. "This here's Shamrock."

Xena raised and eyebrow as she clasped his hand. "Xena," she said briefly. "You gave a wild, untamed horse a name because...?"

"Oh, no ma'am. \*I\* didn't. We had a friend and his sister visit last week. She and the horse took a shine to one another. \*She\* named him Shamrock."

"I see," Xena drawled slowly, clearly confused. "So why didn't she keep him, if they got along so well?"

"Because they were leaving out for Texas and she needed a horse that had already been trained and was ready to make the trip."

Xena nodded, accepting the explanation, then she turned her attention back to the mustang. "Shamrock, huh?" she asked, rubbing his head. He pushed harder under her hand and she laughed soundlessly. "How much?" she asked the cowboy without removing her eyes from Shamrock.

"Well," he considered, "He's got good tone and speed and he is such an unusual color... I won't take a penny less than two hundred."

Xena looked at the horse carefully, then put her hand on the top rail and lightly leaped the fence into the corral.

"You can't...." Phillip sputtered, then simply stood back and watched as Xena gently lifted and examined each hoof. She walked around the mustang, talking to him in a low tone that no one else could understand. The

horse stood stock still, allowing the examination, even when she opened his mouth and checked his teeth.

"Two hundred, huh?" she said with her back still turned to Phillip.

"Yes, ma'am. I think he's worth every penny."

Xena wrapped her hands in the dark blonde mane and leapt onto the mustang's back. The horse trembled but stood still, waiting to see what this strange new human had in mind. Xena sat confidently, giving the animal a chance to adjust to her weight. She eased one hand into her shirt pocket, pulling out a handful of bills and counting out two hundred. She extended her reach towards the cowboy who stared at her with astounded eyes.

The horse stutter stepped nervously and Xena gently urged him to take the sidestep necessary to bring her body along side the fence.

"Your price," she said briskly, when Phillip made no move to take the money from her. Slowly he raised his hand and felt the warmth of the paper as the transfer was made. He looked at her fully then and Xena let her eyes show a feral joy she hadn't felt since coming to this strange land decades ago.

"Do we have a deal?" Xena asked softly. She sat straight on the mustang's back, sure of her seat and confident in her abilities. Her hair blew away from her face in the light, early morning breeze and her eyes reflected the glow of the dawning sunlight.

Phillip merely nodded his head, mesmerized by the living portrait of feminine fierceness before him. She accepted his word with a slight lift of her head. Then she leaned down into Shamrock's neck and whispered into his ear.

"All right, boy... let's see whatcha got. Let's RUN!"

She nudged him with her knees as she spoke and Shamrock took off like the wind. Around the corral he ran, stirring the other mustangs until he was leading a parade. Xena angled him towards the fence, hoping he would clue into what she was thinking. A grin crossed her face when she felt the mustang gathering himself as the fence approached. Xena leaned down into him and Shamrock pulled his legs up, clearing the fence by a good foot and leaving Phillip staring at their dust with his mouth agape and his eye bugging out of his head.

"Well," he drawled at last. "I'll be damned."

Xena laughed in sheer pleasure as the headed out of the town proper and into the outskirts. She pulled up in front of the boardinghouse with a flourish and Rosalie stepped out to see what was causing such a commotion so early in the morning. Her eyes widened perceptibly when she spotted Xena sitting so comfortably on top of a mustang, looking for all the world as though she'd been born to the saddle. Except....

"Come with me," Rosalie said abruptly.

Xena slid down from Shamrock's back, though she kept a hand in his mane as she followed Rosalie to the barn. Xena had spent a lot of time cleaning out the old place out and now it was clean and repaired and nearly empty, save the few odds and ends Rosalie had insisted be stored there.

Now they went in with Shamrock walking obediently behind Xena. She wondered about the oddness of that, then accepted it as a gift not to be taken lightly... especially not knowing how long it would last.

"Wait right here," Rosalie asked and move further into the barn.

The barn was mostly dark in the early hours of the morning, even with the barn doors open wide, but Xena breathed deeply of the clean scent of hay and fresh wood. Shamrock nudged her gently in the back and Xena chuckled lightly as she scratched his ears.

She could easily hear the bumping and groaning coming from the dark corner and wondered what on earth.... Then she saw Rosalie struggling and rushed over to help her.

Rosalie's face was a little flushed from the exertion and she was happy to have Xena relieve her of her burden. "Take that outside, please. I have a couple things to go with that and you'll be all set."

Xena took the heavy wooden box and stepped back out into the morning sunshine. She put it carefully on the ground and turned to see if she could help Rosalie when the older woman came through the doors struggling with a smaller box. Xena was quick to take that from her as well and stacked it on top of the bigger one.

Rosalie leaned against them and removed a kerchief from her bodice, wiping away copious amounts of sweat from her face and forearms. Then she blew out a disgusted breath.

"I surely don't recall this being so heavy before."

Without a word, Xena crossed to the well and pulled up the bucket. Then she grabbed the full dipper and brought it back to Rosalie. Rosalie accepted the dipper and drained it, patting Xena on the arm with a smile.

"You're a sweet one, Xena. Remind me a lot of myself in my younger years. C'mere." Rosalie pushed off of the boxes and picked up the flat iron bar she'd brought out from the barn with her. She handed it to Xena and gestured to the wooden crates. "Open those up for me, will ya?"

Xena pried the lid off and set the smaller box aside. Then she lever the second one off and stepped back.

Shamrock, doing his bit to help, lipped at the straw that was visible, but he soon abandoned the stale straw in favor of Xena's clean hair. She ducked his lips playfully and scratched his neck, then froze when she saw what Rosalie had removed from the crates.

On the lid sat a western leather saddle that though used, looked as though it had been well-cared for. Rosalie set the oilcloth it was wrapped in on the straw and casually moved over to the smaller box and took out bridle, reins, bit and various other sundry parts that Xena needed to saddle Shamrock.

Wide blue eyes blinked and her mouth worked, but before Xena could get sound to come out, Rosalie started to speak softly, her back turned to Xena.

"When I was a much younger woman," she reminisced, "I had a best friend that I loved very much. We did everything together. Neorah and I, we... I... well.... Anyway, when we were sixteen, my folks married me off to a much older man and Neorah, she ran away from home and headed west, swearing she would never suffer my fate. Marriage, ya know."

Xena nodded but remained silent, wanting to hear more of Rosalie's story.

"Horace, my husband, was a kind man, but we didn't love one another. He lived for three years after we wed and once my period of mourning was over, I came out west, hoping against hope to find my Neorah."

Silence fell as Rosalie got lost in her memories. Xena waited patiently.

"It took me almost a year to travel out here on my own, avoiding Indians and white men alike. From the little I'd heard they were equally vicious and even as young and stupid as I was I knew it was best not to be a woman caught alone out here."

"So why do it?" Xena asked logically. "Were things that bad for you as a widow?"

Rosalie shook her head with a sad smile. "No. Horace left me comfortably well off. But I needed to find Neorah." Her eyes pinned Xena's. "You can understand that."

"This area was empty when I stopped here. I just couldn't go on any further. And that first year... God, I didn't think I'd survive. I built the barn alone and it took me until after the first snows. It was... it was rough." She swallowed hard. "For five long years, I worked the land and built me a little place. The Indians left me alone because I respected the land and their way of life. Very few white men came through until they built the fort and even then, they didn't come out here unless they were passing through to the ocean."

"What happened?" Xena asked when silence fell again.

"Neorah," Rosalie answered with a tremulous smile. "Out of the blue one fine spring morning almost thirty-five years ago, the most beautiful sight I have ever seen came riding up to my front porch." She laughed. "I was out back in the garden when I saw a rider come up the path. I picked up the shotgun Horace had taught me how to shoot, having learned real quick to be safe rather than sorry."

Rosalie never felt the tears fall from her eyes, but Xena felt her own tearing up at the joy that shone in her face. She blinked rapidly and focused her attention on keeping her breathing even.

"The rider dismounted and walked towards me, even though I had the gun still raised. I asked what they wanted, told them to get off my land. She stopped, just out of arms reached and lifted a hand towards her hat...."

Rosalie trailed off again, remembering the day her life had changed so drastically. Then she sighed and turned her attention back to Xena, who had a faraway almost pained look in her eyes. She laid a tentative hand on the warrior's arm and waited until the blue eyes tracked to her own.

"We had twenty-five wonderful years together before she... before...." Rosalie bit her lip and turned away. "Even after all this time," she whispered, "it still hurts."

Finally she lifted the bridle and bit and put them in Xena's hands. "These were hers... well, her horse's," Rosalie said with a small smile. "I'd be honored if you'd consider them yours and...." She looked at the horse. "He got a name yet?"

"Shamrock," Xena said gruffly. "Name he came with."

Rosalie held up her hands defensively and tried not to laugh. "Yours and Shamrock's," she continued. "You need them and I'd like you to have them. Please," she added when it looked like Xena might refuse. Xena nodded and moved to outfit Shamrock in his new gear for the first time. Then the day got \*really\* interesting.

"Guess you're glad he's a fast learner," Rosalie commented that evening as she put the stopper back in the bottle of witch hazel. Xena's hands and arms had cuts and scrapes that were already healing, though if Rosalie noticed, she kept such things to herself.

Xena merely grunted her agreement. Her butt was sore. It had been a long time since she'd ridden such a strong-willed horse and it had taken Shamrock a little while to accept the new tack. But a few well-placed words after their first battle of wills and he settled down right. Xena spent a good bit of the morning learning his gaits and teaching him different commands. She felt satisfied with their work and turned him back towards the house at a fast clip when without warning he threw her cleanly out of the saddle and unfortunately landed her in a briar patch.

She climbed back on a little warily and put him through his paces again. Once she was satisfied they were communicating again, she directed him back to the house. Everything was fine until they reached the yard. Then without warning, he stopped dead and arched his back, jumping and curling in a wild, graceful dance.

Then she realized that he was bucking and twisting because he enjoyed it... it was his way of playing with her. But she supposed that free spirit had to express itself somehow. Xena held on tight and just hoped that mostly it came in the form of running and not this creative dance he seemed so enamored of. She wasn't sure she could handle all that enthusiasm, despite her immortality. Especially since the panther and the fox tended to bring out those traits in Shamrock and they seemed predisposed to appearing in her life at the most inopportune moments.

Xena left Calgary with good memories though they didn't last long. Almost the minute she crossed back into the United States from Canada, ugly rumors reached her ears about Union atrocities and she set out to find out the truth.

What she found was beyond her understanding, worse than anything she had done during her warlording days in Greece. Union soldiers had killed Indian women and children and that put Xena on a warpath that would bring her in contact with a despised enemy.

Xena's first glimpse of Custer sent proverbial chills up her back... something she'd not felt since.... India? The Steppes? Rome? The familiarity of it made her spine tingle in a most unpleasant way and she initially tried to put it aside as malevolent feelings towards a soldier she considered to be without competence or honor. But it niggled at her and she began comparing it to the other times in her life she'd felt it. It was reminiscent of Ares, but....

Xena cast her mind back nearly two thousand years and remembered what Naima had said about karma and the circle of life. Then she realized why this union soldier felt so familiar to her. The colonel known to the

world as George Armstrong Custer was in actuality the reincarnation of Alti's soul. And Xena set out to defeat her in the lifetime she now lived.

For several years, Xena had dogged Custer's steps, harassing him and his troops at every turn. She organized raiding parties that plagued Custer's efforts across the plains. Fort Riley had been razed because of his desire to channel the Indians onto a reservation and she had only just missed catching him there. It was the Battle of Washita that made it personal for Xena though.

The fact that soldiers killed defenseless women and children made her blood boil and it made Xena want to bring the skirmishes to an end once and for all.

Various Native nations had joined her periodically to drive the troops from their land, but Xena was having trouble convincing them to join forces and with one another to drive the white man out completely. They felt their hatreds for each other were too old and deep.

Finally she went to Sitting Bull, with whom she had developed a friendship over the last few years as they'd fought together against the white man. Crazy Horse, whom she met on her trek back from California, had introduced them. Crazy Horse was like a duplicate of Palaemon, being something of a dashing rogue, a ladies man with an almost identical facial scar. Once he understood that she was a warrior of no small skill and not a woman to be wooed, Crazy Horse had accepted her as a friend and brave. Sitting Bull had never questioned her motivations, accepting her introduction by Crazy Horse and appreciating her Cheyenne warrior marking and skills. Several times she had been invited to share around his fire and he'd found her thoughts succinct and insightful.

Now when she approached him for a meeting, he couldn't refuse and he listened carefully while smoking a pipe which they shared. His gaze went inward for a while once she finished speaking and he thought about what she'd proposed. Finally he nodded.

"Join me for Sun Dance. See what spirits think."

Xena nodded. She felt confident that the spirits were in agreement.

The following morning the rites for the Sun Dance began and for four days Xena fasted and meditated except when her physical presence was required for some ceremony. Just before dawn of the fifth day, she escaped her self-imposed exile and hunted, knowing she needed the blood sustenance for the trial ahead.

Xena was already deep in a trance when the blades were inserted into her breasts. For hours she simply hung still reviewing her life with Gabrielle while those around her struggled and fought to get free. The medicine men couldn't understand the small smile that graced her face. Finally, though, she slid free from the blades and only the silent tears on her face gave any indication of the excruciating pain she felt, though they never knew the real cause.

When the day was over, she had Sitting Bull's agreement. The tribes would join together to fight the Union Blue Coats at Little Big Horn.

Runners were sent out to the Nations and men gathered very quickly, including a very surprising visitor for Xena.

The appearance of a white man in their camp was stunning, but the enthusiasm with which he was greeted by Xena and Crazy Horse caused a dead silence to fall over the entire assembly.

They had been preparing for war - arrows added to quivers, axes honed to razor sharpness, guns checked and loaded and the buzz of conversation hung low across the encampment. When the stranger approached the camp, he drew everyone's attention, then Xena looked up and caught his eyes and the small grin on his face that he produced on sight of her.

"Hercules?" she whispered, before launching into a run and engulfing him in a hug.

Hercules wrapped her in a fierce embrace and lifted her off the ground until he felt her shrink away from him. He drew back to look at her face, concerned.

"Problem?" he asked softly, well aware of the eyes on them.

She shook her head and hugged him again, though it was much lighter than the first. "I'm just a little sore," she answered vaguely. "C'mon," she said with a smile as she pulled away again. "There's someone here I want you to meet."

They turned to find Crazy Horse waiting. Hercules extended his hand and Crazy Horse simply looked at him a long moment, before engulfing him in a hug.

"Harrison! I have not seen you since we fought with Red Cloud in Wyoming."

"Crazy Horse! How are you?"

"Good, my friend. You?"

Hercules smiled. "The same. Glad to find friends here," though his look at Xena conveyed more than his words.

"Happy you are here, Harrison. Come." Crazy Horse led the way.

The eyes of the whole community followed them until they reached Sitting Bull's fire. And conversation started up again slowly as the Chief invited them to sit down. They sat and talked until the shadows grew long and Sitting Bull found a friend in the man named Harrison Tillman.

Once the sun had completely set, Xena and Hercules took their leave from Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse and walked away from the camp out into the darkness of the plain. Without a sound, two animals came up on either side of Xena, subtly pushing Hercules further away from the warrior. He looked at Xena with a raised eyebrow. She chuckled softly.

"Etor, Melo, this is an old friend... Hercules. Herc, these are my spirit guides."

Hercules knelt down to bring himself eye to eye with the animals. "It's nice to meet you. I'm glad Xena has had you and hasn't had to be alone." The panther stepped into Hercules' personal space and growled, showing its canine teeth in a full, snarling smile. The fox crossed in front of the cat, putting itself between the panther and Hercules. The cat held Herc's eyes for another full minute before turning its face into the fox's

neck and nuzzling with a faint purr.

Hercules stood slowly and looked at Xena who has silently watched the entire tableau. "They're mates?"

She nodded, "Since before I found them, I think."

"Ya know," he commented casually, "They remind me of y...."

"I know," she cut in. "Me too."

They walked on again in silence. "Would you excuse me a few minutes? I need to...."

Hercules held up his hands. "Go ahead. Etor and Melo can keep me company til you get back."

Xena nodded and slipped into the darkness without a sound and Hercules sat down and turned his attention to the two animals. The panther sat facing him and the fox curled up in its embrace. Hercules stared at them for a time, then turned his attention to the darkness, feeling as though he had intruded on something intensely private when they began grooming on another. He never heard Xena come up until she seated herself next to him, clearly visible in the moonlight.

"Do you know who Alti is... who she was in the lifetime that was so long ago for us?"

"I know some. I've heard stories. Why?"

"I've seen her in this lifetime. She is the soldier known as George Custer."

"You're sure?"

"Yep."

"I met him once, during the war. He was a total ass."

"Yeah, well, soon he is gonna be a dead one. We're gonna wipe 'em out, Herc. They've killed enough, killed women and children and it ends here. But Custer especially dies."

"Why?"

Xena shrugged. "It is part of my destiny... my karmic circle. I defeat Alti in every life we cross paths in."

Hercules looked a little lost at her surety, but decided to let it pass uncontested, having other things of importance on his mind. He was composing a way to bring up his topic, when Xena beat him to the punch.

"So what brings you here, Hercules? I got the distinct impression from your arrival that you were looking for me."

"I was." He looked down at his clasped hands then back out at the flat plain of darkness that stretched to infinity. "I found Gabrielle." Xena's grip on his arm made him flinch with the bruising force she applied when she grasped it.

He waited, but she didn't say a word, her jaw clenched so tightly he could hear her teeth grinding together.

"She, um... she's a beautiful woman, Xena, but time and the world have worn on her... a lot."

"She's always been a beautiful woman, Hercules. Even when she was still a cute kid," she whispered, though Xena's hold grew noticeably tighter. Hercules surreptitiously flexed his hand to keep the blood flowing to it. He cleared his throat and continued without looking in her direction.

"I took her to Texas... to stay with some friends I have there. It's given her some stability and she's well thought of there. She's the school teacher in a little town called Nocona Corners."

Hercules heard Xena swallow, but it was the only sound she made. He looked at her and watched her jaw clench and unclench, knowing she was fighting an emotional battle to stay focused. He'd given her the impetus she needed to make the coming fight swift and furious. Herc nodded to himself and returned his gaze back to the blackness and kept a silent watch, waiting for the sun to come up.

Morning brought battle. The Indians spotted the Blue Coats in the same instant they were seen and they prepared themselves for the coming fight.

Xena mounted Shamrock and prepared to lead a mounted charge against those who were coming. Her gut told her Custer would be among them and she had a burning need to finish her business with Alti so she could finally reunite with Gabrielle... especially now that she had all the totems save one. With the chakram she suspected was still in Gabrielle's possession, they could go home.

Hercules gathered up his borrowed weapons and prepared to join the warriors who were on foot. Sitting Bull had introduced him to the war chiefs and he had been made welcome to join the many braves who would fight on foot. He felt Xena's regard and he gave her a salute from his chest which she returned with a smile, before giving her war cry and leading the mounted troops to meet the enemy. He felt himself wishing for a horse so he could fight by her side once more and then a far bigger problem became his immediate focus.

Custer was not a stupid man and he had divided his forces into a three-pronged attack and unexpectedly, one of those prongs came over the horizon towards the encampment and the warriors who remained there. The war chiefs rallied the braves and soon they were engaged in the battle. Hercules spared a prayer for Xena, then focused his attention on the fight that lay ahead of him.

Meanwhile Xena and the rest of the mounted warriors pursued Custer and his battalion into the hills, knowing they had the advantage in both numbers and knowledge. This was their home they were defending and many of them had grown up learning their skill at arms in this very valley. So it was with many glad voices raised that they now fought to drive the white man from their territory once and for all.

Xena honed in on Custer, wanting him to know where his death was coming from. He was a little separate from those in his command, as though his being in charge would make a difference in whether he lived or died.

*Pompous little prick*, Xena thought to herself before turning Shamrock and heading directly towards George Armstrong Custer. She blocked the other sounds of battle, negligently killing those who thought to get in her way and letting this one Blue Coat become her entire focus.

Custer caught sight of the brave headed at him so recklessly and he raised a pistol to shoot him. Before he got the gun to firing level, however, he realized two very important things. The brave was no brave at all, but a woman with startlingly blue eyes. And she was now leaping from her horse and taking him off of his.

Custer lost his gun along with his balance and was barely able to roll to his feet before the first blow rattled his brains. He fell and she kicked him and he reached for his remaining pistol while shaking his head.

"Die, Injun!" he yelled as he pulled the trigger, his smile a grimace when Xena fell to the ground unmoving. The bloodstain blossomed on her chest and he reached for the knife strapped to his leg and grabbed the dark hair in his fist.

"I've never taken a woman's scalp," Custer sneered, "but I'll make an exception in your case."

He never saw the blow coming, but the pain that exploded in his throat was telling as her foot connected with his throat and he landed on his butt from the force of her kick. His breath grew raspy as he struggled to pull air into his lungs and Custer recognized to his bemusement that he was going to die. He looked at Xena with a mixture awe and fright when she snatched the blade from his hands.

"Y-you... should be... d-dead!" he wheezed as his eyes fastened on the big red spot on her chest. "I-I-I shot... you... at p-point... blank... range!"

She looked down at her chest and felt a wave of lethargy flow through her at the blood loss. "Damn you, bitch! That hurts!"

Xena punched him and watched his head snap back, then drew the blade up Custer's face, leaving a thin trail of blood in its wake. "I don't kill that easy," she remarked. "You of all people ought to know that by now."

Custer stared at her trying to focus even as his breath grew subtly shallower. Xena waited, knowing revelation would come and recognized the moment it did.

"Xena," Alti drawled. The warrior could hear just the faintest hint of the telltale rasp that her voice had carried in their original lifetime. "How...? You can't...."

Xena smiled cruelly. "Oh but I can...I have many skills," she said coldly.

Alti forced her body to stand. "So do I," she growled, gathering her waning life force in her hands and channeling it, hitting Xena in the chest again. The warrior flew back and landed on the ground a second time. "At least if I have to go I can take you with me."

Alti fell to her knees and punched Xena's face, then reached for the knife. "Say your prayers, Xena."

The warrior jerked upward and pulled out of Alti's grasp shaking her head to clear it of the dizziness that the blood loss had caused.

"Why won't you die?" Alti hissed, even as Xena swung the knife towards her. She sliced through the blue uniform and cut into the skin on Alti's upper arm. Then she spun and kicked the shamaness in the gut, watching as she fell to the ground.

Xena clenched Custer's hair in her hand and twisted hard as she moved the blade into position. "Nice as this has been, I've got other places to be," she said.

"I'll see you in hell," Alti said, then screamed as Xena removed her scalp. Silence soon followed, but she, like those of her regiment, was not alive to appreciate the peace that shrouded the battlefield at their deaths.

Xena stood and raised Custer's scalp to the sun and her war cry was echoed across the plains by the warriors who had survived the day with her. She whistled; Shamrock ran to her and she leaped astride the mustang as he headed back to the encampment, followed by his compatriots.

What they found when they got there was astonishing. Yet another band of Blue Coats had attacked the main camp, but they were being held off by the foot troops that had not left for battle... instead the battle had come to them. Now with the return of the mounted warriors, the Blue Coats were being forced to retreat into the hills and the war chiefs were pursuing them to wipe out the last of the enemy.

Xena rode the where Sitting Bull stood, directing the warriors. She dropped the scalp at his feet. "Custer is dead," she said succinctly. "And now I must leave. Duty calls me elsewhere."

He motioned to her bloody chest, but she waved him off. Sitting Bull shook his head, but motioned his acceptance of her diagnosis nonetheless.

"Go find beloved. Search over soon."

Xena's eyes rounded with questions. Sitting Bull chuckled at her expression.

"Vision quest during Sun Dance revealed many things. Now go, brave warrior. Your place not here now."

Xena nodded and stood in the stirrups, looking for Hercules. She gritted her teeth against the pain and the dizziness and guided Shamrock through the maze of bodies living, wounded and dead before she reached him.

"Where is Nocona Corners?"

"Let me get my stuff...."

"Hercules, you've got no horse and I'm not gonna wait. Where is she?"

"A little town in the northeast part of the state."

She extended a hand with a grimace and he took it, knowing she bore him no malice but that her patience had finally run out. He just hoped she'd be all right alone.

"Thanks, Hercules. You've been a good friend and I appreciate...."

He held up his hand. "We'll see each other again. Good luck, my friend."

She nodded and wheeled her horse around, headed southeast and giving Shamrock his head. Here watched until she was out of sight.

"You're gonna need it."

## Chapter XXXIX

It was only when Shamrock stopped walking that Xena opened her eyes to near darkness. The loss of blood combined with the day's heat, Shamrock's rocking gait and the exertion of the battle had caused Xena to drift into a state of disassociation. By unspoken common consent, the three animals kept a slow steady pace and the cat searched for a spot to make a lair.

Fortunately, the country they were currently in had hills and mountains... some of which had caves. It was to these that they headed.

When they stopped, Xena looked around in confusion, her mind not clear enough to understand where there were... or why.

"Whassa matter, boy?" she slurred. "Ya loss?"

She studied the area, trying to wrap her focus around what was happening. Now that the adrenaline had worn off, she was having trouble thinking coherently.

She slid from Shamrock's back, her knees buckling when her feet touched the ground. A sharp pain lanced through her chest and she put her hand up, pulling it away covered in blood. Her legs slid out from under her and she sat down on the hard-packed earth rather abruptly.

The fox nuzzled her hand, licking it clean. Xena realized that she needed blood to replenish what she had lost and to help speed her recovery. The problem was her ability to hunt. She wasn't sure she could remain cognizant long enough to find what she needed.

"Gotta do this... gotta get... to... Gabrielle."

She made to stand and instead slipped to the ground unconscious.

Hercules helped bandage the wounded and saw to it that everyone was on the trail away from the Union soldiers before he headed for the nearest outpost. There was a little town a few days' walk from his current location and he had a promise to keep.

He bid Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse goodbye and headed east, hoping to get to his destination quickly.

The vagaries of weather made him a few days later than he'd hoped and he briefly considered skipping his errand altogether. After all, given Xena's anxiousness to get to Gabrielle, she could very well have run her horse to its very limits which would put her to Texas in a very few days. On the other hand, he had told Gabrielle that he would let her know if he found Xena as soon as he could, so she could make some preparations.

He stepped into the telegraph office, pulled one of Gabrielle's fountain pens from his shirt pocket and began

to write:

GABRIELLE \*STOP\* X HEADED YOUR WAY \*STOP\* BANFF FOR SUMMER \*STOP\* GOOD THOUGHTS \*STOP\* H

He reread it twice before he nodded in approval. Then he took the message to the clerk and handed him a few pennies. He watched with satisfaction as the message was sent out across the wire, then he walked back out into the town, intent on finding a hot bath and a soft bed.

July in Nocona Corners made Gabrielle wish for the forests and trees of home. It also made her long for the cloth and leather outfits the Amazons had introduced her to. *Though*, she admitted to herself with a smirk, *Xena had a lot to do with the increasingly lack of material her clothes were made with*. Her ego had preened every time she caught \*that look\* in Xena's eyes and a new outfit with less material was a sure fire guarantee to bring that look out. She hadn't done it often, but they both always enjoyed the results.

"Miss Gabrielle! Miss Gabrielle!"

Gabrielle came out of her reverie, spinning to find Dominic running down the street waving a paper at her. He skidded to a stop in front of her and she waited patiently for him to catch his breath. Finally he extended his hand to her.

"Here ya... go, Miss... Gabrielle."

"Thanks, Dominic," she said, taking the paper and glancing at it before she turned her attention back to the boy. "C'mon. Let's go see if Mama has some lemonade." Dominic smiled and did his best to contain himself to a walk.

Gabrielle laughed and tousled his hair. "G'wan. Tell Mama I said it was okay."

Dominic grinned broadly. "Thanks, Miss Gabrielle. You're the best."

Gabrielle chuckled and left him to his enthusiastic run as she strolled towards the boarding house. She took a good look around her, seeing the town she had called home since Hercules had brought her here with new eyes. It had grown some since they'd first arrived, but it was still a cattle town and in many ways reminded her of the home she'd had lifetimes ago.

Mama had taken her in immediately, treating her as one of the family and making sure she was looked after. It tickled Gabrielle's sensibilities in a way; after all, she'd been on her own and taking care of herself for a very long time. But Mama had deigned that it wasn't proper for Gabrielle to be without family, so she'd simply made Gabrielle part of hers. And Gabrielle had discovered it was much easier to go along with Mama on most things than to put up an argument.

Part of Gabrielle appreciated Mama's overtures as something she'd been without for more years than she cared to remember. It was nice to know that people cared about you for yourself and Gabrielle had a whole town full of people who felt that way about her. Thanks to Mama's acceptance, she had carved her own little niche here and was a respected member of the community.

Part of her, though, just wanted Xena to find her and go home. She and Hercules had searched together for a while, but nothing had come of it. She'd gotten involved with the school and the town and when he'd asked her to remain behind this time, Mama had backed him up and she'd agreed.

Now she had in her hands proof that her search was nearly over and her patience was finally going to be rewarded. Though she fumed a bit to herself, acknowledging that their reunion would have already happened if she had been with Hercules. Still, she couldn't quite contain the grin that slid onto her face at the prospect of being in Xena's arms again.

"That must be some news," Mama remarked as she handed Gabrielle a glass of cold lemonade. Mama had carefully tended the two lemon trees Hercules had found for her in their travels and she made good use of their fruit. "I don't think I've ever seen you so happy."

Gabrielle accepted the glass with shaking hands and Mama motioned Dominic out of the kitchen. Then she took Gabrielle's cold hand in hers and led her to the table. She looked at her flushed face and then patted her hand.

"I'll be right back."

Mama stepped out of the kitchen and into the dining room which had a small bar on one wall. Mama's boarding house was a little unconventional. Her dining room was a restaurant that was open to the public for lunch and dinner and the bar was actually a bar that served alcohol... to a point. If Mama or Sal decided you had enough, that was it. And they never let anyone have enough to get drunk. Mama had learned that costly lesson early on.

Strangely, it didn't put a damper on business, though that had a lot to do with the great food Mama served. It didn't hurt that Gabrielle told stories for an hour or so three nights a week either.

Now, however, the dining room was closed and Mama went behind the bar and grabbed a bottle of clear shine. Sal cocked an eyebrow in question, but Mama waved him off and he kept wiping the glasses.

Mama re-entered the kitchen, noting Gabrielle's faraway expression. She picked up her still nearly full glass of lemonade and poured in a generous dollop of liquor. The recipe was an old family one she'd brought with her from North Carolina and though the climate differences changes the taste slightly, Mama's shine still packed quite a punch.

"Drink," she commanded softly, pushing the glass into Gabrielle's hand. Gabrielle did, consuming huge gulps that made her swallow her tongue as soon as her body realized what she was ingesting with such fervor. Tears came to her eyes as she coughed and gasped for air. Mama rubbed her back and waited for her to settle down again.

"Whaddya do that for?" she asked Mama in a hoarse whisper, eyeballing the water she set before her with distinct suspicion.

"I figured to err on the side of caution. I didn't want you goin' into shock and you were showin' signs of it. Now," she said without pausing for breath. "Tell me the news."

Instead of answering, Gabrielle passed over the telegram to Mama as she picked up the glass to drink. She'd never explained much of her story - just that she was searching for someone who'd been missing from her life

for a long time. Mama had her own suspicions, but she figured Gabrielle would share when the time was right for her.

Mama smiled as she read the words printed on the page and then passed the paper back to Gabrielle. "Good news, then." She smiled. "I am so happy for you Gabrielle. I know this is somethin' you've been searchin' for for a long time.

Gabrielle nodded but didn't speak. The compunction to share with this woman was overwhelming, so she simply kept her mouth shut and nodded. There was no way she was going to spill her guts when she was so close to recouping everything.

"I'll miss Harrison, though," Mama continued, unaware of Gabrielle's wandering thoughts. "He's been a good friend to Isaac and me since we met."

"Who has, Mama?" Isaac asked as he came in the back door. He leaned over and kissed her cheek before moving to the counter to fix himself a glass of lemonade. "Hey, Gabrielle!"

"Hey, Isaac," she replied even as she pondered his likeness to Iolaus. Sometimes it was simply uncanny and she had to catch herself from referring to him as such. He had become a good friend though, once he'd gotten over his crush.

"Harrison," Mama was answering his question. "He's gone up to Banff for a while. I was just mentionin' to Gabrielle here how much I'd miss him."

"Yeah," Isaac replied. "He's always finding some adventure or other to get involved in."

"Hmph," Mama answered eloquently. "Always findin' trouble for you two to get into, you mean."

Gabrielle hid a giggle behind her hand. The truth was Isaac was a LOT like his ancestor Iolaus and he and Hercules still got caught up in all sorts of escapades.

"Mama," Isaac whined, blushing furiously.

"Don't even," Mama said, cutting him off with a wave of her hand. "I still can't look at honey without laughin'."

Isaac blushed even harder and Gabrielle finally let loose the laughter that was dying to be released.

"You'd think I'd learn," he muttered as he lifted the glass to his lips and drank.

Now Mama laughed. "Yes, but then where would Gabrielle get story material from?"

Isaac looked up with a horrified expression on his face. "You wouldn't...."

Gabrielle stopped giggling, though she couldn't quite wipe the smile from her lips. "No, I wouldn't... but it sure would be easy to." She shrugged. "You two make it sooo simple."

Finally, Isaac chuckled ruefully. "I guess we do. But it sure is fun... mostly." He looked between the two women. "Any idea when he'll be back?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "He said through the summer, but I don't know what he'll do once he gets there. That's been home for a long time. He may stay until next spring."

"And what about you, Gabrielle?" Mama asked quietly when Isaac moved to retrieve the pitcher of lemonade. "Will you be stayin' once your beloved arrives?" She smiled slightly at Gabrielle's startlement. "C'mon, Gabrielle. I'm not so old that I've forgotten what the sparkle and flush of love looks like."

Gabrielle's eyes dropped to the table. "I'm not sure," she stated honestly. "We have a lot of things to talk about. I'm sure that'll be one of them."

Mama patted her hands. "Well, I hope you decide to stay, but whatever you decide, I want you to know I am happy for you."

"Thanks, Mama. That means a lot."

"What does?" Isaac asked as he resumed his set, setting the pitcher and a plate of cookies on the table.

"Having you all as my family, Isaac. Now if you two will excuse me," she added as she stood, "I have a couple things I need to take care of at home." She patted Mama's arm. "Thanks for the lemonade."

Then she disappeared out the back door and down the lane that led to her tiny cottage.

Her house was small and very reminiscent of the cottage in Banff though this one housed the few mementoes she'd collected. But Hercules had insisted she have her own private space and he, Isaac and a few of the townsmen had gotten together and built an adobe house similar to the log cabin as soon as he'd convinced her to make Nocona Corners her home for a while. Its furnishings were spare, but she was comfortable enough with what she had.

So now she had a place that was as much a home to her as any had been and she went to make things ready for Xena's imminent arrival. Not that she had a logical reason for it; she was fairly certain Xena wouldn't be noticing much of anything when she got to town. At least, she hoped not... feeling the tiniest niggling bit of doubt. After all this time, Xena did still feel the same about her, right?

Gabrielle forcibly put the doubts aside and began preparing her house to become a home to share with Xena, at least for a little while. She wanted some time alone with her soulmate to reconnect on every level, before they made any decisions about their future... or their past.

So she did her busy work, cleaning and polishing until everything was just so. Then she settled back to wait, hoping the next few days would pass swiftly.

Days turned into weeks and weeks became months and still there was no sign of Xena. Gabrielle went from the heights of joyous hope to the depths of depressed despair until it became obvious to everyone in town that she'd lost her sparkle and zest for life.

But she gritted her teeth and tried to put the utter disappointment aside during the day, digging in her heels and continuing to teach the children when the school year rolled around. She stopped telling stories, however and many nights she roamed the countryside alone, searching for a reason to stay.

Finally, a week before Samhain, Mama came to her home, determined to do what she could to help make things right.

Xena awoke after a long sleep. She was inside a small cave, but she couldn't have said how she got there. The last clear memory she had....

"Gabrielle??" she called out, sitting up swiftly and then regretting the action as the world went dark again for long minutes. She laid there simply content to breathe, letting her mind wander as she tried to put the pieces back together.

She remembered the fight with Custer, *Alti*, her mind cheerfully supplied. The gunshot... Xena put her hand on her chest. Her deerskin shirt had a hole and it was hard and crusty from the blood that had soaked it and subsequently dried.

Well, I had to have been here at least a day or two. Let's get up and see where we are and get some nourishment, Xena.

Xena slowly rolled to her knees and paused, waiting for her equilibrium to catch up with her body. She idly wondered just how much blood she had lost to have affected her so drastically. She stood on shaky legs and fell into the wall, almost blacking out again, before sliding back to the ground using the wall to ease herself into a sitting position.

She sat there for countless minutes before she noted that the fox and the panther stood in the opening. The cat carried a large jackrabbit carefully in its jaws and it crossed the cavern floor to drop the still warm animal in Xena's lap.

She felt her canines extend themselves and without ceremony Xena sank her fangs into the rabbit, draining it in seconds. Then she leaned her head back against the wall and let the bit of blood seep into her system. It wasn't nearly enough to replace what she'd lost, but it might be enough to keep her on her feet. She looked at her two spirit guides.

"Thanks, guys," she croaked out hoarsely. She set the carcass to one side and slid up the wall slowly. "Let's go see if we can find some more game, some water and something to burn. I need to get my strength back and get to Gabrielle."

When she stepped from the cave, she noticed several things immediately that made her heart heavy. The weather was much cooler than she remembered it and the grass all around her was brown. Shamrock had cropped it short in all directions as far as she could see and he had somehow worked himself out of the saddle, though by the condition of the girth strap, it had taken a while and hadn't been a very pleasant experience.

Xena leaned against the mouth of the cave as another wave of vertigo swept through her. "How long have I been out?" she muttered to herself. Finally she straightened and moved towards the saddlebags that lay with the abused saddle near the entrance to the cave.

They were more worn than she remembered but still intact and she pulled them to her, opening them carefully.

She didn't want any nasty surprises. What she got were musty clothes and old trail rations. The pemmican she'd carried was soft and odd to the taste, but the jerky still tasted like jerky and she chewed it slowly. The water skin was bone dry and her bow was broken so she hoped her reflexes were up to hunting. With a little more haste, she opened the second bag, gratified to see the careful packing of the totems had paid off. Not one thing was broken, though the staff was quite scuffed up.

Xena let the wave of relief wash over her. She gradually made her way to where Shamrock had wandered near the cave entrance when he'd seen her emerge.

"C'mon, guys," she said at last. "Let's find some game."

Shamrock knelt at her command and Xena slid into his back, hefting the skin and her knife before signaling the mustang to stand. Then they took off at a slow pace in the direction the cat led.

Etor led them to a small herd of deer and with Shamrock's help they managed to separate two good-sized deer from the rest. Xena fell on them as a starving person would, incisors extended fully and soon both animals were drained. Now, feeling exhausted, but no longer weak, Xena placed the remains on Shamrock's back and began leading the mustang back towards the cave.

Etor led them by a burbling stream and Xena dismounted as quickly as her tired body would allow her. She filled the empty skin, then stripped off her clothing and sank into the cold water with a sense of unerring relief. She drank until she'd quenched her thirst, then scrubbed the dried blood from her body, glad beyond words to remove the itch from her skin.

When she stepped from the water, she realized her clean clothes were still at the cave and she really had no desire to put on the ones she'd so recently removed. Xena looked around, noting the barrenness of the landscape and shrugged. It wasn't that long of trek and nakedness had never been an issue for her before.

They reached the cave without incident and Xena removed the deer from Shamrock's back, patting the horse and promising him a good grooming later. Then she pulled her cleaner clothing from her saddle bags, smiling a little as she slid the denim pants up her long legs. They'd worn to an even more comfortable point over the years and the last she'd heard, Levi was doing quite a business with them. She slipped the shirt over her shoulders and buttoned it with shaky hands, then turned to see what sort of fuel she could find for a fire.

It took her a while, but she was finally satisfied with the chips and wood she'd found. She butchered the three carcasses and laid them out for smoking, putting the hides aside to tan. She began the smoking process, saving a large portion of raw meat for the fox and the panther to share between them, which they did with gusto. Xena wondered again how long she had been out of things. Then she took the hides to the stream and washed them well, stretching them out when she returned to the cave.

Then she sat back to wait for the meat to smoke and the hides to cure. Never realizing when she fell asleep again. Only knowing when she woke up that it had been several days by the coldness of the fire and the dryness of the new hides. But she felt better than she had in a very long time and she stretched before she climbed out from under the white buffalo robe she still carried.

With much more energy and enthusiasm, she rebuilt the fires, then began working on the hides. It took a few days, but soon they little party was ready to travel again. Shamrock had been groomed til he shone, though the saddle was no longer useful. Xena flipped the saddlebags over his hindquarters, then vaulted aboard herself.

"You guys coming?" she asked the panther and the fox. She'd noticed they'd stayed pretty close to her and she rather hoped they would choose to travel with her to Nocona Corners. She wanted Gabrielle to meet them and visa versa.

Xena chuckled when the fox tried to scramble up Shamrock's flanks, causing the mustang to whinny and shy away from it. Only the panther's low growling kept the horse from bolting completely, sensing that the cat would have no compunction in making escape a painful prospect. Xena bent over, reaching a hand down until Melo could grab hold and be lifted up in front of the warrior.

"Behave, Etor," Xena rumbled lowly, grabbing the reins and pulling Shamrock back under control. "We've got a long way to go yet and a short time to get there. I just hope we're not already too late." She squeezed Shamrock's sides with her knees. "Let's go, boy... YAH!" And they raced from their past towards their future.

Gabrielle had taken to wearing her trouser outfits again except when she was teaching. Not that anyone saw them... for the most part she was cloistered in her home, or out away from the town where no one went in the darkest hours. Besides, she figured she wasn't going to stay here past the current school year, so it really didn't matter if they did see or what thy thought.

Her only regret was that it was only October, so she was committed to staying in Nocona Corners for another seven months. Once school was out, however, she had decided to travel back to Greece. Xena had made it clear so was no longer interested in being part of Gabrielle's life, so she was going to go home and ask Aphrodite if she could simply remain in Olympus. She was tired in her very soul and there was nothing left to fix that.

The knock on her door in the early evening surprised her. Most of the townsfolk were either at Mama's restaurant or in their own homes. So she opened the door hesitantly, only to find Mama standing on her front porch.

"May I come in?" Mama asked, her brogue showing itself just slightly. She showed no astonishment at Gabrielle's choice of clothing. She simply waited with understanding in her eyes.

Gabrielle nodded and opened the door wider, motioning the older woman in and to a seat on the small couch. Gabrielle's home was an eclectic mix of things, Mama decided and reflected the younger woman's personality in an odd way. An old leather-bound book sat on a table nearby and Mama wondered what secrets it held. She took a seat and waited for Gabrielle to do so.

The bard didn't sit, crossing instead to the fireplace and stoking it, poking at the wood until the flames were literally jumping up the flue. Then she stood, keeping her eyes focused on the flames.

"Did you need something, Mama? Something I can do for you?"

"No darlin'. I was hopin' I could do something for you."

"Nope," Gabrielle said without turning from the fire. "I'm good."

"You're lyin'" was Mama's rejoinder.

"It no longer matters, Mama and there is nothing you can do."

"Your beloved is here then?"

Gabrielle didn't answer, but she didn't need to. Mama knew; she more than most was aware of the despair created by the desertion of the one you'd entrusted your heart to. It wasn't something she shared, but it did make her understand Gabrielle better than most. The difference for her had been Isaac; he'd given her a reason. And as far as she knew, Gabrielle had no one... save her brother Harrison.

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "You have been a good and dear friend to me, Mama. I think it's only fair to tell you that I'll be leaving in the spring."

"But...."

Gabrielle held up a hand. "When the school year is over, I'm going home. There's nothing left for me here anymore."

"You can't know that. Time heals...."

Gabrielle laughed ruefully. "Time heals nothing! The pain is always there, even if it is only a dull, throbbing ache." She looked Mama full in the face as she said these words and for the first time allowed her to see the oldness of her eyes. Eyes that had seen and done more and lived alone for far longer than a human being should be permitted.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle," Mama said as she rose from her seat. She laid a hand on Gabrielle's cheek, grateful when the younger woman didn't pull away, though she didn't lean into the contact either. I would like to ask a favor of you, if I could."

The request was so stunning, Gabrielle nodded. "If I can," she replied.

"It's two-fold," waiting for Gabrielle to nod her agreement again. "First, I'd like for you to help me with Samhain. We have the fall carnival for the kids coming up...."

"I'll help you with the preparations, Mama."

Mama shook her head and took Gabrielle's hands, leading her to sit down on the couch. "Gabrielle, I want you to do more that help us get ready. If you're only gonna be with us a few more months, let us give you some good memories to take with you. Don't shut us out."

Gabrielle withdrew her hands as gently as possible and walked back to the fireplace. "No promises, Mama. I can't."

Mama nodded, understanding more than Gabrielle was aware of. "Will you try?"

Gabrielle bit her lip and closed her eyes. She really was so very tired, but what would it hurt her to make a little effort for these people who had been so kind to her? When she opened her eyes, there was resigned acceptance in them and she nodded at Mama.

"I'll try," she said simply.

"Good," Mama answered approvingly. "Now, will you tell me where I can get a pair of those trousers? They look sinfully comfortable."

All Hallow's Eve arrived and with it came a stranger into the small town of Nocona Corners. Classes were scheduled for half a day to let the children prepare for Halloween festival that evening. Gabrielle crossed from Mama's to the general store as a cream colored mustang pulled into the stables on the other end of town.

Xena eased off the horse, both rider and animal a bit weary from the pace they had set. Then she stepped to the blacksmith to see about a price. Once that was settled, she turned the conversation to more personal interests. The warmth she felt in her belly told her she was almost home and she hoped this man could point her in the right direction.

"Hey, Smithy, I'm looking for a friend... woman about this high," she described, holding her hand at shoulder level, "green eyes and red-blonde hair. Her name is Gabrielle."

Xena watched his eyes shutter, though his face gave nothing away. He shrugged nonchalantly and she knew something was up.

"May wanna check with the lawman, across from the general store. He might know of her whereabouts. Though it's a mite early for him to be into the office yet."

Xena nodded. "Much obliged," was all she said, moving back to the stable area and grooming Shamrock carefully before she left. Then she hefted the saddlebags and headed down the street.

Gabrielle walked back from the general store with Sammy helping her carry the grocery items she'd picked up for Mama. Then together they, Dominic and Little Sal made their way to the schoolroom for the day's classes. She dismissed the tingling in her gut as anticipation over the coming night's activities.

Xena stepped into the street and noticed the general store. She headed that way, anxious to find the lawman. Somebody had to know something in this town and he was gonna be her best bet.

The door of the office was locked and Xena figured as early as it was she might do better to find some breakfast. She crossed to the general store and went straight to the counter, sliding the bags to her feet.

"Morning," the shopkeeper greeted her politely.

"Morning," she responded in kind. "I was looking for a bit of information."

The man crossed his arms and leaned casually against the counter. "Well, I don't know how much help I can be, but let's hear it."

"I'm looking for a woman named Gabrielle," watching the walls go up in his eyes. "Bout this tall, green eyes and red-gold hair."

"Hmm," the man appeared to consider. "Probably wanna talk to Isaac. He's our local deputy marshal," said with a hint of pride. 'If he ain't left yet, he'll be over to Mama's. That's the boardinghouse directly at the end of the street."

"Appreciate it," Xena muttered, slinging the saddlebags over her shoulder again and headed for the boardinghouse.

## Chapter XL

Xena got nowhere with Mama, though her eyes did not close up when the warrior asked her questions. Instead they turned speculative. But she was not forthcoming with any information and it seemed as though the deputy Isaac had been called out of town early that morning on an emergency. And he wasn't expected back for several days, a fact that Mama lamented several times in light of the coming Samhain celebration.

Still, Xena did manage to get a good meal in the bargain and a room for the duration. She took her bags up to her room and decided to take a stroll through the town. She figured it was the best reaction she could have short of going totally ballistic and using the pinch on someone. She knew she was close... she could feel it. Waiting a little longer she could manage after the years she'd been waiting and searching and it sure beat ending up in some Podunk little jail.

Nocona Corners was different than what she expected... similar to Sutter's Mill, but by the same token vastly different. This town was well established, built of wood found in the scrub hills around the area, or of rock and adobe. It was also unsoiled and fresh, something Xena appreciated greatly. Even with the cattle that were herded in, the people took great pride in keeping it clean and only on days when the town was downwind of the stockyards did one realize that this was indeed a cattle town.

Her view of it from the hills was spectacular and she let her mind wander, trying to figure out the best way to find Gabrielle. She was convinced the bard was here and wondered at the secrecy of the townspeople about it. The ringing of a bell brought Xena out of her reverie and she remembered what Hercules had told her. He said Gabrielle was the schoolmarm here. I wonder....

She turned from where she had been at the far outskirts of town and began walking towards the small building that seemed to spew small children from its belly. From this distance, her eyes couldn't tell for sure, but her heart recognized the one small blonde who stood at the door til the others had left.

"Gabrielle!" she called. "GABRIELLE!"

The bard hesitated, but seeing no one, continued on to the barn with two boys walking beside her. Xena realized that the wind was working against her and she hustled to catch up.

Gabrielle was amazed when she, Dominic and Little Sal entered that stables. There in front of her stood an old friend whickering a greeting. The boys moved off to do their chores and left Gabrielle to say her hellos in private.

"Shamrock!" she exclaimed happily, moving to scratch the mustang between the ears. It was only when she

traversed to the stall that she noted two other animals... animals that struck a chord of familiarity in her soul. She hesitated, unsure of her welcome by the panther and the fox.

The cat stalked slowly towards her, taking in her scent before curling around her legs with a purr. The fox gazed beguilingly at her and Gabrielle knelt down, allowing the panther to nuzzle her neck and the fox to crawl into her arms.

Shamrock stamped his forefoot impatiently and Gabrielle laughed. "Shamrock, be patient," she commanded, standing gingerly with the fox still cradled happily in her left arm. "You guys must have a great human to be so trusting and friendly."

Her skin prickled just before the voice spoke from the doorway.

"I'd like to think I'm a better human being than I was the last time we were together."

Gabrielle froze, stiffening in recognition. Then she put the fox down, keeping her back to the door. She felt as much as heard the steps behind her and flinched when hands landed lightly on her waist.

"Hello, Gabrielle."

A myriad of emotions washed through her, but surprisingly she was left with infuriation as her chief reaction, her abandonment by Xena coming to the forefront of her mind. Hundreds of years of emotion built up in a matter of seconds and she turned violently, putting the force of her anger behind the straight-from-the-shoulder punch. There was no sound until impact - fist to face and the crack of bone, the crumple of cartilage and the spurt of hot blood.

It was the scent of blood, so enticingly familiar that Gabrielle felt her canines grow in reaction, that brought her back to the present and she turned and walked out the door without a backwards glance. The panther growled in Xena's direction as it passed by the warrior before following Gabrielle. The fox cocked its head, then stepped across Xena's body before joining the parade leaving the barn.

"Thanks, guys," the warrior muttered, moving her lips as little as possible.

Gabrielle had always been quicker to anger and quicker to forgiveness than she herself had been. It was one of the things that made her so vibrant, so passionate and it was one of the reasons Xena loved her. Xena stood and allowed the punch, having seen it coming in the subtle nuances of Gabrielle's body language. *Some things will never change*, she had time enough to think before her face caught nearly two millennia of frustration.

The warrior was amazed at the amount of pain she felt as she flew back and landed flat on her back. She smacked her head on the hard ground and lay there looking up as her eyes began swelling closed. She heard more than saw the footsteps and knew from their weight that the older boy had left the barn at a run and the set approaching her belonged to the smaller boy that had accompanied Gabrielle to the stable.

Xena felt the eyes staring at her. Little Sal put his hands on his knees, crouching down to get a better look.

"Geez, mithter. Are you okay?" He reached towards her face and touched her swollen nose lightly. She hissed and grabbed his hand, moving it away from her. He pulled his hand from her grip and wiped the blood on his shirt before putting the hand back on his knee.

"Nope, I guess not. Ya gots blood runnin' out yer nose and a really big fat lip. Does yers hurt? Mine did... I had one of those once when I gots hit by the door. Loosed up my front teefs... that's why I talks funny right now. My tongue keeps slippin' through the big hole, see?"

Little Sal peered at her closely. "Ya can't see too good, can ya? You gots black and blue eyes, didja know that? The blue parts real purty, but the rest is real swolled up. Ya looks kinda like a coon. I seen a coon once... mean thing tried a bite me. Are you mean, mithter? Ya made Miz Gabr'elle mad and I's never seen her git mad like that 'fore. She's a nice lady. She telled us good stories. Do ya like stories, mithter? She telled lots of stories fore she got so sad. Are you the reason she's so sad, mithter?"

Xena's head was spinning trying to keep up with the five-year-old's conversation and she was relieved when she heard footsteps approaching.

She sat up gingerly, cradling her head in her hands. She was gratified to find that her head was going to stay attached. For a long moment there, she really had doubt... immortality or not. Then she heard Mama's voice.

"Help me get her up, Sal. I think this one has some explainin' to do."

"I c'n do id mythelf," Xena mumbled, slowly rising to her feet and swaying slightly from side to side. "Godda lub a woman wid a mean wighd," she muttered under her breath. Mama heard, though and put the thought away for later contemplation. For now, she put a gentle hand on Xena's arm.

She'd seen Gabrielle exit the stables as she herself had been out on the front porch at the time, having opened the doors to let some air into the packed dining room. She'd wondered, of course, but Gabrielle had headed up into the hills and she had paying customers to take care of. Then Dominic had come running up the street calling for her and Sal. It was amazing that the whole town hadn't heard and turned out at the commotion, but most everyone was at dinner. And Mama had left Sal's wife Josephina in charge... and everybody listened when Josephina spoke. She and Mama were a formidable team.

"C'mon," Mama said to Xena, who was trying to peer through her mostly closed eyes. "Let's get you back to the kitchen and get you cleaned up. You're gonna be in some pain for a few days and look like a raccoon even longer. But you'll live."

Xena chuckled ruefully at that pronouncement, wincing when her lip started bleeding again. Then she took Mama's arm and followed her to the privacy of her small back kitchen.

Mama set a glass of clear liquid on the table and wrapped Xena's hands around it. "Drink that," she commanded in a voice the eerily resembled Cyrene's.

"Whad id id?" Xena asked warily, trying to sniff the contents, but unable breathe through her nose, much less smell anything.

"Somethin' that'll make this hurt a lot less. Now drink."

Xena did so, gasping for breath as the tears ran down her face from the harshness of the alcohol as it burned down her throat and into her system. After a long moment, the burning subsided and she felt a little numb and

somewhat disassociated from the throbbing pain of her face.

"Waid a minnud," Xena said, placing the flats of her fingertips on either side of her nose and jerking it sharply. She saw stars but she made no sound and spent a minute simply trying to breathe without passing out. Finally, she turned in the direction she felt Mama's presence.

"Aw wighd. Go ahead." Then the warrior sat perfectly still while Mama started cleaning up the damage Gabrielle had done.

"Can I tell you a story?"

Xena shrugged. She wanted the woman to get done so she could go rest long enough for the swelling to go down and then she could go find Gabrielle. She was fairly confident the bard had not left and she was glad her spirit guides had gone with Gabrielle to keep her company until Xena herself could get to her. She spared a rueful thought to Cecrops and sent him a silent apology for his broken jaw. Even as an immortal, this really hurt. She turned her attention back to Mama's voice.

"More than a decade ago, we met a man named Harrison Tillman. He and my son Isaac became reluctant friends because they fought on opposite sides during the War of Northern Aggression. When the late unpleasantness was over, he helped us move from North Carolina out here to Texas. Once we were settled, he went to Banff, where he had taken his sister to get her out of the war. He promised to come back and bring her for a visit."

Harrison Tillman? She's talking about Hercules. That must mean.... breaking her thoughts off to concentrate on Mama's words.

"When he came back the followin' summer, he brought a most delightful young woman... his sister, Gabrielle." Mama rinsed out the cloth she'd used to wipe the blood from Xena's face and tossed the old water out the back door. Then she pumped some fresh and soaked the cloth again, placing it gently over Xena's eyes before picking up a new cloth and the witch hazel. Xena didn't even flinch when she started dabbing it over the raw flesh and her split lip.

"It was obvious to me at any rate that Gabrielle was searchin' for somethin', or waitin' for someone. Though she eventually allowed herself to settle here somewhat contentedly, it was clear her heart was elsewhere. For a while she did go out searchin' regularly, but when Harrison left this last time, he convinced her to let him go alone."

"He was gone for several months and finally in early July, Gabrielle got a telegram from him... a telegram that changed... everythin'."

Xena shifted, uncomfortably aware of where this little tale was probably headed.

"He'd found whatever or WHOever she'd been searchin' for and she was so excited. I'd never seen her so happy."

So, on top of the fact that she's been alone for over eighteen hundred years because of a bad decision, now I have to explain why it took me over three months to take a trip she knows I should have made in less than three weeks. Some lifetimes you just can't catch a break.

"I don't think I need to explain what happened when the days turned to weeks and months for her, do I?" Mama cupped Xena's chin and removed the cold cloth, looking into the slits of her now open eyes.

Xena closed her eyes against the truth she knew, feeling the aching in Gabrielle's soul as though it was her own. She shook her head gently. Her eyes opened again when Mama tapped her fingers on her chin.

"I'm gonna share somethin' with ya, because I believe that you are probably the only thing in this world that can make things right for her. She has a little cottage in the woods back of this house. If you follow the path it'll lead you right to her front door."

Xena nodded.

"Now, I know she went up into the hills to think... she does that a lot, but she will be back down before dark. We have a town carnival tonight, usherin' in Samhain. She's supposed to be participatin' - tellin' stories and such. You might wanna get some rest if you wanna catch her beforehand."

"Bud...."

"Tch. You leave the details to Mama. I'll make sure you get your chance, if you promise to make the best of it." She chuckled. "At least you'll make a colorful impression."

Xena would have smiled, except she could feel the bones, cartilage and skin reknitting themselves whole and it was almost more painful than the initial hit had been.

"Than yu," she replied, before standing tentatively, waiting to see if her balance was going to stay with her or desert her for more stable surroundings. Satisfied that it was going to remain intact, she turned to the back stairs.

"Can I...?" Mama asked, laying a hand on the warrior's arm.

"I god id," Xena said cutting Mama off before she could offer more help. "Bud thans."

She eased up the staircase and she found her room by luck as much as anything else. Then she lay down, hoping that liquor Mama had given her would kick in and let her get a little rest while she healed.

Gabrielle was in a whirlwind of emotion. The connection she'd once had with Xena, the one she'd had to become accustomed to doing without, had reinserted itself with a vengeance upon their personal contact. The warmth that she had felt those thirty-odd years ago when she'd first reached the New World had blossomed with the first touch between them. It allowed her heart to believe in the possibility that she could be whole once more. Her head was having a much harder time wrapping itself around the fact that not only did she not have to be alone, but that Xena might actually desire such a resolution.

Her soul struggled... she wanted this. To her very depths she desired this, needed this. But she didn't want to. Her guts felt like they had been ripped out - first in Japan when Xena had chosen death over her and again when it seemed as though she had pushed everything between them aside. But had she? Gabrielle no longer knew. Her mind was in turmoil, weighing the odds; going over what she thought and felt and believed.

The fox crawled into her lap and she absently stroked the soft red-gold fur, so much like the color of her own temperamental hair. The panther snuggled down beside her, nuzzling both her leg and the fox's neck.

Gabrielle watched them for a long time, allowing the rhythm of her motions to soothe her. Finally it dawned on her that these two animals, animals that should have been natural enemies, were in fact mates. Against the odds, against nature itself, they were mated and perfectly suited to one another. *Just like me and Xena*.

And suddenly she felt better, knowing that despite everything, if they wanted it, they could work through everything and be together again once more. Only this time, it would be an eternal kind of thing. Because she wanted this... more than anything, she wanted this. And she was sure in the depths of her soul that Xena did too.

It was with a much lighter step and a smile on her face that she made her way back to her cabin.

It was nearly sunset when a light knock sounded on the door and Xena beckoned, "Come in."

Mama opened the door slowly, then gasped as she got a good look at Xena's face. The swelling was down and eyes which had been black and blue hours earlier were now merely shadowed in a remnant of their previous bruising.

"That's amazin'," she said, approaching Xena but not touching. She got the distinct feeling that any familiarity Xena had permitted earlier was gone.

Xena shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm a fast healer."

"I'd say so," Mama commented as she continued to stare a moment longer. A dark eyebrow raised in question brought her back to herself and she flushed slightly in embarrassment. "Beg pardon," she mumbled. "I'm not usually so rude. I uh, I came up here to tell you that your bath is ready."

Xena swallowed. "I appreciate that, but I've got nothing clean to put on. You think the general store might...."

"You leave that to me. Now g'wan, before you water gets cold." She handed her a long robe and shooed her down the hallway to the bathing room.

Xena didn't take long, but it felt so good to wash in hot water. And she appreciated the fragrant soap Mama had put in the room. But it made her start thinking and by the time she reached her room again, she was scowling fiercely.

Mama was waiting there with clean clothes and she turned when Xena closed the door quietly behind her after she crossed the threshold. "Here you go. These should be just about your size. You're much the size my Robert was." It was said matter-of-factly, but Xena could see the pain in the brown eyes that faced her and she sank to the bed with her back to the older woman to leave her to private grief.

"Why?" she finally asked quietly when she didn't hear Mama make her departure. "You obviously know what Gabrielle and I are to one another and I've seen the way your church treats people like us. Why are you so willing to help us?"

She felt the weight of the bed shift when Mama sat down on the opposite side with her back to Xena. "If I allowed the church to dictate all aspects of my life, you're right. I'd shun you and decry you as sinners headed straight to hell, because your love is not only not valid, but not real."

Xena's lips tightened and her fists clenched. She held still though, because she expected more and she had asked. She actually appreciated Mama's honesty.

"But I learned a long time ago not to let others decide what I believed or what love was real and valid. Even when the love turns out to be different from what you expect or hope for, it is still real and just as valid as anyone else's. My husband and I shared something like that briefly and it was worth what I have lived with since."

She paused and stood up from the bed. Then she walked to the door and turned the handle before looking back at the still figure on the bed. "If what I suspect is true, I would do this even if the church condemned me to hell because of it. If there is a chance to recover that kind of soul connection, then it is worth everything."

The door closed and Xena sat unmoving on the bed for a moment longer. Then she rose to dress in the clothes Mama had provided.

The black trousers were long enough, but were far too wide on Xena's slim waist. She slid into the suspenders and then looped the belt around her. The pants were still loose, but at least they wouldn't fall off.

The shirt actually fit across the shoulders, but hung down shapelessly in the front. She shrugged and tucked it in, chuckling a little when it reached to her knees. But at least it helped hold the trousers in place. She idly wondered how large a man Mama's husband had been, trying to picture the couple they had made.

Xena put on the thick socks Mama had given her, then stepped into her boots. She slid into the jacket, figuring to need its warmth against the chilly night air. Then she combed through her mostly dry hair and opened the door to find Mama standing there with a few precious roses and some wild flowers.

"Here," she said with a smile. "These may help," extending the flowers. "If she was mad enough to hit you, it's probably best to soften her up. Flowers always worked with me."

Xena accepted the bouquet and withdrew a single rose, pressing it into Mama's hand. She didn't say a word, but her eyes spoke volumes. Then she left down the stairs without a backwards glance. Mama stood still until she heard the back door shut in the waning sunlight.

Then she lifted the rose to her nose, breathing in its delicate scent with delight and smiling. She had a good feeling about this and against all logic, it gave her a hope of her own.

Gabrielle had come back to her cottage intent on taking a warm bath before the evening's festivities. She was surprised that the animals remained with her, but they curled up in front of her fireplace content together and she simply watched them for a moment, continually reminded of possibilities.

She went into her bathing room, happy she had taken the time to recreate all the creature comforts she'd seen and enjoyed during her lifetime. No one knew about her hot running water or her flushable toilet, but she definitely appreciated them.

Especially tonight, though she didn't let herself examine the thoughts too closely. She was still hesitant to hope too hard, though if she was completely honest with herself, she was more than hoping. She was betting her very essence on what would happen.

Gabrielle gazed into the looking glass as she dried herself, noting for the first time in a while the tattoo that still adorned her body after all the time that had past. It was slightly faded from what she remembered, but it still had color and movement with her body's own and she turned away feeling slightly nauseated by the sight.

She dressed with more care than usual, choosing her favorite blue gingham dress and combing her hair out carefully before pinning it up in the accepted style of the day. She looked at herself again, realizing Xena hadn't seen this look on her before and wondering what she would think of it. Then a knock on the door caused her to stop breathing for a moment.

She wiped sweaty palms on her and moved to the door....

... only to find Hercules standing on the other side.

"Surprise!" he said, extending his arms for a hug. "Wow, Gabrielle. You look great. Can I come in?"

She looked beyond him. "Well...."

"Or are you expecting someone? And where is Xena?"

"I hope I'm expecting someone and I'm not really sure."

An eyebrow rose. "But I thought...."

"Long story... one I'll share with you soon, I promise." Gabrielle looked past him again and this time her eyes burned with a fierce inner joy tinged with sadness, though her face never lost its stoic expression. The years had enabled her to hide many things, though her eyes told a story all their own.

"Hello, Xena," he said as she approached, her eyes never leaving Gabrielle. The bard blushed at the intensity, but she didn't let her stare waver.

"Hello, Hercules. Nice to see you. Now get lost."

Xena reached the steps and walked purposefully up them, pulling the flowers from behind her back. Hercules walked backwards, nearly tumbling down the stairs in an effort to escape the strength of passion he could feel flowing between them.

"I think I'll go surprise Mama," he muttered before turning and moving briskly back towards the boarding house.

Xena stopped short of touching Gabrielle, not quite sure of her reception despite what her heart and soul were shouting at her. She extended the flowers and watched Gabrielle tear up as she reached a hand out to accept the bouquet.

When Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, Xena stepped into her personal space, resting one hand lightly C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

on her hip and putting the other over her lips.

"Don't," she said. "Don't apologize. I deserved that and gods...." She let her hand trace Gabrielle lips and travel up smooth cheeks, smiling tremulously when Gabrielle leaned instinctively into the touch. Xena wiped the solitary tear that slipped from the green eyes and let her hand feel the silky smooth skin beneath her fingertips - a sensation she had missed for more than half a lifetime and one Gabrielle had not shared in longer than forever.

Xena's hand trailed down Gabrielle's neck and into her hair, loosening the pins that held it in place and running her hands through its corn silk softness. She went no farther; now any overtures would have to be Gabrielle's. But first....

"We have so much to talk about. I need to explain...." But her words were cut off when Gabrielle repeated her earlier action, raising a shaky hand to cover her lips.

"Do you want there to be an us?" Gabrielle asked in a bare whisper, moving her fingers and tracing Xena's lips with a feather-light touch. "Do we have a future together?"

"Oh yes! Gods, yes, Gabrielle. If you're willing, we have an eternity together to look forward to," Xena answered softly, kissing the fingertips that remained on her lips. She waited patiently as Gabrielle studied her eyes while the bard's fingers continued to roam around her face and down her neck. It was sending all sorts of pleasant sensations along her body and she trembled slightly in reaction.

Gabrielle felt the shiver and smiled as she saw the banked fires in Xena's eyes burst into a barely controlled flame. She understood suddenly that their future rested in her hands. Xena was giving her the decision to make and she knew if she turned the warrior away, she would never see Xena again.

Just the thought made her catch her breath and Xena's eyes filled with concern.

"Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle smiled nervously, feeling much like a blushing bride on her wedding night. She wound one hand into Xena's long tresses and ran the other up the front of her body until it rested on the curve of her neck.

"We do have a lot to talk about," she said, urging Xena's head down. "But we have an eternity to do it in," she added as she brushed their lips together in a teasing kiss. "And we can start tomorrow." A second kiss lasting just an instant longer. "But tonight, especially tonight, I need to feel you. No words... no explanations... no excuses. Just us... touching, feeling, loving one another."

For her answer, Xena swung Gabrielle up into strong arms and crossed the threshold into the house, shutting the world out with the slamming of the door.

## Chapter XLI

Xena was only peripherally aware of the banked fire and the two animals curled up blissfully in front of it. Her entire focus was on the world she held in her arms and she walked without hesitation... into the bathroom.

Gabrielle chuckled soundlessly, as much from nerves as from amusement. "You trying to hint I need another bath?" she asked teasingly, smiling at the slight blush the climbed up Xena's face.

"Um, no... I took a wrong tu...." She took a good look around. "On the other hand, I can think of a few reasons to use that later," she said, wiggling her eyebrows as she nodded towards the shower.

"So can I," Gabrielle agreed as she pulled Xena's head down until their lips were nearly touching once more. "Now, take me to bed, Xena. I have waited an eternity for you."

The truth of those words hit Xena in an unexpectedly deep place. "Never again, sweetheart. Never again."

The warrior walked the few paces into the bedroom, not stopping until she was standing next to the bed. She set Gabrielle gently on her feet and stepped back slightly, allowing her eyes to roam the slim figure before her. Unlike any of the clothing she had previously seen Gabrielle in, the blue gingham teasingly hinted at the assets it hid. The strength of her shoulders and arms were hidden by the sleeves. But the snug material hugged full breasts and a trim waist, then draped nicely over the swell of her hips.

"You are so beautiful," Xena whispered hoarsely, noting the nervousness in Gabrielle's actions as she wiped her palms on the front of her skirt.

"Still?"

Xena closed the space between them and lifted Gabrielle's eyes to meet her own. Only then was she aware of the weight of Gabrielle's solitary life in her eyes and it made her heart break again.

"Always," she said softly, before claiming the lips that had been hers alone in lifetimes past.

The kiss was soft, gentle and unrushed. Xena traced Gabrielle's lips with her tongue and moaned when she was granted immediate entrance. She brought her hands up to cup Gabriele's face, trembling when she felt Gabrielle's hands running up her chest. The bard paused to tease Xena's breasts before she reached the top button on the warrior's shirt.

Without hesitation, she grasped either side, intent on ripping the shirt open. Xena pulled back slightly.

"Wait."

Gabrielle looked up in confusion. Xena smiled.

"Mama let me borrow the clothes... so I could have some clean ones."

Gabrielle smiled in return. "Well, in that case...."

She pushed the jacket to the floor and eased the suspenders from broad shoulders, feeling muscle that had grown firmer than she remembered. Gabrielle trailed her hands down the white shirt, smiling slightly when Xena's breathing hitched. She reached the belt and loosened it, unbuttoning the trousers, then watched them slide from Xena's slim hips to the floor.

"How accommodating," she said with a smile.

Xena shrugged and gave her a crooked grin. "They were a little big."

"Take them off," Gabrielle said, leaning against the bed and watching with interest. Xena did so, sitting down in the room's single chair to ease her boots off then stepping out of the trousers. Gabrielle giggled when Xena held them up.

"Xena, those are more than a little big. You, me and Shamrock could fit in those things with room to spare."

"Maybe we'll try it sometime without the horse." She stood up and wrapped her hands around Gabrielle's waist. "What happened to no talking? You all right? You're not... you're not... afraid... of me, are you?"

Green eyes flew up to meet blue and Gabrielle shook her head vigorously. "No, love, NO!" She chuckled uncertainly. "I'm just... I'm nervous, I guess. It's been a while. I haven't done this since...."

"Since...?" Xena repeated when silence fell, feeling her heart clench at the thought of Gabrielle having shared herself with anyone else. Despite what both Hercules and Cecrops had said, there had always been a tiny corner of doubt. How could anyone choose to be alone for so long?

"I haven't been with anyone but you, Xe."

Xena felt both overwhelmed and humbled by the quiet, startling admission. "You've been alone... since that last night in Japan?"

Gabrielle nodded

Xena enveloped Gabrielle in a full body hug, which the bard reciprocated in kind. She nestled into Xena's chest, absorbing the warmth and scent and feel of the warrior surrounding her. Xena leaned her cheek on the fair hair, nuzzling its softness with a sense of coming home.

"Oh, Gabrielle...."

"It was my choice, Xena," she said as she squeezed. "I... couldn't. I couldn't share this without the feelings and you own my heart."

Gabrielle felt Xena's heart stop at her words and then redouble as she blew out a breath.

"Let me love you, Gabrielle." The words floated down to her ears on a bare whisper.

Gabrielle pulled away just far enough to unbutton Xena's shirt and push it to the floor. She traced the tattoo and scars on the warrior's chest, arching an eyebrow in Xena's direction. Then she stepped back and looked at Xena, standing naked before her. Her legs had lost a good deal of their customary tan, but they were still long, lean and supple, the muscles flexing with each tiny movement of the warrior's body.

Her hips were a little slimmer than Gabrielle remembered and the abdominal muscles more pronounced. The breasts were still firm and round and the shoulders and arms were muscular, though differently than when they had wielded a sword.

The full lips were creased in a rare, full smile and the blue eyes twinkled in pleased embarrassment. No one had ever made her feel the way Gabrielle did with a single, smoldering look.

Gabrielle lifted her hands to her dress, but Xena gently pushed them aside. She began unbuttoning the bodice, shivering when Gabrielle ran her fingertips up the warrior's bare sides. She traced her fingers over ribs and stomach muscles and lingered over the round sides of her breasts before repeating the action.

Xena worked the buttons loose as quickly as she could, then stepped away from Gabrielle's touch. She walked around behind the bard and trailed her fingers across Gabrielle's shoulders, watching the goosebumps rise following her touch. Xena pushed the dress down her arms and waist, watching it fall to the floor in a heap of material. Another tug and her undergarments joined them.

Then Xena scooped Gabrielle up in her arms once more and lowered her onto the bed.

For a long moment she simply looked, gazing into Gabrielle's eyes and loving her without words or touches, seeing that love returned in kind. Then Xena's eyes traveled down the immortal body, remembering how and where Gabrielle liked to be touched. Finally she brought her lips and hands to bear, capturing Gabrielle's mouth possessively and allowing her fingers to trace the smooth contours of the bard's body at last.

They took their time. Having waited a lifetime and beyond, they went slowly - touching, exploring, rediscovering - igniting one another's passion and celebrating the joys of coming together and being whole once more.

They met body to body, heart to heart and soul to soul. And at the height of their passion, just as the clock struck the witching hour, they renewed their blood connection and for the first time in nearly two millennia, the circle was complete.

"Harrison! What are you doin' here?" Mama exclaimed as she opened her arms for a hug. "It's so good to see you again."

"Hello, Mama. I thought I'd come check on Gabrielle, but I saw she is finally in better hands."

"Lord, you didn't interrupt...."

Hercules chuckled and flushed slightly. "No ma'am, but it was a near thing." He motioned to her finery. "What's the occasion?"

"It's Halloween, Harrison. We're welcomin' Samhain."

"Ah."

"And you just volunteered because I'm bettin' we don't see Gabrielle for a while and I need the help."

"Where's Isaac?"

Mama shrugged. "He got called off on some emergency before daylight this morning. Told me it might be a few days. Now go get into your Sunday-go-to-meetin'-clothes. We got a party to go to."

Hercules laughed and took the stairs two at a time to get changed.

Folks were glad to have Hercules, or Harrison as he was known to them, back among them and they welcomed him warmly. Though they were disappointed that Gabrielle was suddenly unable to join them, the party was in full swing when Hercules ran into a most unpleasant and unexpected visitor.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed taking the visitor's arm and pulling him into a more private area. "Can't you find somewhere else to be?"

Ares jerked her arm out of Hercules grasp and smoothed down the material of his jacket. "It's a free country, bro. I can go where I want."

"Yeah, well I want you to go somewhere else... preferably back to your hidey hole in Greece."

"Well, we don't all get what we want, do we?" the war god said bitterly. "Don't get your shorts in a twist. I'm leaving soon. I got what I came for."

Hercules eyes got big, but he bit his tongue on the off chance that Ares hadn't come for Xena and Gabrielle.

"Besides, even with that annoying little Iolaus clone you call a lawman, this town has an energy... a power I haven't felt in ages. It drew me...." Ares shrugged. "Maybe it is just the time of year." He walked off a few steps before he turned. "See ya, little brother."

"You know that jerk?" Isaac asked as he came up beside Hercules, who turned in surprise. Isaac smiled. "Hey, big guy."

Hercules clapped a hand on Isaac's shoulder. "Hey, buddy. I didn't think you were supposed to be here, but I'm glad to see you."

"Same here. You know him?" jerking his chin in Ares direction.

"We've had a few run-ins, yeah." A pause. "Why?"

"He's the reason I left so early this morning. He's rounding up mercenaries to join up with Union forces to fight the Indians. Seems the government is still smarting over their loss at Little Big Horn."

"Always something, isn't it?" Hercules muttered, though he wondered what had brought the god of war to the point that he was physically recruiting mercenaries. "Well, nothing to be done about it tonight. C'mon, let's go get some of Mama's pie."

Classes were suspended briefly at Mama's behest. She explained that Gabrielle had things come up that took precedence and any communication with her would need to be directed to Mama for the time being. Hercules volunteered to fill-in as the teacher, but first he and Isaac made a quick trip to Kansas to warn the Indians of the coming military raid.

Unfortunately, none of these natives recognized either white man as a friend and it took the two several days C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

to convince the braves of their sincerity. Only when they finally met with Kya and Kepo did they make headway, but it was the mention of Xena's name that gained them the trust the needed. They told their story and turned towards home. Hercules particularly was anxious to hear about the reunion between warrior and bard.

It was a two week round trip, so Hercules was more than a little surprised when Mama stopped him from visiting when they returned to Nocona Corners.

"No, Harrison," she said calmly but forcibly. "They are not ready for visitors yet."

"But...."

"Gabrielle promised to let me know when they were ready. Until then, you respect their need for privacy."

"How long do they need? It's been over four months."

"No. Gabrielle's companion arrived on Halloween, just as you did."

Hercules creased his brow in thought. "But...."

"Let it go, Harrison."

He nodded. "All right. Not like I'm going anywhere for a while what with teaching school for Gabrielle," realizing for the first time just what he'd committed to. "It'll wait. It's just...."

Mama patted his arm. "I know, but we'll get the whole story eventually." She turned to slip a pan of biscuits in the oven. "I hope," she muttered in afterthought.

The weather turned colder and snow flurries blew through on Thanksgiving. December was colder still and Christmas approached with no sign of Xena or Gabrielle emerging from their cocoon. Even Mama became concerned and girded her loins to check on them.

Hercules tried to dissuade her, knowing they could survive much longer without any of the so-called necessities of life. But he couldn't convince Mama of that without betraying their secret, so with great reluctance he let her go, hoping Gabrielle could cope with the questions he was sure would follow.

She wrapped up a meal, packing it into a basket before pulling on her heavy coat and wrapping a shawl over her head. Then she started down the path, hoping she was not stepping where angels feared to tread.

Mama heard soft laughter and the murmur of voices when she lifted her hand to knock on the door. Her hand fell as she considered the wisdom of simply dropping in. Gabrielle had promised to let her know when she and Xena were ready for company and though it had been nearly two months, that sign had not yet come.

On the other hand, it had been nearly two months and there had been no sign of life around the cabin save the wood smoke that came from the fireplace. Mama felt her concerns were well-founded. No matter how strong, human beings simply could not live on love alone.

She raised her hand again only to hesitate when the laughter turned to something much more provocative and intimate. Instead, she set the basket down, knowing the cold would keep everything for a few days. If she didn't see them before the first of the year, she would try again.

They heard the steps coming up the stairs, but when there was no knock, Xena and Gabrielle turned their attention back to one another. The days since Halloween had been filled with much sharing - love, laughter and tears.

Gabrielle had gotten out her diaries and they were reading through them together and Xena saw so many ways her bard had influenced the course of history. She felt a bit of melancholy over all the time they had missed together and a little jealousy over all the things she had missed sharing with Gabrielle.

They were curled up together on the bearskin rug Hercules had brought back from Banff on one of his trips. The fire was cozy along with being warm, something they both appreciated.

"You did a lot of good over the years, my bard," Xena said as she handed Gabrielle a cup of tea. "I mean...."

Gabrielle shrugged. "I guess."

Xena sat up at the tone. "Gabrielle?"

She shrugged again and took a sip of the tea. "I would have rather spent the time with you," came the quiet admission.

Xena set her cup aside and did the same with Gabrielle's. Then she embraced the bard's body completely with her own, nuzzling the soft skin of her neck until she got a delightful little shiver and a tiny mewling sound out of Gabrielle. The bard turned her head and their lips met again. Xena was fuzzily aware of the retreating footsteps but her attention was focused elsewhere.

"What if you could?" she asked when they separated.

Gabrielle shifted in Xena's arms until she could look up into her face with a furrowed brow. She cupped the soft cheek gently and urged the blue eyes to meet her own quizzical green ones.

"Wha...?" She shook her head. "Xena, I don't understand what you're asking me."

Xena smiled and captured the full lips beneath her own for a long moment. "What if you could?" she asked breathlessly when they pulled apart. "What if we could go back and live through that time together?"

"Don't tease me, Xena," Gabrielle said harshly. She pulled away as much as the floor allowed her and would have moved from Xena's hold had not the warrior held on tightly. "I don't think you really understand what an eternity alone is like."

Hurt flashed in Xena's eyes before it was swiftly hidden. She kissed the blonde hair beneath her lips. "You're right, Gabrielle. I don't... I can't. I can tell you I didn't like the small taste of it I had and given the chance to do it over, I do things differently so we could be together... I mean, if that's what you wanted."

"Of course it would be what I wanted, love, but what is the point of speculating over something that can't be?"

"It can."

This time Gabrielle did pull away, enough to sit up until she was leaning on her elbows. She looked at Xena askance and rubbed her temples.

"Simple words, Xena. My head hurts."

In answer, Xena rose and went to the large saddlebags Gabrielle had collected on Samhain morning, following their Halloween reunion. It had been the only time either of them had been out of the house except to collect wood from the shed. Now she sorted carefully through the totems in one bag until she reached the scroll at the bottom. She unrolled it and passed it to Gabrielle.

"When I arrived here, I was... so... lost. All I could think of was finding a way home to you." Silence. "I found out how I was brought here and how to reverse it." Xena opened the bag again and set the items out one by one. "It took me a while and a lot of searching, but eventually I had all the items I needed to go home... except one."

Gabrielle looked over the totems carefully, recognizing all of them but putting her questions save one aside for the moment. "You'll share the stories behind these with me one day, right?"

Xena nodded.

"You're missing the chakram," she stated unequivocally. Xena nodded again. "The chakram that is now in my possession." A third nod. "Well, we have a tiny little problem," Gabrielle said and Xena's head dropped. She had been afraid of this.

"Lemme guess... you left it in Greece. With Aphrodite."

It was Gabrielle's turn to nod. "It seemed like the best idea at the time. I had to leave most of the weapons in her care. I still have a staff with me and some of the smaller knives, but she kept the katana, your sword and the chakram"

Xena smiled ruefully. "Well, I guess in the spring we'll be taking a trip to Greece. In the meantime...." Her smile turned rakish and her blue eyes twinkled wickedly.

"Yessss?" Gabrielle drawled, feeling her blood prickle in excited reaction.

Xena pushed the scroll and other totems aside and moved back to lie beside Gabrielle on the fur. Then she ducked her head, kissing the bard with abandon until she felt Gabrielle relax into her. She loosened the ties on Gabrielle's robe, setting her hands free to explore and asked on a ragged breath when she felt the bard reciprocate the touches in kind, "How 'bout a trip to Elysia?"

Her answer came in the form of a touch so intimate, Xena simply held on and let the bard take her there, cradling her heart and soul tenderly while setting her body free to soar.

They lay together in the afterglow watching the flames burn the new wood Gabrielle had fed them. Xena had opened the front door and retrieved the basket Mama had left and they were cuddled together under a think blanket feeding one another bits.

Unexpectedly, to Gabrielle at least, Xena was on her feet and crouched in defensive position before the rose petals reached the floor. Aphrodite stepped back in pure reflex. Gabrielle giggled and Xena glared before sliding back down beside her bard.

"Whoa, babe! Nice reflexes! Wow... great bod, too!" She turned her attention to Gabrielle who was glaring. "Oops!" And she laughed girlishly. "Forgot about those radical green eyes." She winked and took a look around before dropping onto the couch, bouncing on it a time or two before nodding approval. "Quaint little place you've got here, Cutie. I like it... it totally suits you."

Gabrielle tied her robe and crossed to sit on the couch, wrapping Dite in a crushing hug. "I've missed you," she whispered, feeling a tightening of the goddess's arms around her in reflexive response.

"Oh, babe... I've missed you too... so much." She looked at Xena who was caught between the need to glare jealously at the interruption and the joy she still felt flood her being when she realized that she and Gabrielle were together again at last. Instead, she tied her own robe and began clearing the remains of their meal, keeping one ear on the conversation.

"It is like, so bitchin' to have you two babes together again. The love vibes are just rockin'."

"How did you get here?" Gabrielle asked seriously. "I mean... I know you just popped in, but I thought... I mean you haven't been able to do that for a while."

"Yeah, well, you two have juiced the batteries so much since you've been back together, my energy is totally off the freakin' scale. It's awesome!"

Gabrielle blushed, but her smile was radiant. She gazed at Xena adoringly. "Well, it's been pretty awesome for us as well."

"I know," Dite said softly. "And I am so, so glad. Now," she said in a louder voice, pulling her glasses from a nonexistent pocket and slipping them on her face. "Let's get down to business. Here," she added briskly. "I think you're gonna need this."

She pulled the chakram from another nonexistent pocket and handed it to Gabrielle. Xena reached for it almost automatically, but pulled back with a scowl when Gabrielle took it and set it aside, both at the action and the implication of Aphrodite's words.

"You've been spying on us?" Xena said low and dangerously.

"Not exactly, no," Dite defended herself. She turned to face Xena squarely. "Gabrielle, could you give us a moment alone, please?"

The bard looked between the two of them - one angry and defiant; the other angry and determined. Aphrodite's use of her full name and the seriousness of her tone had not escaped Gabrielle's notice. Dite turned her head, her eyes pleading. Gabrielle turned her attention to Xena, noting the stiffness of her posture before the blue eyes turned her way and the dark head nodded her agreement with a sharp, short nod.

Gabrielle looked back at Aphrodite and nodded with a soundless sigh. Then she rose and picked up the chakram, laying it in Xena's lap before kissing the top of the raven hair. She picked up the basket Xena had left with its neatly stacked dishes and moved over to the tiny kitchen area which backed up to her bathroom.

Then she went into the bathroom and started a hot shower running, figuring it was about the only way to give the two women a bit of privacy.

Aphrodite waited until the door closed before she turned outraged eyes to Xena who met her stare with an equally furious look. She rose to her feet until she was nose to nose with the warrior.

"Just listen," she said when Xena opened her mouth to speak. "Yeah, I overheard your conversation. I've been keeping an eye on Gabrielle for nearly two thousand years. It's kinda become an ingrained habit."

"So once you knew we were back together, you kept watching because...." It was a bare whisper, but the outrage came through clearly.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. "Get over yourself, warrior babe. With your track record, figure the odds. Besides, it's my job, remember?? It's like, what I do."

"Yeah, well, you can stop now."

Dite gave an unladylike snort. "Let me explain something to you, Xena. You have the chance to go back and do things right this time... to be able to live through all the time you missed with Gabrielle. BUT...." She poked the warrior in the chest to emphasize her point. "You screw this up and I guarantee you there won't be a third chance."

"Is that a threat?"

"NO. That is a promise." Dite softened her eyes and her tone. "Xena, most beings, mortal or otherwise don't get the kind of opportunity you've been offered. Don't squander it."

"Or?"

"Or you will be alone for eternity. I won't see Gabrielle live through this... alone like this again."

Xena walked over to the window and looked out across the expanse of bare, snow-dusted ground unseeingly.

"Why?"

Dite's brow furrowed. "Huh? Why what?"

"Why am I getting this chance?

The goddess shrugged. "A lot of different reasons. But I think mostly because of Gabrielle's faith in the two of you together."

"You think?"

"Yeah, but don't let that get around, all right? People will start expecting it all the time," she replied wryly.

Xena couldn't help it. The deprecating, sardonic answer made her smile and she realized that Dite genuinely cared for both of them, though she suspected that caring went much deeper for Gabrielle.

"So what do we do now?"

"Well, I can't take you back. I mean... I can take you back to Greece, but not back in time. You need to find the spell that brought you here and reverse it."

Xena concured. "That's what I've been working on - collecting the totems. The chakram was the last piece of the puzzle. I need to talk to Kya." She looked at Aphrodite. "He's the shaman who brought me here."

Dite nodded and chewed her nail. "Probably a good idea."

"What is?" Gabrielle asked as she stepped from the bathroom drying her hair with a towel.

"Talking to Kya before we attempt the ritual that will take us back to our Greece... our time."

"So you think we can really do this successfully?" Gabrielle asked, looking between them.

"I think so," Xena said slowly. "I don't think we have anything to lose by trying."

"Agreed," Gabrielle said with ultimate faith and trust reflecting in her green gaze.

Aphrodite clapped her hands. "This is so totally exciting! I got things to do." She leaned forward and kissed them both on the cheek. "Good luck guys.... Later!"

Gabrielle laughed when Xena shook her head to clear it of the rose petals that had landed in her hair. Then she blew off one that landed on her nose. Gabrielle covered her mouth to keep from howling. Xena glared in the bard's direction, then let a wry smile cross her face.

"She really cares for you, ya know," Xena commented.

"She cares for both of us, Xena and she's been a good friend."

"Yep. I'm glad...." She started to say more then bit her tongue. She still felt guilty though she and Gabrielle had worked things out between them with lots of honest conversation since their reunion. Now with the opportunity to make things right, she didn't want to dwell on the coulda-woulda-shoulda's. "Here's hoping she's right about us going home again although...." Xena paused. "Gabrielle... are you sure? I mean, I'd be happy to make a life here with you. And by your own admission, you've done so much, helped so many...."

Gabrielle wrapped the towel around her neck and closed the two step distance between her and Xena. She lifted her arms to Xena's neck, gratified when the warrior's hands automatically went to her waist.

"Xena...." captured for a long moment in the intent regard of those blue eyes. "Yes, I'm sure. If it works, we'll be able to do all those things again... just together this time. If it doesn't...." She shrugged. "We'll make a life here together and I'll be happy to do that because we \*will\* be together. But I'd really like to give going

home a try. What do we have to lose, right?"

Xena remembered Aphrodite's warning, niggling in the back of her mind. She wondered if she were destined to repeat her mistake or if the Fates were truly given her a chance to choose her own greater good this time. "Right," she answered.

She pulled Gabrielle into her and hugged her close, nibbling on her neck and chuckling silently when the bard was caught between a giggle and a moan as she allowed Xena better access. The warrior licked her way up to Gabrielle's ear and patted her on the butt.

"Go get dressed. I think it's time to go see Mama."

"You're a tease," Gabrielle said with a hint of frustration in her voice.

Xena grinned rakishly. "Yeah, but you love me anyway."

Gabrielle reached around and pinched a firm warrior behind, then scooted towards the bedroom. "Yep. I sure do," she said laughingly.

Xena growled and gave chase.

They were later to Mama's than they planned, but still made it in time for dinner.

# Chapter XLII

Xena and Gabrielle observed Christmas with Mama, Isaac, Sal and his family and Hercules at Mama's insistence. Xena didn't understand what exactly what they were celebrating, but it was near enough to solstice for her to accept it as a holiday. Gabrielle had long since given up trying to explain that she didn't commemorate most of the modern holidays and simply participated in her own way. They were both glad of the opportunity to thank the woman who had welcomed them into her heart and home without judgment, though and they did so with relish.

Sal, Isaac and Hercules each received a bone knife from the white buffalo Xena had killed so many years before. She had kept them carefully and carved a bit of her story on each of them. The children and Josephina were given Cheyenne beaded necklaces. Mama received the white buffalo robe over her protestations that she couldn't possibly accept something so valuable.

Each of them was given genuine scrolls from Gabrielle that told a different story. The uniqueness of the gift made Sal's eyes light up at the prospect of a new business venture - until Josephina smacked his head for allowing commercialism to intrude on such a sacred holiday. The story she gave Mama brought tears to her eyes.

"Thank you," she whispered to the bard when she was done reading.

"You've been a mother to me for... a few years, Mama," Gabrielle said with a smile. "It was the best way I could think of to say thank you... and goodbye."

"You're leaving?" This from Hercules. He hadn't had a chance to catch up with them yet and he felt a pang at the possibility that he might not get to.

Gabrielle bit her lip and nodded, looking directly in his eyes. "We have a chance to go home again. We're gonna take it."

"Will you be back?" Mama asked.

Gabrielle shook her head. "Probably not. Home for us is Greece. It...." She trailed off, at a loss for how to explain without actually saying anything revealing. Isaac broke the silence before it stretched on too painfully, opening his arms for a hug.

"We'll miss you, Gabrielle."

"Thanks, Isaac. I'm gonna miss ya'll too."

Mama got up from her seat and first embraced an embarrassed Xena and then a teary Gabrielle. "I expect you girls to be careful and be safe. And if you can come back here, we'll be glad to see you."

"Thank you, Mama," Gabrielle said. Xena didn't respond verbally, but she gently returned the hug.

Hercules walked them beck to the cabin later that evening. "So you found all the totems?" he said into the cold air, watching the fog of his breath billow out at his words. Xena nodded. "You think it will take you back home then... to the time we are from?"

"I dunno. I think so... I hope so."

"But you're gonna try?"

Xena nodded. "Yeah. We are. We've got nothing to lose...."

"... and everything to gain," Gabrielle finished. Hercules acquiesced. They reached the cabin and Hercules remained at the bottom of the steps while Xena and Gabrielle walked up them and paused.

"Do me a favor," the big man asked. "If you don't make it back to the beginning, go to Banff and wait for me. I'll come up in the summer to see if you're there or not. But I'd like to know if ya'll do stick around this time, okay?"

Gabrielle walked back down the steps and into his arms. They hugged for a long moment. "We will," she agreed softly. "Thank you Hercules... for everything."

He kissed her cheek tenderly. "Thank you, Gabrielle. You brought back a wonderful part of my life and I'm glad to have had you in mine."

"Hey," Xena called softly. "Can anybody get in on this little love fest?"

Both Gabrielle and Hercules opened an arm to her and they embraced briefly. Then the two women withdrew and moved back to the door.

"When are you leaving?" Hercules asked as they opened the door.

Xena shrugged. "Probably the next day or two. May as well go to the winter camp while the weather is decent."

"Do you need an escort?"

"No, Hercules, but thank you." And Hercules knew that Xena was thanking him for more than just the offer and he acknowledged it with a smile.

"Can't blame a guy for trying," he said teasingly. "Ya'll be safe, all right."

"You too, Herc."

It was cold but brightly sunny when they started out two days later. Shamrock for one was glad to be out in the open again. The panther and fox made periodic appearances, as though they were checking on the progress of the little party. But both Xena and Gabrielle had grown accustomed to their odd emergence and disappearances.

The trip was a lot like their travels in Greece had been and they found themselves falling into a comfortable, well-rehearsed routine. They weren't really bothered by thugs or brigands and the days were filled with games they had played and conversation. Mostly from Xena, surprisingly, as she shared tales about her early life in this strange, new world and the people she had shared it with. Gabrielle found herself looking forward to meeting the tribe Xena proudly called family.

Nights were filled with warm campfires and lots of star chasing. Two thousand years hadn't changed the argument.

"It's a bear."

"It's a dipper."

"Bear."

"Dipper."

"Xena...."

"Gabrielle... even in this time, star gazers call it the Big DIPPER."

"But SCIENTISTS call it Ursa, as in BEAR, Major."

They looked at one another and burst into laughter.

"You think we'll have this argument every night for the past two thousand years?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena kissed the top of the blonde head. "I sure hope so." Then they snuggled down to go to sleep. They had

high expectations of reaching the winter encampment sometime before midday on the morrow.

Strangely, the winter encampment was earily empty when they arrived, with no sign that it had been inhabited all winter. Xena surveyed the area and tried to remember what Hercules had told them about the reservations. She exchanged a grim look with Gabrielle and they mounted Shamrock and headed out into the wilderness.

Travel was slow as the weather increasingly got worse and by the time they reached the land Hercules had described, even their immortal blood was frozen nearly solid. Shamrock was terribly unhappy and the fox and the panther had disappeared once more.

Xena looked around, discontented with the conditions she saw. But before she could comment on it, Gabrielle spoke up.

"I think we may have to delay our trip, love. We can't leave family in this kind of shape." Xena smiled at Gabrielle's words, knowing they came from her heart even though she knew little of the people who her warrior called family.

It was touch and go about their reception until they were recognized and acknowledged by Kya, especially since Gabrielle was so obviously not one of them. Kya was now an old man and he welcomed them both warmly, taking a liberty in age he couldn't have managed in his youth. He cupped Xena's cheek and smiled.

"Hello, Kya."

"Zee-nah, my friend. Welcome." He beckoned them forward into his small dwelling. "And this is...?"

"This is Gabrielle. This is the reason I was searching for the totems."

"Is great honor, Gabrielle. Zee-nah legend of our people."

Gabrielle chuckled and took his hand. "Yeah, she's something of a legend of ours, too."

Xena cleared her throat and changed the subject, trying to will away the blush she felt coloring her skin. "Kya, why are things so bad here? Where are your supplies... your homes?"

And he told them of the raid that had been perpetrated on the Nation little more than a moon before. A raid that had wiped out many of the supplies and homes of the northern clan. The Blue Coats had forced them all to the reservation and now they were having to make due with too little shelter and too few supplies. Sickness was running rampant through the camp and many were not expected to survive the winter.

"Let us help, Kya. We can help build more shelters and do some hunting. Then you can help us go home."

"Finished journey, then?"

"Yes," Xena said simply.

"Good," he told them with a glad smile. "Come. Talk to council. Will help the people then will send you home."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged glances and a tiny, almost imperceptible nod. "We can do that. C'mon."

The trio walked from the hut and Kya picked up a small drum that hung on the wall outside. He banged on it steadily and precisely and a crowd gathered. He continued until the council arrived and pushed its way through the congregation at Kya's hut. Then with very few words, they and Xena and Gabrielle went around back to have their discussion.

The discussion was held in Cheyenne and Xena patiently translated for Gabrielle. First Kya explained who they were and what they meant to the local tribe. Gabrielle could have guessed that just by the looks they were receiving.

Then he went on to tell them of Xena's offer. That caused a loud outcry from the elders until a younger manthe war chief-stood up and motioned for silence.

"Zee-nah fought at Little Big Horn. Killed Custer. Led braves to victory over Blue Coats. She clan. I will follow."

Dead silence ensued his pronouncement. The war chief gave up his leadership only in times of peace, something they hadn't seen in some time. For him to relinquish his position to Xena spoke volumes of not only her abilities but also his faith in her personally.

And Xena proved out his faith in her in spades. Within just a few weeks, the warriors had turned their weapons of war into weapons of salvation for their people. Tomahawks chopped down brush to help create beds and arrows were used for hunting game that Xena was able to pinpoint even in the dead of winter. Then she taught them how to find fish at the bottom of a riverbed.

Gabrielle helped the women and children collect rocks and make mud to build a permanent structure to house the overflow of bodies in. It was hard, grueling work, especially in the dead of winter, but when they finally had it standing after two weeks of exertion, it was well worth the effort. People's attitudes had changed in that time - both towards Xena and Gabrielle and about life in general. They had been given hope again. And they all understood the reason behind the change.

The day before Xena and Gabrielle were to leave, heading off into the privacy of the plains to test the ritual for themselves, Kya called them into his dwelling. A load had been removed from his shoulders by the work they had done in taking care of his people. But the look he wore was a cross between consternation and confusion.

He held in his hand the parchment Xena had given him. Though he remembered the ritual he'd performed that had brought Xena to them, he had wanted to check the details against his memory to be sure he instructed them correctly. Now especially, after just a very limited time on this reservation, he could truly understand both the want and the need to return to the home of one's roots. He marveled at Xena's patience. But he found the scroll... mystifying.

"Hello, Kya."

The shaman looked up from the parchment when the two women walked through the doorway. He was again struck by how well suited they were to one another and wondered if it had always been so. He wondered though, why Gabrielle's green eyes were so much older than Xena's. Then he had a sudden flash of insight. If he had brought Xena, who had not aged a day in the forty years he'd known her, from the distant past, could Gabrielle have possibly lived through it? He didn't expect to actually ever have an answer, but it would give

him an interesting question to ponder until he died.

Kya realized he had been silent too long and that Xena was giving him that raised eyebrow look. He motioned them to sit.

"Forgive old man, Zee-nah. Get lost in thinking too easy."

Xena smirked. "Kya, my partner is a bard. I'm used to it." Then she squirmed to dodge the backhand that hit her squarely in the belly.

"Watch it, Warrior Princess. We have plenty of time for me to torture you, ya know."

Blue eyes twinkled mischievously. "Promise?"

Green sparkled back at her, forgetting their audience for a moment. "Uh uh," Gabrielle replied. "Guarantee."

Kya's laughter brought them back to the present. "You old couple. Been married long time."

"You think we act married?" Gabrielle asked with a smile.

"Yes," Kya answered with a vigorous nod. "Like parents." Then his face turned abruptly serious. "Zee-nah, where did you find?"

Xena scowled. "In the cave, Kya... just like you did."

He shook his head. "Not same. Different ritual."

Xena ran a hand through her hair. "What?? You mean we can't go home - I collected all those totems for nothing??"

"No, mean ritual different. Still need totems."

Xena blew out a big breath and Gabrielle casually stepped up behind the warrior and began rubbing her back. Xena relaxed into the touch though it wasn't noticeable to anyone save Gabrielle. The bard smiled at Kya.

"Can you explain what you did and how it differs from what we will need to do?"

"That is key... this for two. Will take both to do."

Xena nodded. "That almost makes sense, though how anyone knew there would be two of us...." She looked at Gabrielle. Gabrielle shrugged.

"I have learned not to question some things too deeply, Xena. I either don't like or don't understand the answer "

"Gods know I can understand that," Xena muttered. "All right, Kya... spill it." She took Gabrielle's hand. "We have places to be."

It took them nearly a week to reach the sacred ground Kya directed them to. They had returned to the spot where he had originally performed the ritual that had brought Xena to the New World so far out of her own time. Xena had some serious niggling doubts about the whole process now, but figured she owed it to Gabrielle to at least try.

"Xena?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you sure about this? I mean... I get the feeling you have some... doubt... or whatever. I don't want you to do this just for me. I'm content to stay here and live out our lives together from this point."

Xena took Gabrielle in her arms and pulled her into a nearly crushing hug. Then she brushed a kiss to the top of her head, feeling Gabrielle return the favor on her clothed chest. "Sweetheart, let me be real honest here... even with doubts, I would do this for you, because I really believe you would be happier if we got to travel through all that time together. But to be completely selfish... \*I\* want this. I want to be there when you reestablish the Amazon Nation or meet Genghis Khan or write the Scottish Play. I missed so much this go round and if I have the opportunity to change that... even if I have doubts about its success... I'm gonna try. Because I want it. I want us to have that time together."

Gabrielle didn't say a word. She didn't have to. She simply lifted her tear-filled eyes and embraced Xena for all she was worth. Xena pulled back slightly after a few minutes and wiped away the lone tear that slowly rolled down Gabrielle's face.

"I don't say it enough, my bard," bringing a smile to Gabrielle's face with the endearment. "But I love you. You still give my life meaning and joy and regardless of whether this works or not, I'm gonna do a better job of showing you that. You deserve that... we both do."

"Time for us to be the greater good maybe?"

"Maybe, yeah... I think it is."

The two women separated and began collecting wood and chips needed for the fire and placed them in the center of the fire ring that had already been prepared. Gabrielle laid the fire and started it, while Xena lifted the saddlebags from Shamrock's back. She groomed him carefully once more before removing the bits of tack he had left.

"Go on, boy," she said with a gentle slap on his rear. "You've been a good friend, but it's time for me to set you free. Go find you a pretty filly and make some beautiful babies, all right?" She took his head between her hands and kissed his nose. "Thank you, Shamrock," said as a whisper.

The mustang nodded and butted her in the chest. Then he reared and walked away, but only went so far as to be out of the light cast from fire ring.

The fox and the panther stepped forward and took up sentinel positions on either side of the fire and no amount of coaxing could convince them to move. Xena and Gabrielle physically relocated them, picking them up and repositioning them out of the fire ring to wait beside Shamrock. The spirit guides simply followed both

warrior and bard back into the sacred ring and resumed their stance by the fire.

"You think they know something we don't?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena shrugged. "Maybe. I don't think it will hurt to have them here, though."

Gabrielle nodded her agreement.

Xena looked around when a familiar tingling skittered up her spine, but she didn't see anything out of the ordinary. With a shrug, she returned her attention to the task before her.

They placed the six totems equally around the circle. Xena had explained her journeys behind each one and Gabrielle had been amazed at the connections to both herself and to those they called friend. She idly wondered how it all tied together, then turned her attention to Xena.

Without a word, the two women stripped naked and entered the water much as Kya had done forty odd years before. The freezing temperature made them scrub much faster than he did and they were happy to remove themselves from its icy wetness and dry with the thick blanket they'd set aside strictly for that purpose.

They stood in the circle as close to the fire as they could manage, thankful for the distinct lack of wind inside the fire ring. Xena picked up the two pots of paint they had made - one green, one blue - and began painting non-descript symbols on Gabrielle's body as she chanted low in her throat. She then painted stripes of blue and green on her own face before passing the paint to Gabrielle.

The bard accepted the paint and returned the favor... chanting the words Xena had taught her as she decorated the warrior's body in patterns she felt more than understood. Finally, she striped her own cheeks and set the pots out of the circle. Then Xena and Gabrielle began a rhythmic dance that was at once both non-sexual and highly erotic, continuing to chant the words that the parchment scroll had given them.

The dance tempo increased, as did the recitation of words and Xena lifted the chakram from its position in the circle. It like the other totems had begun to glow with an unearthly energy and she felt the warmth of its power flow through her when she raised it above her head.

Beyond the circle, the wind blew fiercely and Shamrock had gone for cover against the rumbling thunder and flashing lightning that was increasingly evident in alarming proportions.

In the distance, a lone rider saw the commotion that seemed to light up the horizon and he raced towards it. Perhaps here at last was the trail he had been searching for.

They continued to dance, closer and closer without touching. The totems pulsed with light and energy and as the sun began to drop beneath the horizon, Xena sliced into the palm of her left hand and lifted it to Gabrielle's lips.

Gabrielle felt her incisors lengthen and her eyes change from green to red. She extended her tongue and swiped it over the cut, licking her lips and savoring the taste of Xena's life essence. A low growl rumbled in Xena's chest at the sheer eroticism of the act and she waited impatiently for the bard to return the favor, her canines extending in anticipation.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity to the warrior, Gabrielle took the chakram and cut her own left palm, proffering the bleeding extremity to Xena. Xena accepted with alacrity, relishing the sweet tang of Gabrielle's blood and smiling at the moan she felt emanating from the bard's chest.

They were unaware of the storm growing outside their circle and they clasped their left hands together, letting the blood flow and mingle jointly. Their right hands each held a side of the chakram, which now pulsed steadily and brightly. The five remaining totems pulsed until their energy arced and raced towards the chakram.

The chakram glowed and sent out a light that surrounded them, drawing the energy of the approaching storm to them.

Ares pulled to a quick stop a short distance from the light, sensing the end of his journey... a strength and presence he had only felt occasionally in two thousand years. He was trying to reconcile what his mind knew with what his eyes were seeing. But there was no way to deny that the tattoo on the shorter woman's back belonged to Gabrielle. These were not descendants or reincarnations. This was the real deal... and if they were here

"IMMORTALS???" he whispered. "But how??"

Xena lowered her mouth toward Gabrielle's neck and Gabrielle extended her mouth toward Xena's. As fangs sank into flesh, lightning converged on them. And the world was blinded for a very long moment.

#### **CHOOSE YOUR ENDING**

**SUCCESS** 

**FAILURE** 

## Chapter XLIII - A: SUCCESS

Ares closed his eyes when the crash of thunder and the flash of lightning rocked the world. And when he opened them, Xena and Gabrielle were no longer in his sights.

"NOOOOOO!!!" he screamed in frustration, before his own world began to vortex and he disappeared into the center of it. When sound and motion stopped, the only thing left on the prairie were a fox and a panther curled up together near a small hillock and a cream colored mustang leading a herd towards the stream.

The fire had burned low, though there was still a little bit of heat and light coming from it. Lying side by side on a fur bedroll were two women - one with eyes closed contentedly and the other with her hands under her head looking up at the night sky.

Gabrielle sat up, leaning back on her elbows and studying the vast expanse of stars overhead. "Looking out at the cosmos makes you think - about where we are - where we've been - where we're going now."

Xena rolled onto her side and leaned up on one elbow. "Yeah - and like the bigger now. I mean, Gabrielle, what are we gonna do? Wander around Greece our whole lives looking for trouble? Why don't we go away? Far away? Whaddya say?"

Bright pink sparkles and a shower of rose petals put an abrupt halt to the conversation. Gabrielle smiled. Xena just rolled her eyes and smirked.

"How's about a totally rocking time at the kick-ass vacation spot in the Aegean?" She looked around at the crude outdoor accommodations and popped a chaise lounge into place, then dropped onto it gracefully. "Hey, hot babes! What's shakin'? Did I hear you two discussing some radical travel plans? I have a gnarly idea for that."

Gabrielle looked at Xena. "You know there is someone else out there."

Xena nodded. "Yeah... has been for the last half candlemark. I'll go...."

Suddenly there was dead silence - no sound at all... not from the breeze or the animals or the water that trickled in the tiny stream behind them. The fire froze unmoving, as did Gabrielle. Xena turned her focus to Aphrodite and raised an eyebrow in question.

"We need to talk." Dite said gravely and leaned forward on the edge of her chair, resting her arms on her knees.

Xena agreed, seeing clearly the serious intent in the goddess's blue eyes. "What's up?"

"Xena, how much do you love Gabrielle?" Dite paused, knowing she'd flustered the normally reticent warrior. "I want you to think about something, all right?" She waited for Xena to consent. "I want you to think about how you would feel if you had to spend eternity alive without Gabrielle."

Xena's eyes widened and she swallowed hard, but she didn't say a word. That was a possibility she'd never honestly contemplated. She had her own distinct impressions of just how long their lives together were really going to be and pondering anything less... especially if it meant eternity alone, was simply too painful to bear up under scrutiny.

"Why are you asking me this?" came the hoarse whisper when Xena could no longer bear the silence.

"Xena, you have one chance here... one chance to choose YOUR greater good. Sometimes... sometimes you have to make a commitment," glancing pointedly at Gabrielle's still form, "and stick with it." Dite hesitated, then continued more harshly. "But I warn you to choose wisely, because you won't get another chance at this. And I guarantee you I won't let her be alone this time."

"You know something," the warrior accused flatly.

"Yeah, I do," Aphrodite responded candidly, thinking of the journals she'd found in her private library and the tears she had cried when she'd read them. She wondered, but some things were better left as mysteries. "But she doesn't and you can't. You're gonna have to live for a very long time to learn what I know... I've given you all the warning I can. What you do next is up to you... and it will determine your eternal fate."

Xena sat thoughtfully silent for a bit before sighing and dipping her head in acknowledgement. She squirmed uncomfortably, not wanting to be beholden, but needing to know. "Dite, when this is all over...." When not if, because she was determined to do right by Gabrielle and herself this time. She had a gut instinct telling her that this was no ploy, no joke of the gods and a misjudgment on her part would cost her everything she held dear.

"Yes?"

Aphrodite waited, but Xena seemed unable or unwilling to put her thoughts into words.

"Look, babe... I'll tell ya what. You do whatever it is you feel ya need to do with Kimchi boy toy out there and then if you're up to it, I'll see about that rockin' vacation on Lesbos. A couple weeks time-out maybe, to you know, like, put the priorities in order, get a few things totally settled between ya." She gave Xena another meaningful look. "Then when you're ready, you and the Gabster can come on up to Olympus. We could have a bitchin' girl fest and I could, you know, let you in on a couple things you like, need to know... answer whatever questions I can."

"Like our immortality?"

Dite blinked in surprise and cleared her throat. "Uh, among other things, yeah." She raised her hand to move time along again when Xena stopped her.

"You're doing this for her, aren't you?" Xena asked softly.

Dite had the grace to blush, but she never broke eye contact with the warrior. "I've got my reasons," she answered, laying a hand on Xena's chest. Xena gasped at the momentary emptiness she felt. "But I meant what I said. You won't get another chance." Dite removed her hand and Xena struggled to breathe.

"Xena?"

The warrior looked at Gabrielle, trying to get her mind back in the game. "Huh?"

"You all right? You kinda faded out on me."

Xena rubbed a hand across her eyes. "Sorry... what were we talking about?"

"Well, you mentioned going away and Aphrodite popped in and volunteered Lesbos as a great getaway."

"Lesbos, huh?" Xena smiled engagingly. "Might actually get a chance to finally meet Sappho. Whaddya think?"

"Oooh, I think you know what I think. But we've gotta get rid of whoever is roaming around out there first," she added under her breath.

"Well, you girls remember what I said. Lesbos is hoppin' and I think you would have a totally wicked time. Just lemme know, 'kay? Toodles!" And Dite left in a shower of sparkles and rose petals before either Xena or Gabrielle could get a word in edgewise."

Gabrielle shook her head. "She is so blonde sometimes!"

"Careful there, my bard," Xena chuckled. "So are you."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes at the warrior. "Are you calling me ditzy?"

Xena riffled her fingers through the pale locks then kissed the fair hair. "Nope, I'm calling you blonde." She shrugged though there was a twinkle in her eye. "You are blonde this week."

"Why you...." Gabrielle sputtered before she pounced on Xena and began a tickle fight which ended abruptly when a slight Japanese monk stumbled into their campsite, only to stop when the edge of Xena's chakram touched his throat.

"I search for Xena."

"You've found her," the warrior said casually. "Whaddya want?"

"I bring a message from Akemi. She seeks your help."

Xena got a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that matched the emptiness in her heart when Dite had touched her. The girl had lied to her and used her before. She wasn't going to let it happen again, especially with Aphrodite's warning floating around in her mind.

"No."

"But...." stammered the monk.

"Xena?" Gabrielle said at the same time.

"No, Gabrielle. He can tell me her problem and I'll advise him to the best of my ability, but I am not getting mixed up with her again. She caused way more trouble than she's worth and I'm not cleaning up behind her any more."

"But Xena...." Gabrielle turned perplexed green eyes towards the warrior and found nothing but love and compassion in the blue eyes that met hers. "What about the greater good?" said on a whispered breath.

Xena cupped the bard's cheek in her hand, heedless of their audience. "Gabrielle, sometimes \*WE\* have to be the greater good. We can't solve the world's problems and I'm tired of everyone from my past thinking I owe them something. Akemi, especially, I don't owe her a thing and I'm not gonna be fooled by her again. I've paid my dues already. It's time to focus on us for a while."

Gabrielle examined the truth she saw in Xena's eyes. "You'll tell me the story?"

"On our way to Lesbos, I promise."

Xena dropped her hand and turned her attention back to the monk. "Talk."

"Akemi is dead."

"Yeah and...? She's been that way for a while now."

"I've seen her."

"Great, a freak who sees dead people. You got anything else or you gonna keep wasting my time?" Xena muttered harshly, still feeling the emptiness in her soul now that she was no longer touching Gabrielle. The monk looked taken aback by her attitude.

"You are not what I expected."

"Yeah, well, you don't know the whole story either. So either talk or don't, but make a decision. Gabrielle and I have somewhere else to be and surprisingly, you're not invited."

"Xena...." Gabrielle chided softly.

Xena sighed and motioned him to take a seat. Gabrielle stirred the embers and fixed tea for everyone, then took a seat beside Xena, stunned when the warrior leaned over and casually clasped her hand. Not that she doubted Xena's feelings for her, but she had never been overly demonstrative, especially in public.

The monk haltingly began to talk. It took him a good candlemark to falter through his story and Xena's patience was stretched to the snapping point by the time he stopped speaking. But her mind had been working as he talked and she already had most of the details worked out.

She jerked her dark head at him. "Get some sleep. I'll have something for you in the morning."

He looked at her doubtfully, but the expression in those ice blue eyes didn't change. He finally nodded and moved to the opposite side of the fire, curling into the blanket Gabrielle gave him.

"Xena?"

"Trust me, Gabrielle. This is the best solution for everyone concerned. I'm not... I won't...." She drew a deep breath. "I know I don't say it enough, my bard, but I love you. You are still what gives my life meaning and joy and I'm gonna do a better job of showing you that. You deserve that... we both do."

Gabrielle gave Xena a gently sweet smile. "I love you too and I think I'd really like that."

Xena pulled the bard close for an intensely passionate kiss. She took her time, tracing Gabrielle's lips with her tongue and accepting the invitation when Gabrielle opened her mouth. For long minutes they tasted one another, exploring and teasing until they were both a bit breathless.

"G'wan," Xena said, though her darkened eyes had another message altogether. "May as well get some sleep. This is gonna take me a while."

Instead, Gabrielle poured them each another cup of tea and settled in beside the warrior. "I'd rather keep you company," curling an arm around Xena's bicep and leaning her head on the warrior's shoulder.

Xena smiled and kissed the blonde head. "I'd like that," she said tenderly, before turning her attention to the parchment in front of her, trying valiantly to remember how to write the characters of the monk's language correctly.

When morning came, the man left with the parchment in hand, though he was still disgruntled. Akemi was C:/Users/Ceri/.../d\_bloodbond1.html 410/415

going to be most displeased that he'd failed to convince the warrior to return with him. She'd been so sure Xena would do anything for her....

Ares looked into his scrying bowl and watched Xena send the monk away with instructions, but not accompanying him herself. "Now I wonder," he muttered, "what exactly is up with that?" watching the monk walk off mumbling to himself. It was totally unlike Xena to refuse to help someone in need since she became a do-gooder. His eyes went unfocused and he had to wonder what he'd missed while he'd been busy with those lovely little skirmishes in Persia and Sparta. Ares shook his dark head to clear his mind of the past and focus on the puzzle the present had just handed him. But when he turned his attention back to Xena and Gabrielle, they were gone.

Xena and Gabrielle headed out towards the sea, hoping to find passage to Lesbos from the nearest port. When Mt. Olympus came into view, however....

"Gabrielle, would you mind terribly if we stopped by to see Aphrodite on the way out?"

The bard felt of Xena's forehead then pulled back with a puzzled look. "You feel cool. What's up?"

Xena shrugged. "I just wanted to say thanks. She's been a good friend and we really don't have many of those left. I thought we could just...."

Gabrielle jumped into Xena's arms and kissed her soundly. "I think that is a fabulous idea."

Aphrodite saw them coming and popped them into her boudoir. "Well, this is a totally unexpected, but radically bitchin' surprise. But I'm glad you girls stopped by. We've got tons of gnarly stuff to catch up on and you're in for a bacchae of a bombshell! C'mon in."

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged glances, then followed Dite further into her quarters, stepping into a new unknown future together and closing the door to the past firmly behind them.

## THE END

10/03 & 02/04 - 10/04

#### Chapter XLIII - B: FAILURE

Ares closed his eyes when the crash of thunder and the flash of lightning rocked the world. And when he opened them, Xena and Gabrielle were kneeling collapsed against one another.

"This must be my lucky day," he muttered to himself. After nearly two millennia of castigating himself for his

C:/Users/Ceri/.../d bloodbond1.html

411/415

part in what had happened to Xena on Mt. Fuji, he found himself with an unexpected second chance. He realized with a start that it must have been Gabrielle that he had sensed in those odd times throughout history when he'd \*almost\* felt Xena's presence and some things fell into place for him.

The fact the both Xena and Gabrielle were obviously immortal were just icing on the cake and he planned to take any advantage of that that he could. It was times like this especially that he hated having to conserve his powers. Popping in and out was just so much easier and less time consuming. But there was nothing to be done for it now, so he remounted his horse and headed towards them purposefully.

Xena and Gabrielle leaned against one another for support breathing deeply as the aftereffects of so much energy flowing through them receded. Slowly they opened their eyes and gazed at one another and Xena smiled sadly.

"Guess it didn't work, my bard. I'm... I'm sorry."

Gabrielle wrapped her arms around Xena neck and returned the smile, though hers was bright and not full of the sadness Xena's showed.

"Xena, we have to focus on the time we have ahead of us, not the time we have already missed. There's a whole world out there just waiting for us to experience it... together."

"I know... I had just hoped we could start over. I... I feel like I've missed so much time with you."

Gabrielle urged Xena's head down until their lips were just touching. "Look at it this way," she said softly as she brushed their lips together. "We have an eternity," kissing again, a little longer and deeper contact. "To try to catch up." This time the kiss went on until Xena's hands clenched at Gabrielle's waist, drawing them closer together.

Gabrielle smiled into the contact and felt Xena do the same and they separated with several tiny kisses, only pulling back as far a necessary to look into one another's eyes.

"Always trying to see the bright side?"

Gabrielle chuckled lightly. "Yeah. It's better for the long term outlook."

Xena gave her a real smile. "Yeah, I guess it would be." She drew a deep breath, but whatever she was beginning to say was lost on the wind as Ares reached the fire circle and several things happened simultaneously.

"Well, well... now isn't this just... cozy," Ares commented with a smirk.

Both the fox and the panther rose to their haunches, hackles standing on end and fangs exposed, causing the war god to take an undignified pace away from them. Xena and Gabrielle scrambled to their feet, stepping in front of one another to shield their naked partner from Ares' view. For his part, Ares crossed his arms over his broad chest and let his smirk broaden, though he kept a judicious eye on the two animals that seemed to be watching him with almost malicious intent.

Xena reached for her saddle bags, lifting them and digging through them to find a shirt for both herself and Gabrielle. It felt wonderful... now that the adrenaline rush of the experience had worn off, they were both feeling the cold cut through them and even a little defense was better than none.

"Oh, please don't cover up on my account. I was thoroughly enjoying the view."

"Whaddya want, Ares?"

The god stroked his beard as if in thought, though he was careful not to approach any closer. "What do I want? Hmm... Well, let's see...." He looked at Gabrielle. "Hey, Blondie. Ya miss me?"

Gabrielle looked at Ares with disdain. "In a word... NO."

He clutched at his chest dramatically. "I'm wounded. After all, isn't it because of me that you two are finally together? I mean, I'm the one who sent Xena into the future, right? Don't you think I should get some consideration for helping the two of you back together again?"

"What do you want, Ares?" Xena asked again, pronouncing each word distinctly.

"I'd think it would be obvious, Xena. I want you. We have a whole new world to conquer and I...."

Without warning and so fast Xena nearly missed it, Gabrielle erupted, putting the force of her frustration of Ares continued interference in their lives behind the straight-from-the-shoulder punch. There was no sound until impact - fist to face and the crack of bone, the crumple of cartilage and the spurt of hot blood. It took another five seconds before Ares' behind hit the ground from the force of the blow.

"Thun ob a bith!" he screamed, glaring forcefully from behind the hand that covered his nose and mouth. Gabrielle leaned over him and smiled mirthlessly darkly gratified when he instinctively winced away from her.

"Let me explain something to you, war god and I'm only gonna say this once, all right? I'll put it into words even \*you\* can understand." She stood and wrapped and arm around Xena's waist, who obligingly curled an arm around the bard's shoulder. "MINE, not yours. So stay away from her... and from us."

Ares looked at Gabrielle in disbelief. No one spoke to him like that and got away with it. Of course, no one had ever broken his nose before either and he was going to have to look into how she managed that little feat a little more deeply.

Xena walked forward and knelt next to him with what could almost be described as sympathetic pity in her eyes.

"Hurts like a bitch, doesn't it?" She removed his hands from his face and winced. "Tch... you're gonna need to set that before it'll heal." She stood and moved back into the fire circle to stand at Gabrielle's side, gratified when the bard immediately wrapped herself around Xena's body.

"Word to the wise, Ares. You've got to worry a lot more about what she'll do to you," squeezing Gabrielle to her and smiling at the return pressure, "than you do about what \*I\* will. She's had a lot more years practice honing HER many skills."

Xena brushed a kiss across the top of the blonde head. "You sure you wanna chance it?"

Ares rose, keeping one hand on his nose to staunch the river of blood that flowed through it. He was startled to see two sets of eyes turn red and suddenly many things were crystal clear to him.

"You're bacchae!! You're immortal because...." He backed away, wishing for the nth time he was still powerful enough to manage the things he had in his prime. "Damnation!" He jerked his nose back into joint and the tears ran freely down his face.

"This isn't over Xena," he said. "I'll find you again when you're not on holy ground and we'll... talk," he said with what he intended to be a rakish smirk, but what the deformation of his face turned in to a hideous grimace. "And don't think I'll forget about this, Gabrielle. One day you will both be mine."

Without another word he mounted his horse and turned it towards the east, loping away from them into further darkness at a ground eating pace.

They watched him go before turning back to the fire. Xena stoked it while Gabrielle put on water for tea and got out a bit of food from their rations to make into soup. Even with the exchange of blood she was exhausted and the cold simply drained her faster.

Xena laid out the blankets, chuckling when she saw the panther and fox had curled up together on the far side and were resting comfortably together despite the cold temperatures now making themselves known inside the circle.

"Guess we'll wash the paint off tomorrow," Gabrielle commented when a pair of long johns and socks hit her squarely in the chest. Xena nodded.

"I think one ice bath a day is enough for anyone."

They sat down together, side by side and watched the flames hiss and crackle in the fitful wind that blew while they waited for the water to boil. Gabrielle poured the water into their cups and let the tea steep while she stirred the stew that was slowly warming up. Then she sat back against Xena's chest, sighing when the warrior wrapped long arms around her and stared out into the darkness of the plains night.

"So, where do we go from here, bard-o-mine?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "Well, we promised Hercules we'd meet him in Banff for a while if it didn't work. After that...." She shrugged again. "I dunno. I'd like to go back to Greece... maybe visit Aphrodite for a bit."

Xena nodded soberly. "She was a good friend to you, huh?"

"Yeah," Gabrielle sighed. "She was."

Xena considered then agreed. "All right. We'll go see Herc and let him know what's going on and then we'll go visit Aphrodite. After that...."

"After that, the future is ours to make of it what we will... as long as we make it together."

Xena tilted the bard's chin up and captured her lips in a long passionate exchange while the pot bubbled unattended and the stars winked back in silent indulgence.

THE END

10/03 & 02/04 - 10/04