

# ~ Differing Shades of Grey ~

by

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Content Warning: The language isn't too bad, but there is a lot of violence. It is mainly spousal abuse. If this makes you uncomfortable, please skip over this story. There is also love between two women. If this bothers you, no one's forcing you to read this. You may skip over it.

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*"Perdicas, I know what love is now... it's life. Everything is united by love alone." Gabrielle gently caressed her new husband's hair as she gazed into his eyes. Thinking she saw a flicker of something in his eyes, she stood on her toes and kissed him. He returned it in full. As the newlyweds continued their embrace, they were unaware of the danger approaching them.*

*"Aw... love, love, love, love... Oh it unites, you're right; and hate divides." The sound of the voice caused the new couple to break apart and see who had interrupted them. Gabrielle didn't have to look to know the voice belonged to Callisto. A shiver went up her spine as her fears were confirmed when she found the insane blonde dismounting from her horse. "Let's see which one's stronger, shall we?"*

*"What do you want? We're unarmed." Perdicas asked with his arms wide as the murderess walked towards them, drawing her sword while she moved. Gabrielle couldn't help but think that Perdicas was being a bit stupid by asking that. What did he think she wanted?*

*"Good. That makes things simple then, doesn't it?" she asked with a tilt of her head before raising her sword to strike him. Before the blade could reach him, however, a familiar whirring sound reached Gabrielle's ears and she knew they'd be safe. The sound of metal hitting metal filled the air as Xena's chakram hit the blade of the sword, causing it to miss its target. Gabrielle used the distraction to move Perdicas out of danger, since it seemed to her that he wasn't going to do it anytime soon.*

*"Xena!" hissed Callisto as the dark haired warrior rode up on her golden mare, effortlessly catching the flying disk that came back to her. "So good of you to join us. You're just in time for the main event." the insane woman said.*

*"I don't think so." Xena growled before flipping off of Argo and drawing her sword. "You're going back to the prison, Callisto." she promised as she advanced on her foe.*

*"No!" the blonde murderess cried before letting out an earsplitting scream. She charged at Xena with her sword raised, ready to kill her foe. The dark haired warrior met the blade with her own, pushing back towards the blonde before swooping her sword in the opposite direction. Callisto met her blade, but didn't expect the elbow that accompanied it. Xena elbowed her squarely in the face but the blonde recovered*

*quickly enough to parry a fatal blow from Xena's sword. She swung her own sword horizontally, but Xena ducked under it before sending another elbow into her stomach. Taken by surprise, Callisto doubled over. She had known Xena was quick, but she had never seen her move **that** fast before.*

*Using the delay to her advantage, Xena brought her knee up and it connected with the blonde's face. Now dazed, Callisto swung blindly at the air in an attempt to block any attacks that were sent her way. That turned out to be a mistake, for once she had swung, Xena used the opening to send the hilt of her sword flying into the side of Callisto's head. This move successfully knocked the blonde murderess into oblivion.*

*"Are you okay?" Xena asked emotionlessly as she tied the unconscious woman up.*

*"We're fine. Thank you, Xena." Gabrielle said quietly. She looked over at Perdicas, who was staring at the unconscious form of Callisto. She nudged him in the side.*

*"Oh! Thank you, Xena. I don't know what we would have done if you hadn't shown up." he said with fake gratitude. Gabrielle made a mental note to herself to give him a lesson in manners later.*

*"I'm sure." the dark haired woman replied, being just as sarcastic as he was. Without a word, she shackled chains around the ankles of the would be killer, along with her wrists. She also removed the woman's weapons, conducting a thorough search to make sure she didn't miss anything. After that, she grabbed the length of chain between the woman's wrists and pulled her up, halfway dragging her over to Argo.*

*"Xena, what's wrong?" Gabrielle asked as she watched her friend chain Callisto to the saddle horn. She had never seen the warrior this quiet. Not even when they were first starting out together.*

*"Nothing's wrong." Xena replied in the emotionless tone she had used earlier. "I'm taking Callisto back to the jail. You two be more careful." she said, looking over at Gabrielle. Her eyes were a bit softer than they had been before, but a hard look replaced the gentleness as she spoke again. "I won't be around to protect you next time." she warned before sending Argo into a gallop.*

*'Oh Xena... if only you hadn't left me there.' the blonde figure thought as she tried to block out the pain she was feeling. "Why didn't you come back, Xena? Why did you leave me with him?" The blonde whimpered as a new wave of pain wracked her body and another memory filled her mind.*

*"Perdicas, why were you so rude to Xena? She saved our lives." Gabrielle chastised her husband as they walked home later that afternoon.*

*"Are you saying that I'm not capable of protecting us?" her husband asked, turning to face her with a strange expression on his face. The bard recognized it as anger; but she wasn't used to seeing it on gentle Perdicas' face.*

*"Perdicas, Callisto is a raving lunatic. You're a man that has just given up the sword." Gabrielle started off, trying to choose her words wisely, "Even if your intentions were noble, she would have cut you down. You saw what she nearly did when you told her we were unarmed." The bard certainly remembered what had happened, the memory sending a shiver up her spine. "If Xena hadn't showed up-"*

Gabrielle's words were interrupted by a harsh slap, causing her to violently turn her head to the side. The blonde blinked as she raised a hand to her cheek. Had Perdicas just hit her? She slowly turned her head to face her husband, finding a man she didn't recognize in his place.

"We would have been just fine if Xena hadn't showed up. I would have killed that bitch instead of just knocking her out!" he hissed at his wife.

"Perdicas, what were you going to kill her with? Your bare hands?" she asked, unable to stop the words from leaving her mouth. Yet another slap, this time harder.

"Shut up! I would have been able to do it, and you know it." he snarled at her. "The only reason she's still alive is because your little bitch showed up." Now it was his turn to be slapped.

"Don't you ever... **ever** talk about her like that again. Do you understand?!" she yelled at him, losing control of her temper.

A look of shock appeared on Perdicas' face when he felt the slap and Gabrielle immediately felt guilty. What had she done? Their wedding had just been yesterday and already her marriage was falling apart.

**'And is that really such a bad thing?'** she found herself thinking. **'Yes! If this doesn't work out, where am I supposed to go? I can't go back to Xena. Not after I abandoned her.'** Gabrielle turned her attention back to Perdicas. "I...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." she apologized as he shook his head.

"It's alright." he assured her. "Let's just... Let's go home." he said before leading her further away from the beach, back to their small home. Gabrielle looked back to the place she had last seen Xena and sadly wondered if she would keep her promise to visit. In her heart, Gabrielle knew she wouldn't.

As they approached the house, Perdicas turned back to her.

"Gabrielle, I'm sorry. It's just... hard. I'm trying to go back to the peaceful life I had before you left, but it's still so hard being seen as weak..." he apologized. "You know I love you, right?" he asked. When she nodded her head, he continued. "Gabrielle, I would never intentionally hurt you. I sometimes just get so angry, though, that I can't control my actions."

"Perdicas, you aren't weak. It takes the bigger man to not fight; to throw away his sword." Gabrielle assured him. "As for your temper, I can understand that. It's hard readjusting."

"Forgive me?" Perdicas asked with a lost expression on his face. Gabrielle's heart melted at the sight and she nodded.

"I forgive you."

**'Those were the second worst words I've ever spoken.'** Gabrielle thought as she tried to block out the pain, both physical and emotional, once again. Of course, the worst words she had ever spoken had been the damning 'I do' she said at their wedding. **'You weren't really sorry, were you?'** she wondered in her mind, afraid that if she spoke out loud she would wake the man lying next to her in the bed. **'No, I doubt you were ever**

*sorry for the things you did.*' The young woman sighed, and immediately regretted it. She just hurt so much.

Xena had always worked so hard to protect her and had worried over every little cut she received when they traveled together. Then, she had left her with the one person that did more damage to her than any mercenary or thug ever did.

*'The Gods are probably laughing at the irony.'* she thought with a self-depreciating snort. The noise caused her husband to roll onto his side and lay a hand on her tender stomach. Gabrielle drew in a quick gasp of breath, once again trying hard to block out the pain. What had Xena taught her? To focus...

Gabrielle once again found herself in the memories of the good times, before she had committed to married life a little over a year ago. Exciting adventures with Xena filled her mind, blocking out everything else she was feeling. Even though her and the dark warrior didn't always get along, Xena had never struck her. Well, there was the time that Ares had caused her to go into a rage, but Gabrielle didn't think that counted. Now the man that was supposed to love and cherish her forever hit her on a daily basis. The young blonde woman desperately wished for the time she had spent feeling loved by Xena.

The far off cries of a baby drew Gabrielle out of her thoughts. Her body immediately began to respond.

*'Oh Gods, not now...'* she thought before carefully removing her husband's hand from her midriff. Ignoring the sharp pains shooting through her sides, she got up from the bed and stumbled towards the doorway. Sometimes she wondered if going on was worth it. Sometimes she wished Perdicas would lose control entirely and just kill her. Of course, he was too cruel of a man to do that. Instead, he kept her alive so he could use her as a human practice dummy. Perhaps the only thing that kept her from letting go was the one that was crying out for her.

"Hold on Nexa. Mommy's coming." she whispered as she made her way to the nursery. Nexa. Gabrielle had named her that because she had wanted to honor her friend Xena somehow. She knew that if she named the girl Xena, though, Perdicas wouldn't be happy. So, she simply switched the letters in the name around a bit and Perdicas was none the wiser. Luckily for her, his intelligence hadn't increased during the year that she was with Xena, or he may have figured it out.

"See? I told you I was coming." Gabrielle said gently as she lifted the baby out of the crib. As she brought little Nexa up to her breast, the former Amazon bard looked around the small room. It wasn't much, considering they didn't have a lot of money, but it was enough to get by with. Inside Nexa's crib was the toy Xena had gotten her for Solstice that year; her little Lammy. Next to it was the blanket that Gabrielle had sewn herself. The color matched Nexa's blue green eyes.

That was another reason why she had named her daughter after Xena. She had some of her old friend's eyes in her. Whenever she looked into the orbs, she was reminded of the great woman she had had the pleasure of traveling with. Oh how she wished she could go back to her; but she couldn't just leave Nexa behind and the road was no place for a mother and baby. Besides, she had no idea where to find her friend.

A giggle brought Gabrielle out of her thoughts. She looked down and found sparkling

blue eyes looking up at her. She sighed before bending her head down and leaving a gentle kiss on the baby's temple.

"Who's mommy's sweet little girl?" she asked in a playful whisper. In response, Nexa reached out with a chubby hand and latched onto Gabrielle's nose. The small blonde chuckled, causing her ribs to protest once more. "Ow. Don't make mommy laugh, Nexa." she said with a smile. As she gazed lovingly down at her daughter, she felt the urge to do something she hadn't done since her last adventure. "How would you like to hear a story, my little Warrior?" she asked.

"Goo..." was the response she received from the little girl, who stuck her hand in her mouth. Gabrielle smiled and pulled the girl's digits from her tiny mouth.

"I'll take that as a yes." she said quietly before starting her story, "In a time of Gods, Warlords, and Kings; a land in turmoil cried out for a hero. She was Xena, a mighty princess forged in the heat of battle. Her life was filled with power; passion; and most of all, danger. Her courage would change the world..."

*'He definitely doesn't tell it as well as Gabrielle did.'* Xena thought as she listened to the bard finishing his tale. Of course, Xena figured she was biased, seeing as she had only heard Gabrielle tell the story before. It was the tale of how the Centaurs and the Amazons joined together after years of fighting. The warrior was still amazed by that, but she was sure that the alliance would hold for quite awhile.

"What's on your mind?" Xena's attention was brought to the auburn haired woman sitting next to her. The warrior shrugged and shook her head.

"Nothing." she replied, not wanting to admit that she had been thinking of Gabrielle again.

"Xena, you had better not be lying to your mother again." Cyrene warned, a stern expression on her face. She crossed her arms and stared her daughter down, trying to will an answer. When none was forthcoming, she sighed. "Xena, I know you miss her. Why don't you go see her?"

"Excuse me?" Xena asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, don't try to act like you don't know who I'm talking about. I'm your mother and I know exactly who it is your mind is on." Cyrene scolded her daughter. Xena bowed her head and nodded. "Don't feel embarrassed, Xena. Like I said, I'm your mother. I'm supposed to know what you're thinking." A chuckle came from the dark haired warrior but a sad expression was on her face when she lifted her head up again.

"You don't understand, mother. This is what's best for her."

"So you've told me every time I ask you about it. Yet, I still find you sitting here every week, more miserable than the last. If you miss her that much, go visit." she told her daughter. *'Honestly,'* she thought, *'could she be any more thick headed?'*

"I can't! I can't go back into her life. I'm just not good for her, can't you see that?" Xena told her angrily; but there was a hint of sadness in her voice. "Besides, this way she can have a chance at a family." she added on. She wouldn't admit that she didn't want to go because it would hurt too much to see how happy her friend was without

her.

"Fine." Cyrene sighed in defeat. She looked at her daughter once more. "If you won't go back to her, Xena... will you at least try to find someone else? I can't bear to see you like this."

The warrior blinked. Replace Gabrielle? Noting her daughter's reaction, Cyrene quickly hurried to ease her fears.

"Not to replace her. Just... to keep you company. I don't want to see my daughter eaten from the inside-out by loneliness." Xena seemed to think it over before nodding.

"Maybe I could team up with Hercules for a little while." she conceded, turning her head away from the older woman's gaze.

"That's my girl!" Cyrene chirped before leaving a kiss on her daughter's cheek. Xena immediately blushed and wiped her hand over her cheek.

"Mother!" she hissed, only to find the other woman gone. The warrior sighed and looked down at her drink. She doubted that she'd enjoy traveling with Hercules. He was a nice guy and they worked well together, but that had really just been a one time thing. Besides, he had Iolaus and she would hate to break up their friendship. Again. Her mother was right, though; she did need to find someone. She knew Gabrielle wouldn't want to find her living like this; roaming from town to town without a clue as to what she was supposed to be doing.

Xena swished the liquid in her cup around before taking a long drink from it. It was going to be a long couple of weeks.

*'How exactly does one find a sidekick? I can't just hold auditions for it...'* she wondered. The last sidekick she had, she didn't even want. A smile came to her lips as she remembered the blonde following her home; and later, on the road. Gabrielle had never asked. She just knew that Xena needed her.

*'I need you now, Gabrielle.'* she thought sadly as she finished her ale. *'But I'll never get you back, will I?'* Not wanting to continue her sad thoughts, Xena decided to turn in for the night. At least in her dreams she could pretend she was with Gabrielle.

The warrior stood from her table and left a tip on the surface before heading for the nearby staircase. She slowly made her way up the stairs until she made it to the second floor of the tavern.

After reaching her room, she stripped down to her night shift and laid in the bed. As she drifted off to sleep, her last thoughts were of Gabrielle saying 'I do'. Only, it was to her; not Perdicas.

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Xena was still looking for a sidekick a month later, when a warlord by the name of Galvius threatened Amphipolis. Obviously he was new in the business if he hadn't heard that Amphipolis was the home city of the warrior princess Xena.

"I've warned you plenty of times." Galvius told the village elder. "Now, either you pay up or we raze Amphipolis to the ground."

"I don't think that will be happening any time soon." The warlord turned at the sound of the voice and found the dark warrior standing behind his army.

"Xena! What are you doing here?" he asked, dumbfounded.

"She lives here, genius!" someone shouted out from the crowd of villagers. Galvius turned back to the villagers and scowled.

"I didn't ask you, now did I?" he snarled.

"But they're right. I do live here." Xena said calmly as she took a step forward. "And I don't take it very well when someone threatens my home."

"You can't take us all on by yourself, Xena. Even you're not that good." he growled, turning his attention back to the warrior woman.

"I don't have to take you all on. I just have to kill you." she told him with a devilish grin as she pulled her sword from its sheath. "Ready to die?"

"Get her!" Galvius ordered as he pulled his own sword out; just in case she got past his warriors. The soldiers let out a simultaneous cry as they charged Xena at once. The dark warrior simply rolled her eyes before letting out her own war cry as she jumped into the middle of the group.

"Yi-yi-yi-yi! Cheee-Yah!" Her sword flew in every direction, parrying blows as she fought her way to Galvius. Behind her, the villagers fought as well, armed with pitchforks, scythes, and other sharp farming instruments.

"Was that really the best you had?" she asked the warlord as she knocked out the last soldier standing between the two of them. She saw him visibly gulp before he jumped off of his steed. '*Oh this is just too easy.*' she thought as she took in his scared appearance before he tried to hide it.

"Prepare to die, Xena!" he yelled as he charged her. Xena rolled her eyes once more before meeting him head on, something he hadn't expected. Using the distraction to her advantage, she brought her leg up in vicious kick between his legs. "Hope you didn't plan on creating more little warlords." she growled as he doubled over in pain. Shaking her head, she slammed the hilt of her sword into his head, knocking him unconscious.

"That takes care of that." she muttered as she turned to take in the fighting around her. From what she could tell, there were only a few losses on their side and the remaining forces were dying down. '*Good.*' she thought as she quickly joined the fray.

She had just sent a third attacker into a dark oblivion when she noticed a little boy being taken by one of the enemy soldiers. Before her hand could reach her chakram, however, another fighter was taking on the soldier. Xena realized that the auburn haired woman used a short sword and was dressed as a warrior. She seemed to handle herself well, also. In moments, the soldier was unconscious and the woman was kneeling down to comfort the small child. Unfortunately, this meant she didn't hear the rider coming up behind her, his sword drawn.

Xena acted quickly and reached for her chakram. Without a moment's hesitation, she

let the sharp disk fly.

A loud thud was heard as the weapon buried itself in the attacker's chest and he was knocked off his steed. The horse reared up in fear, legs kicking. Xena saw the other warrior cover the child with her own body, just in case the animal kicked out at them. Once the danger was gone, though, she pulled back and began visibly wiping at the child's tears.

"Nice moves." Xena said as she approached the woman, who was giving the child back to his mother. The fighting had ended a few candle marks before, and Xena considered herself lucky to find the woman again. The woman turned to face her with a smile.

"Not bad yourself, Xena." she complimented the warrior with a chuckle. The girl was almost as tall as Xena; which was quite an impressive feat, considering how tall Xena was.

"I see my reputation precedes me." the dark warrior joked.

"Well, you do have quite the reputation." the other woman told her. "Actually, that's the reason why I'm here." Xena raised her eyebrow at this statement. "Word has it that you're in the market for a sidekick. Well, I'm here to fill the order."

"And your name would be?" Xena asked as her eyebrow arched even higher. Maybe her search for a sidekick was over.

"Amarice the Amazon, at your service." the girl introduced herself with a not-so-graceful bow.

"Amazon, huh?" Xena asked. The other warrior nodded vehemently. "Well Amarice, I think you've earned yourself a test run." she finally decided. "I'm going to warn you though; I'm not a very nice person and it took a lot out of my last companion to put up with me." she cautioned the younger warrior, her tone now serious.

"I understand, Xena. I can handle it!" Amarice replied confidently with a salute. "So when do I start?" The taller woman smirked. It would be fun running this girl off like she had the others.

"How does tomorrow morning sound?" she asked. Amarice beamed at her and nodded her head.

"Perfect!" the woman told her before heading off towards Cyrene's tavern. Xena inwardly smiled.

The kid had potential, but she doubted she'd last a month.

"We'll just see how you hold up." she muttered to herself before following after her. *'Tomorrow is going to be a big day.'*

## **Part 2**

"So Amarice... you said you're an Amazon?" Xena called behind her as they galloped across the plains. Amarice pulled up beside her and looked at Xena with a confused



expression on her face.

"Yeah. Why do you wanna know?" she replied as she pushed her chestnut colored mare to go faster.

"Oh no reason." Xena assured her. A few moments went by and the only noise was the sound of hooves hitting the ground. Then Xena spoke again.

"You know, my last companion was an Amazon." she remarked. *'Time to see if this Amazon knows her stuff. I hope she doesn't disappoint me.'*

"Xena, I would hardly call Gabrielle an Amazon. She was much more than that." Amarice replied, getting a raised eyebrow from Xena in response. Taking it as a cue to continue, she kept talking. "She was a princess, a bard and the warrior princess' best friend." Somehow, Amarice knew that praising Gabrielle would keep her on Xena's good side, so she had done her research on the Amazon princess.

"Since you know so much about her, then you probably know what will be expected of you if you take her place."

"I don't intend to take her place. I simply want to help you and, hopefully, learn from you in return. We might become friends later on, but I would never try to take Gabrielle's place." Amarice replied as they approached a forest.

*'Good answer.'* Xena thought as they slowed the horses to a walk. Without a word, she slid off her golden mare and began leading her through the wooded area. Amarice copied her actions and wordlessly followed behind her.

They had been traveling together for two weeks and right away Xena knew it would be a quiet partnership. Although Amarice talked, it wasn't very often; and it definitely wasn't about anything Gabrielle would talk about. Where as Gabrielle noticed the beauty of nature around them, Amarice was like Xena and only saw strategic fighting places.

That was another thing; Amarice knew how to fight without holding back. Being an Amazon from birth, she lost her blood innocence around the same age Xena had. Although this made Xena feel a little better about her choice, she still had a bit of paranoia left from her warlord days. At least with Gabrielle, she knew she didn't have to worry about being killed in her sleep. Gabrielle could never kill anyone.

Xena shook her head as she realized her thoughts were being filled by the bard again. It felt like getting a new partner had been a step in the wrong direction. It seemed that now that she had someone to travel with, she was thinking about the blonde even more than before. She was constantly comparing Amarice with Gabrielle, noting what they did differently. Which was a lot.

"We should stop here. There's a stream not too far off if you're interested in bathing." Xena suggested as she brought her mare to a stop. Amarice nodded and did the same.

"Want me to set up camp?" Amarice asked as she tied her mare to one of the nearby trees. She wasn't as well trained as Argo, but she was fast and Amarice didn't plan on losing her.

"No, I'll do it. Can you cook?" Xena looked over at her companion, who now had a

strange expression on her face.

"Yeah, but it falls a little short of a five star tavern." the young Amazon told her sarcastically as she pulled her bedroll off her horse.

"That's fine. I'll set up camp and catch dinner. You just cook it." Before Amarice could object, Xena disappeared into the wooded area around her.

The Amazon sighed as she took a seat on the ground and laid out her bedroll. Moments of boredom ticked by for her as she tried to think of what she could do. Unable to come up with anything else, she pulled out her sword and a whetstone. As she methodically sharpened her weapon, her thoughts began to leave her mind.

"Careful. Don't want to sharpen the blade so much that it's no use to you." Xena's voice broke Amarice out of her trance. She wasn't aware of how much time had gone by but judging by the look of the neatly set up camp, it had been awhile. After glancing down at her sword, she nodded.

"Good point." she conceded as she sheathed her sword and put away the whetstone. Xena said nothing in reply as she gathered firewood and arranged it in the middle of the camp. *'I still don't understand why she agreed to let me come if she won't let me do anything to help out.'* Amarice thought as she watched Xena start the fire. *'Maybe she's just used to having to take care of Gabrielle.'*

"Here. You can get started on this." Xena interrupted her thoughts by throwing a fish at her. Acting on instinct, Amarice brought her hand up and caught it.

"Thanks." she said sarcastically before pulling out a dagger and getting to work on gutting the fish.

"Nice catch." Xena mumbled. She liked it more when the fish hit the person she was throwing it at. Yet another difference between Gabrielle and her current traveling companion. With nothing else left to do, she continued to pull her bedroll off of Argo.

A few hours later, Xena was lost in thought as she stared into the flames of their fire. She was taken back to another campfire, when she made a promise to Gabrielle that she wasn't sure she could keep.

"You miss her a lot, don't you?" the younger woman asked. Xena looked to her side, where she found Amarice sitting next to her. Unable to stop herself from shooting an icy glare at the Amazon, the warrior got to her feet. She wasn't angry with Amarice; more at herself for letting Gabrielle go.

"I'll be back later." was all she said before heading off on her own, leaving Amarice alone by the fire; wondering just what she had said to set the other warrior off.

Xena came to a spot far off from the campsite where she was sure Amarice wouldn't find her for awhile. She sighed before taking a seat on the cool ground. From where she was, she could look up and see the night sky, filled with stars. She immediately began to wonder if Gabrielle was looking up at them as well.

*'She's probably too busy fawning over her precious Perdicas.'* she thought angrily as her eyes rested on a star cluster that they had always fought over. "It's definitely a dipper." she muttered before standing up and heading back to the camp where

Amarice was waiting.

"See that one, sweetie? That's a bear." Gabrielle cooed into her daughter's ear as she pointed out the cluster of stars she found from the porch. Nexa giggled before grabbing onto the blonde hair dangling in her face. "Let go of mommy's hair, honey." Gabrielle said gently as she wrapped her hand around Nexa's tiny one and undid the small digits from her golden locks. The former bard smiled down at her daughter, whose blonde hair was just beginning to grow out more. "How would you like to help mommy clean up the kitchen?" she asked before walking back into the house.

Gabrielle smiled as she entered the kitchen, a rare occurrence for her now that she was married to Perdicas. The kitchen was the one of the only two spots she was comfortable in, since her husband never came in it. He believed it was beneath him. The other sanctuary she held dearly was the nursery. There was something about Nexa that kept Perdicas away from that room, but Gabrielle didn't know what it was.

*'I don't care, either; as long as it keeps him far away from her.'* she thought as she carefully set her daughter down on the floor. Grabbing a rag from the counter, she began to wipe down the table. She had just finished cleaning the plates and cups when she went stargazing with her daughter. A sigh escaped from the small woman. Did Xena still look up at the stars at night? A feeling akin to hurt flooded through her chest at the thought of Xena enjoying the night sky without her; or worse yet, with someone else.

The thought of Xena being with someone else other than her made Gabrielle's heartache. She wanted to be the one that made the warrior happy. She wanted to be the one that argued with her every night over the star formations. She wanted to be the one that held her when the nightmares came at night.

*'That's a bit selfish, don't you think?'* she mentally berated herself, scrubbing down harder on the table than necessary. "Besides... I'm the one that was stupid enough to think Perdicas really needed me. I'm the one that was stupid enough to marry him... and I was the one stupid enough to leave her behind!" With every word, the scrubbing had gradually become harder until Gabrielle couldn't control her anger anymore. "Argh!"

A large crash echoed through the kitchen as pots and pans fell to the floor. The rag Gabrielle had thrown rested next to the pile of kitchenware. There was a moment of silence before Nexa began crying, frightened by the loud noises.

"Oh! I'm sorry sweetie." Gabrielle apologized before walking over to her crying daughter. "Mommy's sorry, Nexa." she cooed as she bent down and picked the child up. "Shh... It's alright. Mommy won't do it ever again..." she promised as she kissed the top of the child's head in an attempt to comfort her. Nexa's cries began to die down at the familiar presence of her mother and soon Gabrielle had a dozing child in her arms. "Good girl, Nexa." she said softly before leaving the kitchen and heading for the nursery.

Gabrielle gently laid Nexa in the crib Perdicas had made for her. It was a gift Perdicas had made after the first real beating. It was his way of apologizing, the bard guessed. She stroked the soft hair on her daughter's head before placing Lammy next to her.

"Sweet dreams." Gabrielle kissed her fingertips and placed them on her daughter's

forehead before turning to leave the room. She needed to get the kitchen cleaned back up before her husband returned from the elder's home. Even if he didn't go into the kitchen very often, he still hated a mess.

"Gabrielle, why is there a pile of kitchenware on our floor?" Gabrielle's heart sank at the sound of Perdicas' voice.

*'Too late...'* she thought as a feeling of dread shot through her entire body. He wasn't supposed to be home yet. She was supposed to have more time to clean. Why was he home so early?

"Gabrielle," he called out, "come here." Gabrielle gulped before slowly making her way to the kitchen. When she walked in the doorway, however, she didn't see anyone. She was just about to call out Perdicas' name when a hand grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back. "What happened?" her husband snarled into her ear.

"I... I'm sorry! I was going to clean it up before you got home." Before Gabrielle could finish explaining, she was pushed away from Perdicas' body and into the table. Her stomach hit the hard tabletop, knocking the wind out of her. As she tried to catch her breath, Perdicas approached and knocked her to the ground amongst the pots and pans.

"I didn't ask when you were going to clean it up! I asked what happened!" he growled as he picked one of the pans up. "Now tell me!" he ordered her before throwing the pan at her. Gabrielle brought her arms up just in time to protect her head from the metal object.

"It was an accident, Perdicas. I swear!" she told him as she bit back the tears. She had made a decision not to cry in front of him a long time ago. A kick to her side almost broke her resolve.

"The only time you have accidents, Gabrielle," he said, a hint of disgust in his voice when he said her name, "is when you're thinking of her!" There was another kick to her side, knocking the wind out of her once more.

"I wasn't thinking of her, I swear!" Gabrielle shrieked as she tried to curl herself up into a protective ball.

"Liar!" he roared before grabbing her by the hair again and pulling her back to her feet. "I told you to never lie to me. Yet, you do it on a daily basis!" he screamed at her. Despite the fact that she didn't want to show her fear, Gabrielle's body shook slightly at his voice. From what seemed a far off distance, she could hear the cries of their daughter from the Nursery.

"I'm sorry..." she said quietly, immediately regretting it when he pulled harder on her hair.

"I wasn't finished." he hissed at her before turning her around. A moment of silence ticked by and all that could be heard was the sound of Nexa's cries. "I don't ask much of you, do I Gabrielle?" he asked softly, using his free hand to tip the blonde's head up to face him. The former bard noted that he now looked at her with a gentle light in his eyes but she knew that the wrong answer would make it go out. So, she simply stayed quiet. "All I ask is that you love me; that you take care of the house while I'm gone."

he said quietly. "And yet, you fight me every step of the way."

"Don't you love me, Gabrielle?" he asked. Without a moment's hesitation, Gabrielle nodded her head vehemently. There was no way she was going to say no to this monster. "Then why can't you listen to me? You've already ruined the good news I was going to tell you."

"And what is that, Perdicas?" she asked quietly, afraid to speak any louder. Inside she was laughing at herself. A bard, afraid to speak. *'The Gods certainly are laughing at me.'* she thought bitterly.

"I've been able to secure the position as one of the town's councilmen. Aren't you happy?"

*'Ecstatic.'* Gabrielle thought sarcastically. On the outside, however, she smiled as sweetly as she could and nodded. "That's... that's wonderful, Perdicas." she told him, trying hard not to grit her teeth in pain.

"I thought you would like that news." he told her with a smile before bending to capture her lips with his own. It took every ounce of self control that Gabrielle had to stop herself from gagging. "Now then, clean this mess up in here and go take care of Nexa." he told her once he broke the kiss. "Then, we can properly celebrate once you come to bed." he suggested with a smile more sinister than the last before leaving her to do as she was told.

Gabrielle sighed before painfully bending down to pick up the kitchenware. Each movement sent agony shooting through her body, but she knew she needed to hurry, or else Perdicas would come back sooner than she wanted him to. Not for the first time, Gabrielle wondered if living was really worth it. She couldn't stand not knowing what would set him off. Living in fear of her own actions wasn't any way to live.

*'Why can't I stand up to him?'* she thought sadly as she stared at the last pan. The cries coming from the nursery reminded her. Gabrielle would not stand up to the man while Nexa was there. That would put her daughter in danger; and that was something she refused to do. Maybe if her daughter was older...

"Mommy's coming, Nexa." she whispered as she hung the pan back where it was meant to be before heading back to the nursery.

"Is my little warrior scared?" Gabrielle asked as she gently picked the little girl up. It made her arms hurt to lift the bundle, but when she looked into Nexa's eyes, she forgot the pain. "Don't worry. Everything's alright now." she assured the baby as she pulled her up to her shoulder. "We won't bother you anymore." she said gently as the tears that she had held in check earlier began to fall.

She didn't want to do it. She didn't want to go into her room, where Perdicas lay waiting for her. She didn't want to subject her already aching body to her husband's raging libido.

Gabrielle looked into her daughter's eyes and remembered why she had to do it, even if she didn't want to.

"Mommy will always protect you, Nexa." she cooed into her daughter's ear as the child's eyelids began to droop. "Sweet dreams for real this time, my little warrior." she

said before laying her daughter back in the crib and tucking her in again.

After wiping her tears on the back of her hand, Gabrielle began to regain her composure. A few snuffles later, she was ready to face her husband once more. Not wanting to make him even angrier by taking too long, she left the nursery and walked down the hall to where Perdicas waited for her in their bedroom.

*'Why didn't I say no?'* Gabrielle thought as she walked into the dark room, the door closing behind her.

Hours later, Gabrielle lay in her bed next to her sated husband. As for herself, she was aching everywhere. Even in bed, the man was violent. It wasn't like their first time, when Nexa was conceived. The former bard sighed and shut her eyes, conjuring a picture of her beautiful daughter in her mind.

*'I'll protect you, no matter what.'* she thought. The image began to change in her mind, however. The next thing she knew, Gabrielle was looking at an image of Xena. *'Oh Xena... why didn't you say anything to stop me from marrying him? Why didn't you tell me you needed me more than he did?'* she thought sadly before finally drifting off to sleep.

### **Part 3**

#### 6 Months Later

"You take that back!" Amarice growled at the taller woman, who, at the moment, was regretting ever bringing her along. "Xena, I said take it back." The dark warrior looked down at Amarice with a devilish smirk.

"I can't take back the truth." she said casually before walking away, Argo following behind her.

"Can't take back the... Xena!" Amarice called out before running to catch up with the older woman. "Xena, I am not, nor will I ever be, afraid of men." she insisted as she walked beside Xena.

"Oh really? Then why were you so rude to Iolaus and Hercules?" Xena asked with a raised eyebrow. "That's a defense mechanism if I ever saw one." Amarice had indeed acted differently towards the two male heroes. Instead of the usual respect that she showed Xena, the young woman often gave the two men the cold shoulder. She also went out of her way to make things difficult for Hercules and Iolaus. This in turn had made their mission much more complicated.

"It's nothing personal towards them... I just don't like men. They always look down on us, even if we're great warriors. No wait. Especially if we're great warriors." Amarice told her. "That's one of the reasons why I like being a part of the Amazons so much. They don't look down on a woman simply because she marches to the beat of her own drum." Xena shook her head and looked forward.

"You sound just like another person I know." Amarice waited impatiently for the other warrior to continue.

"Feel free to tell me about her anytime now, Xena." she said when no explanation was supplied. Xena responded with a glare, but she did continue speaking.

"Her name was Glaphyra. She hated men even more than you do. She hated them so much in fact, that she went into the slave trade. She only sold men on the market, though."

"I like her already. I wonder if I can get her to give me some tips." Amarice remarked with a smirk. Xena simply rolled her eyes at the girl's thinking.

"She's rotting in a dungeon right now. Do you really want to end up like that?" The young Amazon went quiet, seeming to ponder what Xena said. This filled the atmosphere with an uncomfortable silence. *'Looks like she **does** have a few things left to learn.'* Xena thought as she quickened her pace, leaving Amarice to think about what she said.

Night was just beginning to fall when Xena brought Argo to a sudden stop. Amarice followed suit and began to scan the trees around them to find what Xena had heard. A few seconds went by before the dark haired warrior drew her sword.

"Alright, show yourself. I'm tired of you sneaking around." she called out to the seemingly empty forest.

"I guess losing your little blonde friend hasn't had an effect on your ability to do that." a dark voice chuckled before a man clad in battle leathers appeared, Xena's sword sticking through his stomach. Amarice's eyes grew wide at the sight.

"Ares." Xena stated in a tone that said she was not amused.

"Good to know you still remember me, Xena. Now, do you think you could move your sword?" Xena smirked and twisted the blade where the God of War's gut would be if he were a mortal.

"Better?" she asked. Ares rolled his eyes and took a step back, away from the sword. "Now what do you want?"

"Now is that the only kind of greeting I get from my favorite warrior? I'm hurt." Ares put his hands to his chest, feigning hurt.

"I guess I've done my job then." Xena remarked as she put her sword back in its sheathe.

"Ouch! Score one for the Warrior Princess." Ares said, a fiery one appearing in midair on an imaginary scoreboard. "Seriously though... I just wanted to see how my beautiful warrior was doing without the irritating blonde." Xena glared at him, but he ignored it. "Ah, but I see you've picked up someone else to fill in for her while she's basking in the wonders of having a family." he pointed out, looking directly at Amarice. "That really was the one thing you couldn't give her, wasn't it?" he asked in mock curiosity. "I guess that's all that mattered to her, too."

"First of all, Ares, I am not your anything anymore; and I never will be again." Xena started off. "Second... Leave me alone!" she barked at him, eyes narrowed.

"Alright, alright... but before I go, I want to congratulate you on your choice. Maybe

she won't leave you for some peace-loving farmer." Before Xena could even form a fist to throw at him, Ares disappeared into the air.

"That... That was the God of War, wasn't it?" Amarice asked, looking over at the taller woman. Xena nodded before starting to walk again. "Xena, can't you see that he is the perfect example of what I was telling you about? He thinks that just because you're a woman, he can manipulate you when you're going through a hard time. Just like a man."

"Amarice, *he* is **not** a man! Don't embarrass the male population like that." Xena retorted. "He's a God; he talks down to everyone. That was actually him being nice."

"But Xena-"

"No, Amarice! This conversation is over. Just forget that you even saw Ares. You don't want to give the arrogant bastard something else to rejoice about." Xena snapped at her. "Now, there's a small clearing up ahead; you can go set up camp there. I'm going to go catch dinner."

"Why do I always have to set up camp?" Amarice asked, hands on her hips.

"Because I told you to. Besides, it wasn't that long ago when you were practically begging me for the chance set up camp."

*'That's because you wouldn't let me do anything.'* the teenager thought, shooting daggers at Xena's retreating back. "Fine, but you had better not expect me to cook again!" she called after the warrior.

"It's your funeral pyre." Xena muttered under her breath as she walked quietly through the trees, looking for dinner.

As she silently searched for her elusive prey, Xena's mind backtracked to the God of War. She had secretly expected Ares to show up sooner to gloat. Not that she wanted him to. There had to be something that had stopped him from showing up sooner, though. If anyone knew Ares, it was her; and she knew waiting to rub things in wasn't his style.

*'What is he up to?'* she wondered as she drew her breast dagger from its hiding place. *'Whatever it is, I doubt it's good.'* she thought before letting the weapon fly toward the bushes.

Xena arrived back at the camp with two rabbits in hand. Amarice had done a decent job of setting up, she had to admit. It was a much better job than the last attempts she had made. Xena had to change a few things around when Amarice made the camp the first time. It appeared that the girl learned quickly, though.

"Good job. Now you can cook this." Knowing what was going to happen, Amarice automatically reached up with her hand and caught the rabbit that was thrown at her. She just barely brought her other hand up in time to catch the second one. Unfortunately, she was less coordinated with that hand, so she dropped it on the ground. "That one's yours." Xena said

"What?! It fell in the dirt!" Amarice complained as she bent over to pick the dead animal up. "Besides, I told you I wasn't cooking again." she reminded the other



woman.

"If you want to avoid an upset stomach, I suggest you cook." Xena told her as she sat down on a nearby tree that had fallen over in the last storm. "And it wouldn't have fallen in the dirt if you were as good with your left hand as you are with your right." she added on, her way of telling Amarice she needed to practice more.

While Amarice mumbled under her breath, Xena pulled her whetstone out and unsheathed her sword. She went to work sharpening her weapon while Amarice struggled to cook the rabbits as night fell. Hours later, the bickering travelers were taken by Morpheus to the land of dreams.

Xena, as always, was up before the sun and getting everything packed up. Unlike with Gabrielle, though, she had help with the cleaning. Amarice was an early riser like Xena, although she was a little crankier than the other warrior when she first woke up. So, morning cleanups were generally kept quiet, neither woman wanting to speak. Once the camp was picked up, Amarice untied her mare and Xena whistled for Argo. It was a comfortable routine the two of them had fallen into after their first month of traveling together.

"So, where are we heading, Xena?" Amarice asked as she rode alongside the other warrior. They were going at an easy walk, giving the horses some time to wake up; it was the only time they really tried to have any kind of conversation.

"Potidaea." Xena answered as she stared straight ahead at the horizon, not bothering to look over at Amarice while she spoke.

"Any particular reason why we're going there?" the young Amazon asked, her head tilted slightly.

"I thought you didn't like talking?" Xena replied with her own question, avoiding answering.

"I said I don't like to talk as much as other people do. Now answer the question." Amarice responded.

"Does it really matter?" Xena argued, now turning to face the other girl. She leveled the girl with her 'look', as Gabrielle called it, and hoped that'd be the end of the conversation. By the sound of the audible gulp Amarice took, it was.

"Yes, it does matter. You wouldn't follow me somewhere if I didn't tell you why we were going. What makes you think I will?" Amarice retorted hesitantly after a few moment went by.

*'Stupid little...!'* Xena's cursed mentally as she realized that the girl wasn't going to leave her alone until she answered. "We're going because I want to see if Gabrielle's visited her parents."

"Oh. You could have just said that, you know." Xena grunted in response, making Amarice roll her eyes. How exactly had Gabrielle put up with her mood swings? "Are you hoping she'll be there?" Xena shrugged, giving a non-committal answer. Amarice sighed and decided to return to her own thoughts.

She had already been with Xena for over six months and she thought she would have

gotten used to the dull silence she was usually subjected to. Amarice was by no means a talkative person, but too much silence was stifling, even for her. She wondered if Xena felt it, too.

*'I doubt it. Woman of steel over there doesn't feel anything.'* she thought with a snort, which earned a questioning look from Xena. She gave the other warrior a sheepish smile before returning her attention to the road ahead of them. *'I have learned a lot from her in the last few months, though.'* she admitted to herself. *'Now if only I could get her to have a decent conversation with me.'* She smirked to herself before realizing that Xena had quickened the pace. Nudging her horse into a gallop, she pushed the steed to catch up with her mentor.

A week later, the two weary travelers finally rode into Potidaea. The looks they received made Xena wonder if it had been a wise decision to come back to Gabrielle's hometown after all. The last time she had been here was when she had just started out on her path for redemption. That path almost ended near the small town, where Xena had buried her weapons and armor, ready to end her life. If Draco's cronies hadn't shown up and herded all the village women together...

Xena shook her head of the memory and tried to forget that she had ever been weak enough to even consider killing herself. She ignored the stares that followed her through the town as she made her way to where she remembered Gabrielle's family home was.

*'Here we are.'* she thought to herself as she approached the familiar house. Without taking her eyes off the house, she tied Argo to one of the fence posts.

"This is where she lived?" Amarice asked with a somewhat surprised expression on her face. The house wasn't exactly what she expected of the girl that traveled with Xena: Warrior Princess. It wasn't a rundown shack; but it wasn't anything great either. She noticed that some of the wood was beginning to rot around the windows and would probably need to be replaced soon. The door to the house had visibly rusty hinges, but Amarice figured they would last a bit longer before needing to be repaired.

"Yes, this is where she came from." Xena told her, bringing her attention back to the conversation. At first, Amarice thought Xena was just going to stare at the house. Then she realized that the woman was mentally preparing herself for whatever lay inside the building. "I want you to stay out here with the horses." the older woman ordered her. Amarice, knowing now was not the time to argue, nodded her head. She doubted that Xena saw it though, for the warrior woman had already started for the front door.

She stared at the front door for a moment before hesitantly knocking. She had never let fear get the better of her; and she wasn't about to start now.

"Hold on a moment! I'm coming!" a female voice called from inside. Seconds later, a blonde woman not much taller than Gabrielle opened the door to the dark warrior. "You! I wondered when you'd be back. Come to take my other daughter away from me as well?" the woman asked.

"No, I just came to see-"

"I don't care why you came. You're leaving now." Hecuba's eyes were watery, holding

back unshed tears. "I refuse to allow you to steal my remaining daughter away from me!" Before the blonde woman could shut the door entirely, Xena wedged her foot in the doorway to stop it from closing.

"I'm not here to take Lila away." she assured the woman, who was now quietly crying. "I just... I wanted to know if you've seen Gabrielle."

"We haven't seen her since she left with you, thank you very much." Hecuba spat at her. "Why? She's not in danger, is she?"

"No, she's fine."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I wanted to know if she had told you the good news." Xena quickly lied, covering up the real reason why she had gone back to Potidaea. "She married Perdicas like you all wanted her to. I guess they've been a little too busy on the honeymoon if they haven't come back to tell you themselves." Before she could see Hecuba's reaction to the news, she removed her foot from the door, causing it to slam shut.

Gabrielle let out a relieved breath as she heard the door slam shut. Perdicas was gone. For a week, anyway; which meant a week without being kicked, hit, or yelled at. It would be a week spent without fear. Instead, she would be spending it with Nexa; her little warrior. Moments after thinking about the one bright spot in her life, cries from the nursery reached her ears.

Gabrielle groaned as she pulled her body out of bed. She loved Nexa, she really did; but her daughter always seemed to know when she was thinking about her.

*'Which wouldn't be so bad,' Gabrielle thought, 'if she didn't start crying every time.'* The blonde woman quietly exited her bedroom, afraid that any small noise would bring Perdicas running in.

*'He's not here. He's not here. He's not here.'* she chanted to herself in her head. The silent mantra was eventually spoken aloud. It wasn't much, but it gave her the confidence and the courage to make it to the nursery without jumping at every noise the house made.

"Shh... Mommy's here, sweetie." Gabrielle said as she entered the room. A small smile came to the former bard's face as she walked over to the crib and peeked inside. "Is my little warrior lonely?" she asked while picking the child up. "Well I am just going to have to solve that, aren't I? How does watching the sunrise with Mommy sound?" Nexa's cries began to die down at the sound of her mother's voice. "I thought you'd like that."

Gabrielle carried her precious bundle out of the nursery and through the kitchen. Once they were out on the porch, Gabrielle gently put her daughter down and took a seat next to her.

"You're getting big, my little Warrior. If you're anything like me, you'll be walking soon." she remarked with a smile as she watched the child crawl across the wooden surface. A dark shadow passed over the blonde's face. "I guess that means I won't be able to keep you in the nursery all day if you start walking around." she said quietly, trying to hide her inner turmoil. If she couldn't keep Nexa in the nursery, that meant

Perdicas would have more chances to hurt her. "I won't let that happen. I don't care if I have to constantly follow you around all day. I swear he will never hurt you." she vowed to her daughter, who was studying a small rock she had picked up off the porch. Gabrielle was drawn back into a memory when she watched her daughter awkwardly throw it off the porch.

*"See how calm the surface of the water is?" Xena asked Gabrielle, nodding in the direction of the lake they were sitting near. The young girl followed her gaze and stared at the smooth water. "That was me once." The blonde girl watched as her friend picked up a rock. "And then," Xena drew her arm back and threw the lake into the water, "the water ripples and churns. That's what I became."*

*"But if we sit here long enough, it will go back to being still again." Gabrielle pointed out, thinking she had found a hole in Xena's logic. "You could go back to being calm." she told the older woman.*

*"But the stone's still under there. It's now part of the lake. It might look as it did before, but it's forever changed." Xena argued gently, hoping she had gotten her point across. There was a rare moment of comfortable silence as the two traveling companions looked at each other with genuine affection. "Come on; let's go." she said as she stood up. Gabrielle did the same and followed her over to Argo.*

*"For your first stab at wisdom, you did alright." Gabrielle complimented her friend.*

*"I was just saying that for your benefit. You didn't think I actually meant it, did you?"*

*"Ha! Not me. I wasn't fooled." the blonde laughed as she walked around Argo to the other side, not missing the last glance Xena gave the water.*

"I know what you meant now, Xena." Gabrielle mused as she leaned back on her hands, carefully watching her daughter from the corner of her eye. "I thought I knew what you meant then, but 'knowing' takes on a whole new definition when you've had a rock thrown in your own lake." The blonde sighed, wishing she really were talking to her friend for the umpteenth time since she married Perdicas. "I wonder if my lake will ever have the chance to become calm again." she thought aloud. *'I doubt it.'* The sight of her daughter crawling toward her brought Gabrielle out of her thoughts. "Hello there, Beautiful." Gabrielle chuckled as her daughter crawled onto her lap.

The former bard did indeed think her daughter was beautiful, inside and out. The white blonde hair that had started to grow six months ago had turned into a darker blonde color that almost matched her mother's. In fact, Nexa took after her mother more than her father. Gabrielle guiltily felt thankful for that small blessing. She didn't want to be reminded of Perdicas every time she looked at her wonderful daughter.

"Goo goo..." Nexa chirped as she reached for her favorite plaything; Gabrielle's hair. "Ma!" she exclaimed as she latched onto the golden locks. The former bard blinked at the sound, too shocked to care that Nexa was now placing the strands of hair in her mouth and chewing on them.

"Nexa... Nexa, sweetie, what did you just say?" she asked, looking down into the blue eyes of her child.

"Ma! Ma! Ma!" Nexa chirped happily, bouncing up and down in Gabrielle's lap. The

woman smiled down at her daughter before looking at the horizon. The sun had risen, painting the sky with shades of pink and purple.

"I think it's going to be a good week, my smart, little Warrior." Gabrielle told her daughter as she ran her hand over the short hair before kissing Nexa's head. "A very good week."

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The day before Perdicas was due back from his trading expedition with the other town councilmen, Gabrielle decided to take Nexa to the beach near their home. Her daughter was just beginning to learn how to walk and the former Amazon bard decided that the soft sand would provide a gentle cushion for her child whenever she fell. Besides, she hadn't taken a pleasure trip to the lake in a long time and she longed to feel the water on her skin again.

"Be careful, sweetie." Gabrielle called out to her daughter, who was awkwardly trying to walk on the soft sand. Nexa looked back at her, which turned out to be a mistake. Losing the concentration she had used for balancing, she lost all sense of equilibrium and fell to the ground. The shocked expression on her face made Gabrielle laugh. "I told you." Her daughter looked at her with an expression that Gabrielle could only classify as indignant. This just made Gabrielle start chuckling.

Now assured that her daughter wouldn't hurt herself by falling on the ground, she walked into the water that was coming up on shore. It was nice feeling the water gently caress her skin, even if it was only her feet. It took her back to the times she spent with Xena. Feeling a tug on the worn blue dress she had on, Gabrielle looked down.

"Why hello there, Beautiful. Do you want to play in the water with Mommy?" she asked, getting down on her knees so she was level with her daughter. She didn't mind that she was getting the tattered garment wet; that's why she had worn it in the first place.

"Mama play?" Nexa asked, her head slightly tilted to the side. Gabrielle nodded and smiled at her daughter.

"Mama play." she responded before gently splashing water on her daughter's tiny legs. The girl yelped in surprise and fell on her backside in the sand before looking at her mother with a confused look on her face. Gabrielle smiled at her reaction and waved for her to come over. Nexa hesitantly complied and crawled over to her mother, not wanting to stand up again. She squealed in delight when a small wave washed up on the shore and covered her hands. "Well, I'm glad I'm not the only one that likes it here." Gabrielle said happily as she watched her daughter happily slap the muddy shoreline.

The mother and daughter spent the day at the beach. They spent most of their time playing on the cool shoreline, where the water gently lapped against their bodies. The rest of the time, Gabrielle helped Nexa learn how to walk. Soon, the little girl was taking many steps on her own before falling down. The blonde woman couldn't help but admire how her daughter didn't cry when she fell; she simply got back up and tried again.

The sun was beginning to go down when Nexa fell asleep against her mother's stomach. Gabrielle was stretched out on the sand, her arm wrapped protectively around her small daughter. She stared up at the darkening sky sadly, not wanting her last day of peace to end. Perdicas, her living nightmare, would be back soon. She would have to go back to being the scared wife once more. Gabrielle didn't want to go back to that, but she had to. There was nowhere she could go.

If she went home, her parents would probably just send her back. As long as she had a husband to provide for her and she wasn't traveling with Xena, they wouldn't care about her enough to keep her with them. They had been the ones pushing her to marry the man in the first place! Besides, even if they did allow her to stay, Perdicas knew that that's where she would go. He would just follow her and bring her back home. No doubt she would pay for leaving, as well.

She couldn't go to the Amazons. They were all about strong women not needing to be supported by men. What had she done? She had gotten married to the kind of man they all despised. Worst of all, she didn't stand up for herself. What would they think if they knew that she allowed her husband to beat her? That she didn't do anything to stop him from hurting her? What kind of example would she be for the Amazons if they ever found out?

Xena also wasn't a choice. Not only did she not know where the warrior was, but she also knew that she could never force herself into Xena's life again. Not after abandoning her the way she did. There was no way the woman would take her back after that kind of betrayal.

"She could have stopped it, though. She could have said something, anything, that would have made me believe she wanted me more than he did." Gabrielle said aloud, her hands curling up into fists. *'But she just... stood there! She didn't say a thing!'* she thought angrily. "Why didn't you want me, Xena?" she asked in an almost inaudible whisper as her eyes welled up. "I would have given anything to be with you, but you didn't want me." Tears began to escape her eyes and roll down her cheeks as she thought about Xena.

While Gabrielle cried, the sun finished its descent below the horizon; ending the last day of Gabrielle's perfect week.

## **Part 4**

Gabrielle tried to tell herself that she wasn't an idiot for trying to go to someone for help. She tried to tell herself that she couldn't have known Perdicas was friends with almost everyone in town, including the judge.

*'You moron. Of course he's friends with everyone. He is one of the council members, after all.'* she mentally chastised herself, her jaw too sore to scold herself out loud. Perdicas had lost his temper and forgotten his rule about not striking her in the face.

*'What does it matter? Nobody knows who I am.'* she thought bitterly as she laid on the

floor. She could hear Nexa calling out for her from her crib, but she hurt too much to move. Besides; her face was a mess and would probably scare the child even more rather than make anything better. She could tell just by how her face felt that her nose was broken; the blood trickling into her mouth told her that much. She guessed that the right side of her face was bruised as well. She couldn't see out of her left eye, either. *'I must look awful.'*

The constant pain continued to bring up images of Perdicas' assault, over and over again.

*She was putting Nexa to bed for her afternoon nap when she heard the door open. Thinking it was the authorities coming to wait for Perdicas, she stayed with her daughter.*

*'So much for the nap.'* she thought when she heard the door slam. She watched as Nexa's sleepy blue eyes opened and twinkled up at her. So used to the safety she felt when she was with her daughter, the door slamming didn't send her into alert mode until it was too late. She spun on her heels just in time to see a fist collide with her face.

*Gabrielle was floored by the force of the blow. She had to fight to stay conscious as the darkness threatened to overtake her sight. She was sure that if she blacked out, Perdicas wouldn't give her the chance to wake up ever again. She found that thought comforting for one horrifying moment, but an image of her daughter flashed through her mind before she could surrender to oblivion. The thought of her daughter at the mercy of that monster rekindled her resolve to stay alive.*

*Gabrielle slowly shook herself from the daze she was in and tried to get back to her feet. She got as far as her knees when Perdicas kicked her back down, knocking the wind out of her. As she tried to regain her breath, Perdicas dropped to all fours over her body.*

*"You just had to tell, didn't you?" he spat at her. "You had to try and ruin a good thing." Gabrielle barely had time to register the fact that Perdicas' open palm was coming toward her when he hit her across the face. She could taste the blood pooling in her mouth as her head whipped to the side.*

*"It didn't work though, did it?" he taunted her as she brought her gaze back to him. The furious look in his eyes reminded her of the look he gave her the last time she had seen Xena. Recognizing the look, she pushed against his chest in an attempt to get him off. He was stronger, though, and simply grabbed her by the wrists. Gabrielle couldn't stop herself from crying out when he squeezed them tightly.*

*"Careful, Gabrielle. You wouldn't want to make me angry." He told her with a sinister smile. The way he said the words made Gabrielle's blood run cold. For a moment, she thought she felt her heart stop beating. Then, the heavy pounding in her chest convinced her otherwise. Not wanting to make him even angrier, she made her entire body go limp.*

*"That's better." He smirked down at her as he released her wrists and stood up. Gabrielle mentally sighed with relief but the feeling was cut short by the solid kick to her side. "Don't. You. Ever. Try. That. Again!" he screamed at her, punctuating each word with a kick. Unable to stop herself, Gabrielle's tears leaked from her closed eyes*

*as she sobbed quietly. "Stop that crying." Perdicus sneered as he started to kick her again. Gabrielle pulled herself into a tight ball, trying to fend off the blows in the only way she knew how.*

*Trying to block out the pain, Gabrielle receded into her mind. She stopped thinking and the screams of her husband and daughter were reduced to mere muffles. She was so lost in herself, she didn't even notice when the attack ended. It took the sound Perdicus yelling at a crying Nexa to pull her back out of her trance.*

*"Shut up, you little brat, or I'll make you shut up!" he yelled at the child, only succeeding in making her cry more. Gabrielle's eyes darkened as she recognized the threat in his words.*

*"You will never... ever... lay a hand on her... or I'll rip what ever heart you have out." she threatened him in a shaky voice.*

*"I'm sure you will." Perdicus sneered at her; but he left the room, not bothering to act on his threat to Nexa. Gabrielle sighed. She knew she had been telling the truth. She would do anything to keep her poor excuse of a husband from hurting her daughter, even if the cost was her blood innocence.*

"Mama?" Nexa called out in a watery voice from the crib. Gabrielle pulled herself out of her painful memories and looked up at her daughter, who was peering over the edge of her crib. "Mama get a booboo?" Gabrielle nodded in response.

"Yes, Mama got a big booboo." she replied as she tried to sit up. She didn't want to move, but she knew she had to; if only to make her way to the healer. Gabrielle pulled herself to her feet, only to double over in pain and reach out for one of the bars on the crib. She was sure she felt something move in her side. 'Great...' she thought sarcastically as her hand tightened around the wooden pole. She looked over at her daughter and tried to show her that she was alright with a smile. She was positive that it came out as a grimace.

"Nexa, sweetie... Would you like to go for a walk with Mama?" she asked as sweetly as she could through the pain. Nexa nodded vehemently. Gabrielle smiled for real this time and carefully reached an arm into the crib to pick her daughter up. "No! No! No!" Nexa shouted defiantly.

"Nexa, Mama needs to get you out of there if you want to come with her." she said patiently.

"I do it. Please?" Nexa insisted. Gabrielle sighed and nodded her head. She was rewarded with a bright smile before Nexa began her task of climbing out of the crib. "I guess you don't need that crib anymore." she mused as she watched her daughter climb over the bar. Despite the pain, she reached an arm out to place on Nexa's side to keep the girl from falling.

"No. I big girl now." Nexa grinned up at her once she reached the floor. Gabrielle smiled softly and nodded.

"That you are, my big warrior."

"I get big bed now?" The former bard painfully laughed at her daughter's question.



"We'll see, sweetie." Gabrielle promised her daughter. Nexa squealed in delight and wrapped her small arms around her mother's legs, pressing up against the bruises. Gabrielle hissed in pain before looking down at her child. "Ow. Don't hug Mama right now, okay sweetie?" she told her daughter.

"I Sowwy." Nexa apologized with a sad look on her face as she backed away from her Mama. "When boobos go away?" she asked with a hopeful expression. Gabrielle nodded a promise as she stuck her free hand out; the other arm was wrapped around her middle in an effort to ease the pain. "Yay!" Nexa squealed triumphantly while she took her mother's hand.

Gabrielle led her daughter out of the house and ignored the stares thrown her way. She imagined that she must look dreadful as she limped through the streets to the healer's home, daughter in tow. She didn't care. If she was going to protect her daughter, she needed help.

"Excuse me... is anybody here?" Gabrielle called out when she walked into the home of the healer.

"I'll be with you in just a moment." a woman's voice called from the back. For a moment, Gabrielle was taken back to her time with Xena. Her friend had been an excellent healer, even managing to bring her back moments after she died in a civil war between Thessaly and Mitoa. "Oh dear! What happened?" The voice pulled Gabrielle from her longing memories and back to the real world. There she found a young woman with wavy, brown hair that fell to her shoulders. It was a large contrast to the white and gold robes she wore.

"I..." Gabrielle didn't know what to say. There was a chance that Perdicas was friends with the healer and there was no way she wanted to live through that day's beating ever again. "I can't say." she muttered before looking down at the floor. "Can you still help me?" she asked in a quiet, childlike voice.

The healer's heart went out to the young woman in front of her. She hadn't been a healer for very long, but she knew now what had happened. She had seen other women like this, unable to tell about what was happening to them inside their own homes, either from shame, lack of courage, or both. So, she decided not to pry... for the moment.

"Of course I can. My name's Rosaline." The healer smiled gently at the young woman before looking to the small child next to her. "And who are you?" she asked in a curious voice, bending at her knees to get a better look at her.

"Nexa." the girl said boldly, taking a step forward in front of her mother in a protective manner. Rosaline grinned at the child and stuck her hand out. Nexa stared at it for a moment before taking it.

"Nice to meet you, Nexa." she said sincerely before releasing the girl's hand and standing back up. "If you wish, she can come in with us or wait with one of my apprentices while we go to the back." Rosaline watched as the blonde woman seemed to go through an inner battle.

In her mind, Gabrielle was trying to make a decision. She didn't want to leave her daughter somewhere she couldn't protect her. On the other hand, she didn't want Nexa

to see what Perdicas had done to her. True, the child was still too young to remember anything she saw now, but there was something inside Gabrielle that made her feel like the toddler shouldn't see the horrors of the world just yet.

"If it isn't too much trouble, could she stay with one of your apprentices?" she asked, finally coming to a decision. She would be sure to ask the healer to keep the door opened slightly so she could keep an eye on Nexa.

"It would be no trouble at all. Alexia, would you mind staying with Nexa while I go take care of," she looked at the young woman expectantly for an answer she didn't receive, "our newest arrival?" A woman that looked slightly older than Rosaline came over and nodded before taking Nexa's hand and leading her away from her mother. "Now then, shall we go take a look at you?"

Rosaline led the blonde woman into the backroom, leaving the door slightly ajar at the younger woman's request, and had her sit down on a low pallet. She noticed the patient wince as she complied and the healer began to realize just how serious the injuries were.

"Before we get to the other injuries, I want to take a look at those ribs of yours. Would you like me to help you get out of those clothes?" she asked, nodding toward the blonde.

Gabrielle looked down at her apparel and for the first time, she felt embarrassed. They weren't the impressive robes that the healer was wearing. Instead, it was a grey skirt with a blue-grey blouse. The garments had obviously seen better days. Trying to forget her embarrassment, she nodded. Rosaline smiled the same gentle way that she had when they first met and began helping her patient undress.

"You know, I usually don't let people take my clothes off when we've just met." Gabrielle joked as she tried to take her mind off of the fact that she was about to show her body to a complete stranger. She heard the healer chuckle.

"I see you've managed to hang onto your sense of humor, despite your injuries." she complimented the blonde as she let the blouse fall to the ground. Almost immediately, her patient's arms painfully went up to her chest. '*Someone's modest.*' the healer thought with an inward smirk before taking in what she had to work with. She didn't quite expect what she found.

Bruises, old and new, littered the young woman's torso. It looked as if someone had painted her blue, purple, and yellow. Rosaline felt her heart ache for the pain this woman was obviously going through. Putting her emotions aside, the healer went to work on fixing the blonde up as best she could.

"That should do it. If you ever need help again, I'll be here." Rosaline promised as she helped her patient get dressed again. "I recommend getting as much rest as possible and not straining yourself too much when you aren't resting. Come back in two weeks so I can check those ribs out again." The young woman looked at her with such an expression of gratitude that Rosaline wondered why anyone would ever do something to intentionally hurt the girl. "By the way, I never got your name. May I have it, please?" The blonde seemed to think this over for a moment before answering.

"It's Gabrielle." she said. "Thank you so much, for everything."

"Anytime." Rosaline assured her. "And remember, feel free to stop by whenever you want to, Gabrielle." she called after the retreating woman. The blonde looked back and smiled at her, although the swelled up eye seemed to take something from the smile. Gabrielle hadn't let her wrap it, and now Rosaline could see why. If she was in the predicament that the healer thought she was in, the young woman wouldn't want to raise any suspicions about where she had been. The young healer sighed and shook her head once the mother and child left. She had a feeling she would be getting to know the young woman throughout the future.

Her guess turned out to be right and over the next month, she got to know Gabrielle a bit more. She was even able to get the blonde woman to confirm her suspicions. She had to promise not to tell anyone, however, and as much as it hurt her to do so, she kept that promise. All she could do was be there for her new friend.

"Xena, look out!" Amarice called out to her partner. The dark-haired woman flipped backward over her attacker, glad to have Amarice's warning. The man didn't realize she had moved until it was too late and his sword, aimed for the lower part of her back, found itself in his comrade's gut. Stunned at what he had done, he let go of his sword and watched the man fall to the ground. Taking advantage of the distraction, Xena slammed the hilt of her sword into the side of her attacker's head, rendering him unconscious.

The two warriors somehow ended up back-to-back, Amarice using her two short swords and Xena using her long one. They had found that they were a great fighting team and a force to be reckoned with over the past year. Amarice was someone she could depend on to hold her own and Xena didn't have to look out for her like she did Gabrielle. She was happy about that, but at the same time, it made her sad. She had always enjoyed looking out for the young girl. It gave her a sense of purpose.

As they fought back-to-back, Amarice was wrapped up in her own thoughts while keeping half her attention on the enemies. They weren't great fighters, but they were enough to provide a workout. Not that she didn't get enough of a workout, trying to figure out Xena. Over the past year, they had become better friends, but there was something holding Xena back from fully opening up to her. But then again, there was something alluring about that part of her that wouldn't open up. Amarice wouldn't mind if Xena shared that part of her with her, but she wasn't going to pry to get the information out of her. Everyone has their secrets.

*'Including me.'* she thought with a scowl as she kicked another man away from her and brought her crossed swords up to stop a mace from crashing into her head. She pulled the weapon out of the man's hands with her own weapons, causing it to fly back and hit another raider in the chest. She then shoved her right sword through the man's shoulder and pulled it out again as he fell to the ground in pain. Her thoughts returned to the first day she had met Xena. *'Amarice the Amazon... what a joke.'* she thought ruefully as she knocked another attacker into oblivion with a solid kick to her head.

It was soon apparent that they had finished off the last of the raiders and any that they hadn't killed or knocked unconscious were fleeing for the hills.

"You're beginning to improve." Xena told the girl as she sheathed her sword. Amarice sheathed her own weapons and looked at Xena with a somewhat proud expression.

"You really think so?" she asked. Xena nodded and Amarice smiled. "Good. You know, you weren't so bad yourself." she complimented the warrior. Xena just shrugged it off and went over to Argo and Ice, Amarice's new grey stallion. Xena thought purchasing a male steed was a step in the right direction for Amarice.

*'His name suits him.'* Xena thought as she grabbed the reins of her own faithful companion and began to walk through the small village. Amarice followed after her, the stallion behind the young Amazon. They were headed for a farm on the outskirts of the town. They had been helping there for supplies, since Xena never asked for anything in return for protecting them. Being nowhere near as good a story teller as Gabrielle, Amarice couldn't pull in Dinars as a bard, either. So, they helped work the land and sold any weapons they procured from those they brought down. They didn't have a wonderful living, but they got along well enough.

It was later that night, as they were laying down to sleep in opposite beds, when thoughts began to assault the two of them. Xena thinking of Gabrielle and Amarice thinking about Xena. One was thinking of a friendship she had lost, the other, one she had gained. Amarice just wished Xena could see her as a true friend, or, at least, an acquaintance, instead of a replacement. The young woman sighed and rolled over, looking at the wall so she didn't have to see the warrior's back turned to her. Just like always.

## **Part 5**

As they entered the centaur territory, Amarice noticed that Xena had become tenser than she usually was. It had been happening ever since they made the decision to visit the village. She knew it wasn't because of the centaurs. Despite the conflicts they had had when the woman was a warlord, Amarice remembered that Xena and the centaurs had come to a kind of truce. So, the young warrior found herself pondering what was on Xena's mind.

Xena, on the other hand, was wondering how Solan would react to seeing her again. She hadn't visited since the time she was with Gabrielle, when they stopped Dagnine. The two of them had parted as friends, but Xena knew that someone's mind could change a lot in the time that went by in a year. Gabrielle was an example of that.

Xena smiled when the sound of gently rustling leaves reached her ears. Looking up, she spotted a blonde boy trying to hide in the tree branch above her.

"You can come down now, Solan." She chuckled when she heard the boy's grunt of frustration.

"I thought I had you this time, Xena." he admitted as he dropped to the ground. I've been practicing ever since you left last year."

"Well, you're getting better. Keep working and you'll be sneaking up on the best of them." she praised the boy, hiding her worries beneath the surface. She didn't want her son following in her footsteps. His next words put her fears to rest.

"Nah, I don't have fun sneaking up on just anybody. I only wanted to be able to sneak

up on you." he said, shrugging one of his shoulders.

"Oh really? You know, a great warrior needs to be able to sneak around." Xena pointed out.

"I kind of decided I don't want to be a warrior." he admitted reluctantly, rubbing the back of his head in a sheepish manner. Xena breathed a mental sigh of relief.

"Actually, I'd rather be a bard, like Gabrielle, so I can always make sure there's a happy ending." The blonde boy looked around, peeking behind Xena and Argo.

"Where is Gabrielle? I wanna tell her the news." Xena sighed and tried to think of what to tell her son. There was something about the way he talked about her old friend that told her the young boy had a crush on her.

"She's... not with me anymore. I'm traveling with Amarice now." she finally told him, introducing Amarice with a nod of her head in the Amazon's direction. The Amazon smiled at the young boy and almost had to laugh at the disappointed expression on his face. Apparently Xena wasn't the only one that had been fond of Gabrielle.

"It's nice to meet you, Amarice. My name's Solan." he introduced himself politely before turning back to Xena. "I'll go tell uncle Kaleipus you're here. He'd meet you himself, but he hasn't been doing so well." Solan had a sad look on his face as he turned away and began running toward the civilized part of centaur territory.

Xena looked behind her to tell Amarice to go ahead when saw the amused expression on the Amazon's face.

"What?" she asked in a low growl meant to be playful. Amarice, knowing she was joking, simply chuckled.

"Oh nothing. I just never pegged you as a person that was good with kids." she explained. Xena simply continued to stare at her, hiding her surprise at Amarice's boldness. Perhaps they had been getting closer over the last year and a half. "Of course, it shouldn't shock me. You took care of Gabrielle all that time." The words were out before she could censor them and Amarice knew she'd crossed a line by the look on Xena's face. "I'm sorry, Xena. I didn't mean to say that." she apologized hurriedly as she was faced with an angry warrior princess. An icy glare was her response as Xena turned her steed to ride into the centaur village.

"Don't be sorry. Just improve." was all she heard come from the warrior's lips. Amarice sighed and smacked herself in the head.

*'Smooth move, Amarice. Now you've scared her off and she won't want you to travel with her anymore.'* the young warrior thought as she followed after her mentor on Ice. *'Fine then. It's not like I've never been on my own before. I can learn just fine by myself. She'll just be missing out on my company.'* she decided, raising her head back up. She had been able to survive without Xena before. She could do it now, too. *'Then why do I feel like I just lost something?'* she wondered as her horse walked into the village.

After purchasing a stable for Ice, Amarice tried to figure out where Xena went. She walked aimlessly through the streets, trying to find some clue as to where the other warrior had gone. If she was going to leave Xena, she was going to ask if the woman really wanted her to leave. She didn't want to just walk out on her like Gabrielle had.

As much as she had heard about the former Amazon, Amarice didn't like her. She had left Xena, and her people, for a man that, according to her dark friend, she hadn't been interested in when she lived in Potidaea. To her, it seemed like Gabrielle had abandoned her best friend and the Amazons for some man that didn't mean that much to her in the first place. She'd have to have a word with the bard if they ever met.

Amarice's attention was caught by the blonde boy they had run into earlier. He was running from a hut and Amarice guessed that there were tears streaming down his face. If Amarice remembered right, she could recall the boy mentioning an uncle that wasn't doing so well. It was her guess that his uncle had taken a turn for the worse. A few moments after she had seen the boy run by, Xena was sprinting after him from the same hut.

"Solan, wait!" Amarice watched as her companion ran after the boy, calling out for him to stop. She desperately wanted to know what it was that had happened. Deciding it wasn't her business, though, she headed for the tavern. She'd wait there for Xena, if the woman ever came back.

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"Rosaline, I've been meaning to ask you something." Gabrielle admitted as her friend wrapped her shoulder. She glanced over and received a questioning look from the brown haired woman who was treating her injuries. Returning her gaze to the doorway in front of her, Gabrielle continued. "You have an accent that isn't from anywhere in Greece. Where did you come from?" She heard a chuckle so Gabrielle turned to face her friend to see what was so funny.

"I was wondering when you'd ask that. I have to admit though, I didn't think you'd realize I wasn't from Greece." she said with an amused expression. An indignant look passed over Gabrielle's face before Rosaline continued. "You've obviously been further than this little town. I can see that now. I doubt you've ever left Greece though."

"You're right. I've been all over Greece but I've never actually been able to leave it." the blonde admitted. *'But who knows... maybe if I had stayed with Xena, I would have.'*

"Well, have you ever heard of an island called Britannia?" Rosaline asked as she finished the last bit of wrapping on Gabrielle's arm.

"I've heard of it, but I don't know much about it." The blonde's eyes began to widen as realization dawned on her. "You mean you're from Britannia?" she asked. Rosaline smiled and nodded. "But... But that's so far away!"

"I see you know your way around our world. Yes, it is far away, but I am happy to be here. Greece is so different from Britannia. It's quite a refreshing change, actually."

"Don't you miss your family?" Gabrielle asked curiously, her eyes now alight with something she had thought she lost years ago.

"I don't have a family. I was an orphan." Rosaline admitted. She still had a smile on her face, however. "Don't worry. My life at the orphanage was very nice. They took good care of us. Once I was old enough, though, I left and trained to be a healer. Once

my apprenticeship was over, I came here. It's not as busy and the scenery is prettier." she explained. "What about you, Gabrielle? I don't believe you've ever told me about your family." The blonde visibly stiffened and Rosaline wondered if she had touched a subject she shouldn't have.

"I have a younger sister, Lila, and she was really the only one that tried to understand me. My parents, Herodotus and Hecuba, they're nice people and they only wanted what they thought was best for me. They had me betrothed to... Perdicas... when I was ten years old. We were to be wed on my eighteenth birthday." Gabrielle said quietly, her gaze shifting to the ground. "I know they thought that's what I needed, to get the stories out of my head, but I didn't want to marry him. I wanted to travel the world and become a bard, telling stories that would go down in history."

"You mean your parents are the reason why you're married to that... that... that bastard?! How could they do that to you?" Rosaline asked furiously.

"No, no, no! Just wait for me to finish. Please..." Gabrielle pleaded as she calmed her friend down. A few moments later, the healer nodded.

"It was the year before I turned eighteen when Draco and his men showed up to take our village. The women were being rounded up as slaves. I tried to stand up to them." Gabrielle laughed bitterly as she remembered offering herself for the others. "I was so naïve. What made me think I, a poor peasant girl, could stand up to a trained fighter? Lucky for me, that's when she showed up."

"She?"

"Xena. She saved our village and I eventually ended up traveling with her. It took a little bit of stubborn persuasion, but I did it. Then, we spent our time going on adventures and helping those that needed it. She even helped Hercules out!" Rosaline smiled gently and motioned for Gabrielle to keep talking.

"Have you ever heard of Prometheus?" she asked before launching into one of her stories.

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Xena combed the forest as she searched for her distraught son. She was feeling a little uneasy herself. With Kaleipus dead, who would take care of Solan? She couldn't leave him here with someone she didn't trust. She couldn't keep him with her. Her line of work was too dangerous. The only person she did trust had abandoned her. Xena stopped in her tracks.

"Mother!" Cyrene lived alone and probably wanted some kind of company. She'd be perfect for raising Solan. Deciding to file that idea away for the moment, Xena took off after her son again. "Solan! Solan, where'd you go?" she called out to the trees. Not too far off, she heard familiar sniffles. She smiled sadly to herself and followed the noise until she came to a small river running through the woods, her blonde son sitting next to it.

"Leave me alone. I don't want to talk to you." he told her as she took a seat next to him. "You'll just go away like Kaleipus did. Just like mother and father did." Xena's heart ached for the son that had lost so much.

"Solan, you can't let death stop you from getting close to someone ever again..." she advised him. He turned to face her, an angry and hurt expression on his face.

"What do you know about it?" he spat at her. Xena sighed and put a hand on his shoulder, relieved that he didn't pull away.

"I know a lot more about it than you think," she told him. "And it took a very special friend to teach me that even though they're gone, they're still with you. You just have to close your eyes," she told him, "and look in here." she instructed Solan, tapping his chest where his heart would be. Solan did as he was told, and after a few moments the tears stopped. The only thing heard throughout the forest was the sound of the birds and her son's sniffles.

"What happened between you and Gabrielle?" he asked, opening his blue eyes that were so like her own. Xena's mask almost went back up, but she knew that if she put it back on now, she'd lose her son forever.

"Well Solan... she realized that the life on the road wasn't for her and that she'd rather have a family."

"I thought you were her family, though." Solan said with a confused expression on his face.

"That's what I thought, too..." Xena admitted quietly. "I guess not, though, because she married a boy from her village."

"Wait. I thought she was married to you?" Solan asked. Xena could feel her face blushing as she comprehended Solan's question. She hadn't thought that anyone could read her feelings for Gabrielle.

"W-what? Gabrielle and I were just really good friends, Solan." she told the boy, who now had an amused expression on his face.

"I'm sure, Xena." he told her with a smirk before standing up again, Xena following suit. He shifted on his feet before looking up at the woman. "Thank you, for everything," he said gratefully. "I guess I should start asking around the village for a place to stay. It shouldn't be that hard."

"Solan, before your uncle died... he asked me to take care of you if anything ever happened to him." Xena started off, feeling a little nervous. "So, if you really want to, I have a place you could stay." she offered. Before she knew it, her arms were full of a boy squeezing her in a hug.

"Thank you, Xena. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" he cried into her leathers in relief, glad that he wouldn't have to leave his older friend.

"It's no problem, Solan. We'll leave tomorrow, if you want. Tonight, we'll have the funeral pyre for your uncle." Teary blue eyes looked up at her and the blonde head nodded.

"I'd like that very much. Will Amarice be coming with us?" Xena pondered this for a moment, wondering if the Amazon would be willing to continue traveling with her after she snapped at her like that.

"I sure hope so. I don't think you could put up with just me on the road." The warrior



winked at the blonde boy before heading in the direction of the centaur village. "Come on, Solan. Let's go get ready for tonight." she said.

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"I don't understand. If you were such great friends with Xena, why are you with Perdicas now?" Rosaline asked as she handed Gabrielle a cup of tea. They had moved from the healing room to the healer's bedroom so they could have more privacy. Nexa was now sitting on her mother's lap, bouncing up and down.

"It was all my fault." the blonde started off, a sad, faraway expression on her face. "Perdicas had me convinced that he needed me. That I was the only one that could stop him from being sent into a pit of despair. Xena was so strong. She never needed me for that. She never needed me for anything." Gabrielle sighed as she stroked her daughter's blonde hair. "So, I married Perdicas instead. The day after our wedding, the murderess Callisto came to kill me. She almost ended up killing Perdicas, but Xena saved him. Sometimes... I wish she hadn't." She added the last part so quietly that Rosaline wasn't sure if she had actually said anything. Sensing that this was something that Gabrielle hadn't even wanted to admit to herself, Rosaline wrapped her friend in a hug.

"When I see what he does to you, it makes me wish he was dead, too." she assured her younger friend. There was an awkward silence that filled the room before Gabrielle spoke again.

"We're leaving, you know." she told the healer. "Tomorrow morning, after he leaves with the rest of the council on their trading expedition. Nexa and I are getting out of here." Sea green eyes looked up into warm brown ones for some kind of reassurance that she was doing the right thing.

"Good girl. I'm proud of you, Gabrielle." Rosaline assured her.

"But I feel so guilty leaving you behind. You've done so much and I've never paid you back."

"Gabrielle, getting out of that house will be enough payment. I don't want to see you hurt anymore." The blonde's eyes filled with tears before she began whimpering. It wasn't long before Rosaline was holding a sobbing woman and a young child in her arms.

"I d-don't know w-where I can g-go." Gabrielle stammered as sobs wracked through her small body.

"Shh... What about Xena? You could go back to her." Rosaline suggested. She regretted it when hard green eyes looked up at her.

"I abandoned her. She won't want me back. I wouldn't even want me back." the blonde told her. "Besides, she has her friend Amarice now. I may not leave the house very often, but I still hear stories about her and her new companion." There was anger in Gabrielle's voice, and something akin to jealousy.

"Gabrielle, people can have more than one friend." Rosaline reminded her.

"But I want to be more than friends." the blonde admitted before she could stop the

words from escaping. She immediately pulled away from the healer and turned her back to her. "I... I didn't mean to say that." she stammered, wrapping her arms around herself. "I have to go." she said. Before Rosaline could say anything, Gabrielle had turned around and was taking Nexa from her.

"Gabrielle, wait!" Rosaline called after her friend. It was too late though, and the small blonde was already out the door. "Bloody Hell... that's one way to say good-bye to a friend." she cursed as she stared after the retreating blonde's back.

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From the corner of the room, an invisible Ares watched the scene unfold before him. Gabrielle surprised him. He didn't think she'd ever get the guts to actually leave Perdicas. Of course, he also hadn't predicted Xena getting another annoying sidekick. This was not going how he planned...

"I'll have to remedy that." he said with a chuckle before vanishing, a smirk on his face.

He reappeared in front of the town's meeting house. After slightly altering his appearance, he made himself visible to the mortal eye. He then proceeded to enter the townhouse, where the meeting between the council members would be taking place in just a few moments. He didn't have to wait long for the leaders of the town to start filing into the small room and start discussing the best trade routes to take on their expedition.

They were halfway into the meeting when one of the mortals brought up an issue.

"Perdicas, I don't think you should be leaving your woman at home on her own." . Apparently, Ares wouldn't be working on his own in convincing Perdicas to stay with Gabrielle. He smirked silently as he realized this. "I mean, you two do have a daughter and you're never around. Someone's got to teach the daughter how to stay in line. You leave the kid at home with her mother all day, and she'll be trying to think for herself." Perdicas' growl was audible, even from where Ares was sitting. The God of War decided to add on more to the flames.

"You know, I also heard that she was planning on skipping town while we're gone? Looks like someone is losing control of their family." He chuckled. The look of sheer rage on Perdicas' face was priceless. Ares almost felt a little sorry for the former bard. Almost. It was her fault Xena wouldn't come back to him, and she was going to pay for it while he tried to get Xena back on his side.

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Gabrielle was sitting on the floor with Nexa, playing a game that involved clapping their hands together. Her daughter seemed to enjoy it and every time their hands clapped together, the little girl giggled in amusement. A few times, Gabrielle had to laugh as well. As she thought about the future, she realized she could do it with a smile. She'd be leaving this house. She didn't know where she'd go, but she was getting out of this Tartarus on earth. She and Nexa would be able to be a family that didn't have to live in fear... A smile came to her face again, unaware that her dreams of the future were about to come crashing down on her.

She almost missed the sound of the door closing, it was so quiet. Not so much the

sound itself, but the fact that Perdicas had tried to close it quietly, sent alarms off in her head. Gabrielle listened closer and heard the almost silent footsteps on the floor. If she hadn't been listening for them, she surely wouldn't have heard them.

Gabrielle's heart began pounding in her chest. Perdicas was mad and he was planning something. The blonde closed her eyes and listened, the whole time keeping a protective distance between her and Nexa.

It didn't take long for her to hear what she was waiting for. The sound of the floor creaking right behind her. She could even hear the sound of the wind as Perdicas' fist traveled through the air. Using reflexes that she thought were long forgotten, Gabrielle brought her hand up and grabbed Perdicas' wrist. She used his surprise to her advantage and stood up, still keeping a strong grip on his forearm.

"Let go of me, you stupid whore!" he yelled, trying to yank his hand away from her. Gabrielle let go, causing him to stumble backwards. As soon as he was free, he was rushing at her. Gabrielle quickly picked Nexa up and moved to the side. She wasn't fast enough, however, and Perdicas was able to make contact with one of her legs. The former Amazon fell to the ground, careful to make sure that she landed on her back so that Nexa didn't get crushed.

Her head hit the wooden floor with a thud and for a moment, stars filled her vision. Once she was able to see straight again, she found Perdicas on top of her once more. She didn't know where Nexa had gone, but she hoped it was somewhere safe.

"I can't believe you would have the nerve to even think about leaving me!" he growled at her before slapping her across the face. Gabrielle's eyes widened. How did he know?

'*Rosaline!*' she thought for a moment. '*No... she wouldn't do that.*' Gabrielle didn't have any more time to ponder this, because Perdicas was picking her up by the hair. It was as she was standing that she noticed Nexa hiding underneath the kitchen table. '*Good girl.*' she thought as Perdicas turned her around. A fist greeted her and knocked her back to the ground. Gabrielle almost choked on the blood streaming back into her mouth from her nose. As she brought her hand up to cover her nose, she noticed Perdicas bringing his foot back. '*Not this time!*' she thought before rolling backwards out of his foot's range of motion.

"Get back here!" he roared at her after he regained his balance. Gabrielle simply got to her feet and shook her head.

"I'm leaving, whether you want me to or not, Perdicas." she told him in the bravest voice she could muster. Not waiting for a response, she calmly walked towards the kitchen. She refused to let Perdicas know she was afraid of him. She needed to be in charge.

"You had better not take one step out that door, Gabrielle!" he called after her. Gabrielle ignored him as she bent down to pick up Nexa. He wasn't going to stop her. Not now. Not anymore.

She was almost to the door that led outside when she felt a white-hot pain lance through her shoulder. It took everything she had to stop herself from dropping her precious bundle. She frantically glanced over to see what had caused the pain and she

found a knife handle sticking out of her shoulder. She nearly fainted just from the sight of it. She didn't even have time to pass out, though, because Perdicas was grabbing her by the hair again.

"The only way you're leaving me is if I kill you. And believe me, I'll let you take your precious daughter with you!" he growled in her ear. Gabrielle froze for a moment, fear for her daughter taking over her body. As gently as she could from her position, she set Nexa down. Thinking of it as a surrender, Perdicas loosened his grip on her hair. This gave her the room she needed to reach her hand over and pull the knife out of her shoulder.

A scream ripped through the air as she pulled the blade out, not caring if she ruined the muscles and tendons in the process. All she knew was she had to get away. Before Perdicas could register what was happening, Gabrielle was cutting her hair to get loose from the monster that held her. Once she was free, she staggered forward out of his reach and turned around, pointing the knife at him.

"Don't come after us Perdicas. Don't. I'm tired of listening to you. Of being afraid of you." she told him, shaking the blade in his direction. "Nexa and I are going to leave now. You're going to stay here. We won't ever see each other again." she told him before turning her back to him and taking Nexa by the hand.

Perdicas' anger clouded his thinking, making him forget the threat that she had made to him a month before. Without a second thought, he grabbed onto the other wrist of the little girl, yanking her towards him. She was Gabrielle's weakness and he knew it.

"What are you going to do now, Gabrielle? I have your precious little girl. You had better come back to me, or who knows what I might do to her... I wonder if she screams like you do?" he asked, running his free hand through the little girl's hair. The former bard didn't need to think twice. She calmly walked back over to Perdicas, who had an arm open for her. "That's what I thought."

"Perdicas?" Gabrielle said quietly as she allowed him to wrap an arm around her. He looked down at her, but didn't see the angry fire in her eyes until it was too late. "I hate you!" she screamed before shoving the knife into her husband's side. The feel of the blade entering Perdicas' body made something inside Gabrielle snap. She pulled the weapon out and watched her nightmare's eyes glaze over. Then, she stabbed him again; and again; and again. All the rage from the past three years was leaving her body as she forced the knife into his skin over and over again. Three years of being afraid. Three years of being in pain. Three years of worrying if she'd be able to protect her daughter. All of it was put into the final blow that she sent into Perdicas' stomach.

Gabrielle released the handle of the knife and watched as the man in front of her crumpled to the ground.

Perdicas was dead.

## **Part 6**

Gabrielle stared down at the body of her dead husband as Nexa's screams filled the

house. She couldn't believe she had killed Perdicas. She had repeatedly stabbed him until she felt the life force drain out of his body. She hadn't even wanted to kill him. She just wanted to leave. Then he had grabbed Nexa.

The former bard had never felt so angry in her life. She had been angry enough to kill someone. Not just anyone, either; but someone she had known since she was a child; and someone she was married to. She hoped she was never that angry again.

Finally, Nexa's cries penetrated her hazy, guilt-ridden mind. She looked down at the little girl on the floor that was crawling towards the shorn blonde locks of hair that covered the floor. The loose strands of hair were picked up by the crying child and the familiar feeling between her fingers seemed to calm her down. It was while she was admiring her daughter that Gabrielle noticed how close Nexa was to the blood that was pooling on the floor.

"Come to Mama, Nexa." Gabrielle cooed as she bent over and lifted her daughter up with her good arm. Nexa almost immediately began searching Gabrielle's face for her mother, almost unable to recognize the bloody woman holding her.

"Mama getted a booboo?" Nexa asked, pointing to Gabrielle's bleeding shoulder. The blonde looked over at the indicated wound and then back at Nexa.

"Yes, Mama got a booboo." she responded to the familiar question. "Let's go get Mama's boobos fixed." she suggested to the little girl. Nexa nodded in agreement. Her mama got boobos a lot when her Daddy was home. She hoped they didn't hurt too much.

Gabrielle shifted Nexa's weight in her good arm before heading towards the door that led out into the night. She almost left the body of the dead man in the house without doing anything to the body. At the last moment, though, she placed three coins in his hand and closed the stiff digits. She wouldn't allow her worst enemy to wander the underworld because they couldn't pay Charon's fare to get across the River Styx. Deep down, she also wanted to make sure Perdicas made it to Tartarus, where he belonged. After paying his fare for him, Gabrielle left the dead man behind in the house, already blocking out what she had done from her mind.

The blonde was grateful for the cover of night as she walked down the path that ran through the town. She barely knew where she was going, her mind was in so much turmoil. Luckily, her body knew what she needed, and halfway through town she realized she was heading towards Rosaline's home. She only hoped the healer was still awake.

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The pounding at her door woke the healer from her deep sleep. As she sleepily climbed out of her warm bed, she couldn't help but wonder who had the nerve to wake her up in the middle of the night.

"I'm coming! Have some patience!" she yelled as she made her way through her home. After lighting a candle, she walked to the door and opened it. What she found standing outside she could have never expected. "Gabrielle? By the Gods, is that you?" she asked, stepping outside into the dark night.

"Rosaline... I need help." Gabrielle said, shifting uneasily as she held Nexa.

"I would say so. Get in here and I'll take a look at you." Rosaline ushered the blonde and her child inside. She watched as Gabrielle gingerly set Nexa down and turned away from her.

"Mama getted a booboo." Nexa told the healer, pointing up at her mother. Rosaline looked over and saw Gabrielle holding her shoulder. It seemed that her friend did indeed 'getted a booboo'.

"Gabrielle, what happened?" she asked as she took a step toward the former bard. The blonde retreated a step, leaving Rosaline's sight.

"I'm not ready to talk about it yet. I just need you to help me with something." Gabrielle told her. Rosaline was quiet for a moment before nodding her head.

"Just let me get a fire in the hearth and I'll see what I can do." she assured her young friend before going over to the fireplace and starting her task. "Alright, come over here where I can see." she ordered Gabrielle once she had the fire going. The blonde hesitantly stepped forward into the light, where the young healer could get a good look at her. She found her friend covered in blood, some running from her shoulder and some covering the front of her blouse and skirt. "Gabrielle, what happened?!"

"Please, Rosaline. I'll tell you later. I really need your help right now." Gabrielle told her, her voice cracking as she looked at the healer with pleading eyes. Rosaline sighed and then went to retrieve a chair for Gabrielle to sit in. When she came back, she motioned for the young woman to sit down. "I'll never be able to pay you back for everything you've done." the blonde said with a sigh as she took a seat in the firelight.

"Shush. You don't even worry about paying me back. I won't accept anything you give me." Rosaline chastised her as she ripped the blouse around the wounded shoulder. "By the Gods, Gabrielle!" the healer gasped, bringing her hands to her mouth.

"Perdicas came home from the town meeting." Gabrielle explained as she turned her head away from her friend. "Rosaline, he knew I was going to leave tomorrow. He tried to stop me."

"Gabrielle, I swear I didn't tell him!"

"I didn't think you did. I know you wouldn't betray me." Gabrielle said as she watched Rosaline leave the room. When she came back with a bowl and a rag, the blonde continued her story. "I told him that I wasn't going to stay with him anymore. When I tried to leave though, he followed after me. I guess I had just been hoping he would listen and let me go..." Gabrielle sighed as she looked over at Rosaline, who was washing the blood away from the wound so she could get a better look at it. "He must have grabbed one of the knives from the kitchen because the next thing I knew, there was a knife handle sticking out of my shoulder."

"I can see that. Gabrielle, I don't know if I'll be able to fix this. It looks like someone tried to tear your muscles out!" Gabrielle flinched as Rosaline cleaned the wound out before trying to explain.

"That would be me." The cleaning stopped and the young healer looked over at her.

"He grabbed me by the hair. I needed to get free, so I cut it off. In order to do that, I needed the knife." she explained.

"Yeah, I was wondering about the new haircut." Rosaline joked, trying to lighten the mood. Gabrielle gave her a half-hearted smile before turning her gaze back to the fire.

"I... I don't know what happened after that. The last thing I remember is him grabbing Nexa and trying to use her against me. The next thing I knew, his dead body was on the floor." Tears were threatening to overcome the blonde now. "I... I killed him, Rosaline. I've never killed anyone before." Gabrielle choked out the words before the tears started to fall.

"Oh Gabrielle... I don't feel the least bit awful when I tell you he deserved it. He was draining everything out of you, like a poison." Rosaline told her. Seeing that her friend didn't want to listen to her, she stopped cleaning out the wound and took Gabrielle's chin in her hands. "Listen to me. If you hadn't done it, he would have killed you eventually. Then where would your daughter be?" she asked. "You did everything you could to protect her. That's what **any** good mother would do."

"I guess you're right..." Gabrielle said with a sigh before looking back at the fire. "I just wish it hadn't happened at all. I wish I knew how he found out in the first place... I wish I had a plan for what to do now."

"I'm sure you'll think of something, Gabrielle. I'll be here to help you if you need it." Rosaline assured her with a smile. "Now hold still. I need to sew this up as best I can."

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As the flames took away the body of the beloved centaur, Xena stood there holding a quietly crying Solan. As she watched the smoke rise, she sang a song honoring Kaleipus' memory. He had been a great opponent and an even better ally. He at least deserved this much from her, even if they didn't agree very often.

"Xena, are we really leaving tomorrow?" Solan asked her once she finished the song and the fire burned away, leaving the village in darkness as they walked back to the hut. Xena looked down at her son, waiting for an explanation. "I just don't think I can handle staying any longer, knowing that Kaleipus won't be around anymore." he sighed.

"If you really want to, we can leave bright and early tomorrow." she assured him. "Now, go get into bed. I need to go find Amarice." The blonde boy nodded before running off to Kaleipus' hut, leaving Xena to find the Amazon. *'If I were an Amazon, where would I go?'* she wondered as she looked around the village. She smirked when she spotted the hut that also served as a tavern. *'I'd bet anything that she's in there.'* she thought as she began heading for the hut.

When she entered the hut, Xena immediately began scanning the room for her traveling companion. A small smile came to her face when she found Amarice, but she quickly rid herself of it before approaching the other warrior.

"I thought I would find you in here." she said as she took a seat. The young Amazon glanced her way before turning back to the drink she had in her hand.

"Yeah, what do you want?" Amarice asked bitterly. "Come to send me packing

yourself?"

"Send you packing? Amarice, I came to... what's the word for that thing people do when they've done something wrong?"

"Apologize?" the Amazon supplied.

"Yeah... that." Xena sighed. She was so bad at this. "Look, I probably shouldn't have become angry with you. You're entitled to your own opinion of how my relationship with Gabrielle was." she said. "But you should know the facts. I didn't always take care of her. She grew up and began taking care of herself."

"Grew up and got married, you mean." Amarice muttered. Xena felt her jaw clench but she kept her anger in check.

"Is that what this is all about?" she asked, turning the Amazon's head towards her. "Because if it is, let me tell you something. There are things that I couldn't give Gabrielle, and I knew that from the start. I even tried to get rid of her in the beginning so that she could have those things." Xena told Amarice. *'It's not her fault that she chose to leave when I was beginning to realize that I loved her.'* she added on silently as she watched Amarice think it over.

"But she abandoned you, Xena, and the Amazons. And from what you say, she left for someone she never really cared about in the first place! How can you just forgive her for that?" Xena mentally sighed again. This was turning out to be harder than she thought.

"Amarice, you can't be angry at someone just because they want to have a family. For wanting to raise a child." she explained. "I may have many skills, but I admit that creating a baby inside of another person is not one of them." This got a smirk out of Amarice.

"I'm sure you could find a way." Xena chuckled and patted the young Amazon on the shoulder.

"That, my friend, might take a while." she said. "Now come on. Solan wants to know if you still want to travel with us."

"You mean he's coming?" Amarice asked as she stood up from the table. She wasn't sure if she liked the idea of a kid coming with them.

"Only until Amphipolis. I'm thinking of leaving him with my mother. There's a lot he could learn from the traveling bards that stop by at night." Xena explained as she too rose from the table. "Although, this does mean we'll be visiting my hometown more often. Do you have a problem with that?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No. I think I might be able to handle it." Amarice said with a small smile. Xena laughed quietly before leading her out the door of the drinking hut.

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"So do you know where you're going to go now?" Rosaline asked quietly as they sat cross-legged around fireplace. Gabrielle shrugged with her good shoulder.



"I don't know... Amphipolis sounds good." she replied. '*Amphipolis sounds very good.*' she admitted to herself as she thought of Xena.

"Isn't that where your warrior friend is from?" the healer asked. When Gabrielle nodded, Rosaline squealed with delight. "If you weren't hurt right now, I'd hug you! Gabrielle, this means you can finally see Xena again!" The former bard sighed and shook her head.

"One track mind, aren't you?" she joked, although she admitted to herself that that's the track her mind was always on, as well. Even if she was no longer the same Gabrielle that Xena used to know, she still couldn't wait to see her warrior. Although, deep down, there was this feeling of anger towards her old friend. Even though she didn't want to admit it, Gabrielle was angry at the woman for letting her make the biggest mistake of her life. She was angry at Xena for not loving her enough to object to her marriage.

"Gabrielle? Are you alright?" Rosaline asked. Gabrielle pulled herself out of her thoughts and looked at her friend. "You just kind of blanked out there for a moment."

"Sorry. I was thinking." she apologized with a sheepish smile. "Nexa, get away from there, Sweetie." she said, turning her attention to her daughter, who was now wobbling in the direction of the hearth. The little girl, hearing her name, turned towards her mother and smiled before shakily walking over to her. "That's a good girl." Gabrielle cooed as she put the girl on her lap. She absent-mindedly began stroking the girl's soft dark-blond hair. The two adults sat in silence as Nexa played with the soft fabric of the new robes her mother was wearing. A few minutes of silence went by before a series of soft noises reached Gabrielle's ears. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, signaling that something was wrong.

"They're coming." she whispered, now identifying the sound that she had heard. It had been the sounds of horse whinnies and wagons. Before Rosaline could ask what was going on, Gabrielle was moving Nexa to the floor and standing up.

"Gabrielle... Gabrielle, who's coming?" the healer asked as she stood up as well, bringing Nexa up with her.

"Rosaline, I have to go. Now. The townspeople... they're on their way here." she explained.

"How can you know that?"

"When you travel with Xena, you learn a few things. Like how to use your body to listen, not just your ears. Please, help me get ready to leave! If they find me, they're going to put me in prison! They'll take Nexa away and put her in some orphanage or put her with Perdicas' family!" Gabrielle told her, panic beginning to set in as she frantically looked for her things.

"They won't imprison you, Gabrielle. You were defending your daughter!" Rosaline assured her friend as she grabbed onto the blonde's shoulder with her free hand. Gabrielle whirled around and the look Rosaline received could have frozen a raging river during the dry season.

"Don't you tell me that! The last time I went for help in this town, I found out that

Perdicas had friends. The judge is one of them. Do you really think these corrupt people are going to find me innocent? They'll make it look like murder!" Rosaline blinked. She had known that Perdicas had friends, but she hadn't been aware that the judge was one of them. "Please... help me, Rosaline." Gabrielle pleaded quietly, an almost defeated look in her eyes that rocked the healer to the core.

"Anything for you, my friend." she said, her voice filled with sincerity. The blonde gave her a small smile before turning away and looking for the garments that Rosaline had set out for her. After she found them, she shrugged out of the robe and changed as quickly as she could without jarring her shoulder even more. Once that was done, she hurried back over to Rosaline and tried to get through her next task.

"I need you to... I need you to take Nexa to Amphipolis." she said quietly. "There's a tavern there that belongs to a woman named Cyrene. Leave Nexa with her."

"Gabrielle, why-" Rosaline was cut off before she could finish.

"I'm going to take a different route. If they catch me, I don't want them to find Nexa. They'll take her to Perdicas' family if they get her. I don't know what his family is like and I don't want to risk them being anything like him." Gabrielle explained as best she could. "Rosaline, Cyrene is a kind woman. She'll raise Nexa right if I don't make it to Amphipolis." It was quiet for a moment as Rosaline comprehended what Gabrielle was saying. She didn't expect to make it to Amphipolis.

"I'll do it, Gabrielle, but I need to tell you one thing first: You're going to see your daughter again. You'll be the one to raise her." Gabrielle sniffled as tears started running down her cheeks.

"I hope that you're right, Rosaline." she said before shifting her attention to her daughter. "Hi there my big, strong, warrior." she greeted the little girl. Nexa giggled and reached a hand out to her mother's cheek, wiping away some of the tears.

"You wawwior too, Mama." Nexa said. Rosaline had to smile at the little girl's words.

*'If only you knew, child... If only you knew.'* she thought as she watched the good-byes between mother and daughter.

"Thank you, sweetie." Gabrielle said with a sad smile. "Now, Mama needs you to do something for her." she told the little girl in Rosaline's arms. "Mama needs you to go with the nice healer lady to go see a friend."

"Go see Xena?" Nexa asked curiously. Gabrielle nodded, trying not to wonder how Nexa knew that. "Yay! You come with us?"

"I can't come with you, sweetie." the blonde said regretfully. "I have to go away for a little while, but I'll see you again as soon as I can. And I'll think of you everyday." she promised. Nexa seemed to think this promise over before giving her mother a kiss on the nose.

"Okay. I be good, too." the little girl said, making a promise of her own. Gabrielle smiled, doubting that a child of hers could stay out of trouble for long.

"We have to go now, sweetie. I love you." she said before looking at Rosaline. "Follow me." the healer said. She led the way to the back of the house, Nexa in one hand and a candle in the other. In the distance, Gabrielle could hear the sounds of the

wagons drawing closer. She realized that she probably shouldn't have said such a long good-bye. "Out here." Rosaline said, opening a door that led outside. They quietly shut it behind them before running towards the shadows of another house. Once they were a little safer, Gabrielle turned to her friend.

"You take Nexa down the main road. It won't be as dangerous. I'll go through the woods. They'll be less likely to catch me, that way." she ordered the healer. Rosaline nodded before giving her small friend a one armed hug. Gabrielle quickly returned it. "I'll miss you, Rosaline." she said before taking off towards the forest, leaving Rosaline standing with Nexa in her arms.

"I'll miss you too, my friend." the healer whispered before making her way towards the town stables where she kept her horse. As she saddled and mounted the animal, Nexa in tow, she hoped her friend would be alright.

Giving a kiss to the child's forehead, Rosaline spurred the steed into action. Once they were out of the stables, she nudged the mare into a canter, and then a gallop. Soon, she was riding as fast she could safely go, leaving the corrupt town behind.

Unfortunately, Gabrielle wasn't so lucky.

The former bard had run as fast as she could through the forest, stumbling over roots and rocks as she went. One of the townspeople had spotted her as she broke into the woods though, and the mob had followed after her.

Gabrielle looked back in time to see the light from the torches gaining on her. She didn't see, however, the giant tree root that seemed to come up from out of the ground. As her foot caught on the protruding root and she fell, the ground came up faster than she expected it to and she didn't have time to put her hands out to break her fall.

Stars clouded her vision as she tried to get back up, but the pain in her shoulder, and now her face, made it an impossible feat. She laid there for a few moments, her mind telling her body to move but her limbs too tired to obey it. By the time she was able to force herself to get up, it was too late. A net was wrapping itself around her and the angry yells of the townspeople was filling her ears. Gabrielle fought with all she had until a blinding pain went through her shoulder. As she fell into oblivion, the last thing she heard was the angry chant coming from the villagers.

"Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!"

## **Part 7**

"Are we there yet?" Solan groaned for the fifteenth time that day as he walked behind Xena and Amarice. And although it was getting on her nerves, Xena couldn't blame the boy for the way he was acting. The sun hanging overhead was hot; they had been traveling for days; there was really nothing to do; and Solan's attention span of a typical teenager had worn thin the day before. After all, he was used to playing in forests and always having a tree to climb. It was nothing like the grassy plains that they were traveling on now. Xena was surprised that he had lasted this long without getting bored. Or, at least, without acting on that boredom. So, every time he asked the question, the warrior calmly replied with the same answer. Amarice, however, was

not as patient as the older warrior was.

"Xena, I swear if that little tag-a-long of yours doesn't shut up, I'm going to have to kill him." the annoyed teenager threatened in a whisper, although she made it just loud enough for Solan to hear.

"Hey! I'm not a tag-a-long!" Solan objected as he hurried to catch up, trying to prove his point.

"You look like one to me, kid." Amarice told him, punching him in the arm.

"Amarice, he's only a few years younger than you are, so I wouldn't be talking if I were you." Xena told her, earning a glare from the young woman. Knowing that she had made her point, Xena looked ahead towards the horizon again, hoping that they wouldn't start arguing again. A warrior princess' patience could only last so long, after all.

"So, when are we going to get there?" Solan asked, ruining any hopes that Xena held for a quiet afternoon.

"Look, we'll get there when we get there!" Amarice practically barked at him. Then, she looked over at Xena with a curious expression on her face. "When **are** we going to get there? We've been at this for days, and there haven't even been any fights to liven things up a little." she asked, adding in a few punches to the air for emphasis.

"Amarice, if you would listen to yourself when you talk, you'd know your answer." Xena growled, doing her best not to hit the young woman beside her in the back of the head. The truth was, Xena was as bored and tired of the journey as she was. Then again, it was her fault it was taking so long. As much as she wanted to arrive in Amphipolis, she was afraid that if they moved too fast they'd go running headfirst into trouble. That was something she wasn't willing to risk with Solan there.

"I'd be surprised if anybody listened when she talked." Solan remarked with a smirk. He knew it probably wasn't something he should be doing, but Amarice was fun to mess with. Besides, it wasn't like he meant any of it.

"Look here, you little twerp! The only reason why I don't pummel you right here and now is because it's way too hot to kick your butt!" she told him, although it was becoming very tempting to reach over and strangle the kid.

"Will you two cut it out before I kick both your asses?!" Xena shouted, successfully halting the argument. "Thank you." she said gratefully. She loved Solan, no doubt about it, and she respected Amarice to the point where they were finally good friends; but if they hadn't shut up when she asked them too, she would have had to show them what an angry Warrior Princess looked like.

A few hours in relative silence had gone by, when Xena stopped and held her hand up, signaling for the other two to do the same. Something didn't feel right and it was making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end; and it wasn't the feeling that she got when a God was around, either.

"What is it?" Amarice asked, while Solan silently observed. He didn't want to be a distraction for the two warriors that he was traveling with.

"There's something ahead. I don't think it's dangerous, but whatever it is, something isn't right." Xena said. Just as these words escaped her lips, a faint cry for help could be heard calling from the direction that Xena had looked in.

"I wasn't the only one that heard that, right?" Amarice asked, looking at Xena and Solan.

"No, I heard it, too." Xena assured the young woman as she went through an internal struggle. Although she wanted to help the person that had cried out, she also didn't to go running into a situation that could harm her son. The decision was made for her when Amarice mounted Ice and took off, not waiting for Xena to make up her mind. Mentally sighing, Xena mounted Argo as well before giving Solan a hand up. "Solan, whatever happens, don't let go of me unless I say so." she ordered the boy.

"Whatever you say, Xena." he told her as she spurred Argo into following Amarice and Ice.

"Amarice, what do you think you're doing?" Xena yelled as she caught up with the Amazon warrior.

"What do you mean 'What am I doing'? Someone's in trouble, Xena." the young woman replied, as if that would explain everything. And to Xena, it did. She had taught the girl to help where ever it was needed, even if it was an inconvenience to her.

*'I guess it's time to practice what I preach then.'* Xena thought as she pushed Argo to go faster. If they did run into a fight, she'd just have to work harder to protect Solan. However, it soon became apparent that the fight had been long over with as they came upon the area that the cry for help had come from.

Blood was everywhere, seemingly coming from the corpse of a dead horse. Flies had begun to swarm around the carcass of the animal and Xena figured that it wouldn't be long before the scavengers of the wild decided to join in on the feast.

"Do you think maybe they got away?" Amarice asked as she scanned the area. She couldn't see anybody that could have called for help, so the only logical answer that she could think of was that they were able to escape whatever it was that had killed the horse.

"I don't know. Maybe-" Xena cut herself off when she heard something move, followed by a whimper. Without another word, she dismounted Argo and cautiously walked over to the fallen animal. She never expected to find a woman lying next to the horse. "Amarice, get over here!" Xena called for the Amazon as she squatted down to get a closer look. Amarice quickly dismounted Ice and did as she was told.

"Oh, by the Gods!" Amarice exclaimed when she saw what Xena had found. Kneeling beside the warrior, she too began to examine the woman lying beside the chestnut colored horse. The woman had shoulder length brown hair that fell in waves; but the right half of it was stained with blood coming from a head wound that looked as if it had stopped bleeding not too long before they had arrived. One delicate looking hand was pressed to her side, no doubt an attempt to stop the blood flowing from the wound that Xena could see from between her fingers. "What happened?"

"Slavers..." a hoarse voice answered before Xena could get the chance to. Both Xena and Amarice looked down in surprise to see a pair of pleading grey eyes staring up at them. Or more appropriately, staring up at Xena. Amarice was about to tell her to stop talking and save her strength while they took a look at her when the woman shook her head, already knowing what she was going to say.

"Save it." the woman ordered her with as much strength as she could muster. Amarice looked at Xena with a questioning expression and the other warrior shook her head, knowing there was nothing they could do for the woman now. "They took... a little girl..." The two warriors turned their attention back to the woman when they heard this. The pale woman took a painful breath before continuing. "You have to save her... please..." she requested in a whisper, weakly removing her hand from the wound in her side and placing it on Xena's knee. "Please save her." she pleaded again before her eyes clouded over and the clammy hand fell to the ground with a soft thud.

"Xena..." Amarice said softly, looking over at her traveling companion. Xena simply shook her head again, letting Amarice know that the woman was gone. The young Amazon's shoulders slumped slightly before she stood up, Xena getting up soon after.

"Amarice, stay here with Solan." she told the younger woman before walking over to Argo.

"Xena, you can't possibly be thinking of trying to get that little girl back by yourself." Amarice said, her hands resting on her hips.

"And why can't I?" Xena asked as she motioned for Solan to get down. Not one to disappoint, the blonde boy did as he was told, although he did have to add to the argument.

"You don't know what the little girl looks like." he pointed out, stepping back to stand with Amarice.

"I don't have to." she said as she pulled herself up onto Argo. "All I have to do is free everyone in the camp."

"Xena, that's crazy! You can't do that by yourself!" Amarice objected. "At least let me help you." she said, making a move to mount her own horse.

"No!" Xena ordered her, making Amarice freeze where she was. "Someone needs to stay here and make sure marauders don't try to desecrate her body. When I come back, we'll give her a proper funeral pyre. If I don't come back before nightfall, do it yourselves and set up camp."

"If you come back at all." the youngest of the trio muttered, crossing his arms.

"I **will** come back, Solan." she promised him. "All I have to do is deal with the leader." Before anymore objections could be made, Xena was gone, leaving Amarice and Solan in each others company.

"Does she always act like that?" Solan asked, looking up at his now unofficial babysitter.

"It depends." Amarice replied with a shrug.

"On what?"

"Kid, you ask too many questions." she told him with a sigh. The blonde boy just gave her a half-hearted smile, as if saying that he couldn't help it. "It depends on how she's feeling." Amarice finally answered him, although the answer didn't tell him much.

"You're not very good at conversation." Solan pointed out.

"What do you expect? I travel with Xena." she said gruffly. This earned a small laugh from the younger teenager, despite the grim atmosphere that hung around them.

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Meanwhile, from the safe walls of his favorite temple, a frustrated God of War watched on as his plans were once again ruined before his eyes by the irritating blonde that used to be Xena's sidekick. Not once had Ares thought that Gabrielle would kill her husband. In fact, he never thought that the blonde would kill anybody.

"Well that certainly puts a kink into your little plan, doesn't it, Uncle?" an annoyingly familiar voice chuckled.

"Is there a problem, Discord?" Ares growled before turning around and facing the eternal teenager.

"I don't think my problems are quite as big as yours are at the moment, Ares." she pointed out with an amused smirk. "Pretty soon, all of your 'hard work' will come tumbling down. We both know that judge is going to believe that little blonde woman that you're so obsessed with hurting." she told him as she boredly stared at her fingernails.

"That is none of your business." Ares growled before throwing a thunderbolt her way. Discord dove to the side, the bolt just barely missing her. Instead, it traveled on to strike one of the statues of Ares.

"Temper temper, Uncle." the teenager tsk'd as she stood up. "I think that's what's getting in the way of you seeing the perfect opportunity to continue tormenting that little bard." she told him while dusting herself off.

"What does it matter to you?" the God of War asked, thoroughly annoyed by the younger immortal.

"Oh, nothing that important... Just something that I could hang over Strife's head." she said as she ran a finger down one of the statues of him that he hadn't destroyed yet, a slight pout on her lips. "Say the favor of my favorite God of War?" she suggested, looking over at said God. "Just say the word, Ares, and I'll tell you what you can do to save your vengeful little plan, since it doesn't seem your emotions are letting you see the obvious answer."

"Fine." Ares grunted, crossing his arms in annoyance. "What is it that I am supposed to do, oh wise one?" he asked sarcastically. Discord chuckled and shook her head.

"Nothing too hard. Just a little divine intervention." she told him as she came closer. Once she was close enough, she began to whisper in his ear. A smirk appeared on the

God of War's face as the simple plan was revealed to him.

*'Perhaps I can have my fun after all.'* he thought as he pulled away from Discord. "Leave. You have my favor... for now." he ordered his niece. Discord pumped her arm in victory before wiggling her body and disappearing, the sound of 'shoving it in Strife's face' echoing slightly in the temple after she left. Ares then turned to the shimmering surface on the far wall of his temple. The distorted image of a sobbing Gabrielle showed on it as she awaited the judgement that would decide her fate. "Oh yeah... I will definitely be able to get a kick out of this." he said to himself with a smirk. "But, I think a new form of entertainment is needed right now." With that, he thought of Xena and the shimmering image on the wall changed scenes.

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The Warrior Princess had followed the trail of the slave traders into the forest that was located near where they had found the wounded woman. The forested area was painfully familiar to Xena, as she remembered that this was the forest that she had buried her weapons in. They had been closer to Amphipolis than she originally thought. Pushing the bittersweet memory away, Xena concentrated on the task at hand, which would be tracking down the slavers that had killed the woman on the road and taken the girl that Xena guessed was her daughter. It didn't take her long to find them.

She was surprised that nobody else had found them sooner because of the tremendous amount of noise they were making. She had actually heard them before she spotted them; not much of a feat considering that they were yelling with excitement. Xena wouldn't be surprised if some of the victorious screams were induced by alcohol.

*'And I thought the Amazons partied too hard.'* she thought with a smirk as she finally got a visual of the camp. Her prediction about the alcohol had been proven correct when she observed men toasting each other and noticed the many wineskins that littered the ground. Her plan was becoming easier every second that she observed the interactions between the drunk men in the camp.

Trying not to press her good luck, however, she snuck into the camp as stealthily as she could. Once she reached the leader's tent, she jumped up and landed on top of the temporary quarters. After gently sliding the breast dagger from its secure spot, she began to cut into the fabric of the tent. It wasn't long before she was slipping into the tent unnoticed by the rest of the camp, along with their leader. By the time he turned around, it was too late. Her sword was already pointed at his thick neck.

"Xena. What a surprise." he said, trying hard not to gulp. He feared that if he did, he'd feel the prick of the Warrior Princess' blade.

"I'm sure you're very happy to see me, Elroth." she told him sarcastically. "I mean, we never got to finish where we left off from last time, after all."

"Now Xena... don't be rash. I mean, every member of your army participated in the gauntlet. Not just me." he reasoned with her, putting his hands up as if he was trying to ward her off.

"I guess you're right when you put it that way." Xena said before moving the sword until the blade pricked her former soldier's skin. "Unfortunately for you, that's not



why I'm here." she informed him, causing him to swallow with fear against his will.

"T-then why are you here?" he asked, trying hard not to touch the blade with his throat again.

"Simple. I don't think people should be robbed of their freedom." she said as she removed her blade from his throat. Still too frozen with shock over finding his ex-commander in his tent, Elroth was unable to move as Xena made her way behind him and began whispering in his ear. "I also don't like it when people are killed because they won't give up their freedom." As soon as these words left her lips, the leader of the slave ring could feel the sharp metal that was pressed against his back. "Go let them free, or I gut you here and now." she hissed, pressing the weapon into his back slightly to get her point across.

"Yes Ma'am!" he said obediently before heading towards the entrance of the tent, Xena's weapon still pressing into the lower part of his back as a reminder.

"Attention... Attention!" he called out once he exited his tent, Xena following right behind him. When he finally got the attention of his drunken subordinates, he continued. "There has been a change in plans. It seems we will not be able to sell these slaves as we planned." he announced. Xena smirked as she listened to the groans of the slavers. Apparently, Elroth had just become a buzz-killer. Despite this, he still had his signature self-assured grin on his face, and was keeping a jovial tone in his voice. "Now now... Don't feel so down. I'm sure we'll be able to make up what we lost, eventually."

It was then that Xena realized why he sounded so cheerful, despite the fact that he had been confronted and forced to release his slaves. The sound of two bow-strings being drawn from a distance, and from different directions, captured the warrior's attention. Seconds later, she was catching one arrow with her free hand, and slicing through another with the dagger that she held at Elroth's back.

"You never could fight a battle by yourself, could you, Elroth?" Xena asked before shoving the arrow in her hand through the left side of his back, right beside his shoulder blade. The former soldier howled in pain before stumbling forward and onto his knees.

"What are you waiting for? Get her!" he ordered just as she was drawing her sword once more. The men were doing his bidding in no time, although being drunk did prove to be a disadvantage for them.

As Xena parried and dodged attacks from her opponents in the camp, she was careful to keep an ear out for the archers. Once she heard the pull of a bowstring, she flung her chakram in the direction the noise had come from while holding off a swing from one of the slavers. Just as the trusty weapon was returning to her, she heard the pull of another bowstring. She smiled at the large man she was fighting before forcing him to switch spots with her. As soon as the arrow hit her human shield, Xena let her chakram fly once more and moved on to another soldier.

Xena laughed in amusement as the soldier she took on aimed a swing at her with his club while another tried to sneak up on her. Flipping backwards, she allowed the man behind her to take the hit from the slaver that had swung the club just before shoving her sword through the man that had tried sneaking up on her. Once that was finished,

she threw a punch at 'club-man's' face. Just when he brought his club up to defend, she stopped the attack and kicked at his knee instead, sending a reverberating crack through the air. She then swung the hilt of her sword into the back of the man's head as he bent down in pain.

"Well Elroth... it seems you have no one left to protect you." a sweaty and tired warrior princess said fifteen minutes later as she stalked towards the leader of the slave ring. "I guess it's prison for you." she growled at him as she grabbed the collar of his tunic. "Oh, and by the way; they don't like slavers there. Slavers tend to remind them of their lost freedom." she told him as she led him over to a pair of shackles that she had placed on Argo after fighting through Elroth's men.

"You bitch! I should kill you!" the blonde haired man spat at her as she cuffed his wrists.

"I bet you wish you could." she teased him before fishing the keys off of his belt. "Don't worry. There's a town nearby that will have a prison to... accommodate your every need." she told him before heading off to unshackle the now free slaves.

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"Aw yeah! Xena does it again!" Ares yelled triumphantly after watching his fiery princess take down the slavery ring. While it was true that she didn't fight for him yet, watching her fight still turned him on. Especially when she won. "Although, there could have been a bit more bloodshed." he admitted as he thought back on the number of unconscious bodies that she had left tied to various trees, including the leader's. No doubt she would send the guards of some city to pick them up once she was able to.

"Like, don't you have anything better to do than watch the Warrior Babe perform more total acts of grodiness?" a familiar voice asked. Ares growled to himself. He seemed to be getting a lot of annoying visitors.

"What do you want, Aphrodite?" he asked in an annoyed tone. He hated being around his sister with a passion.

"What do you think I want?" the curly haired blonde Goddess asked, slinking over to him with her hands on her hips. "I want you to stop messing with Gabrielle's life!" she told him, poking him in the chest repeatedly.

"Oh? And why should I do that?" he asked, crossing his arms in a defiant manner. He couldn't wait to hear his sister's genius explanation.

"Because you're like, making it hard for me to do the Goddess of Love gig justice. Duh." she explained, standing up on her tippy toes and sticking her face in his.

"Back off, Sis. I haven't even been meddling in the little bard's life." he told her honestly.

"Yeah right! How else could that big brute find out that she planned on leaving?" Aphrodite asked, poking him in the chest once more. "Do you have any idea how bummed out I was about that?"

"Cut it out, 'Dite!" he snapped at her, grabbing her by the wrist to stop the poking. She just continued with the other hand.

“Not until you promise to like, stop messing with the bard!” she ordered in a serious voice that Ares had never heard her use before. Of course, all that mattered to him at that moment was the annoying poking that was going on in his chest area. Ignoring her threat, he reached up and grabbed her by the other wrist with his free hand.

“Or what? You’ll hit me with a love bolt?” he asked with a cocky smirk. The sickeningly sweet smile that appeared on his sister’s face made him re-think what he just said.

“Oh no, Ares. I would never, never, ever use a love bolt on you.” she told him. He visibly let out a breath of relief. “Just on anything that’s below four feet tall and has a tail.” she concluded.

“Fine! I won’t interfere with the bard!” he promised her in a low growl. Aphrodite smirked before clapping with happiness.

“Thanks bro!” she said before disappearing in a shower of gold sparkles. Ares then proceeded to grin like a little boy that just stole the desserts from the table while no one was looking.

*‘I never promised that Discord or Strife wouldn’t meddle in the bardly affairs, however.’* he thought to himself triumphantly before going back to watching whatever it was Xena was up to. When it became apparent that there would be no more fighting, however, Ares grew bored. There was no point in watching his princess if she wasn’t slicing a guy in two. So, he decided to check up on how his buddy Caesar was doing, the scene on the wall shifting just as Xena came across a blue eyed little blonde girl.

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“You’re Xena.” the little girl simply stated when the dark haired warrior came to her. The warrior princess, taken off-guard, blinked in surprise. She hadn’t expected a child so young to know about her.

“And how do you know that?” Xena asked as she undid the shackles that were weighing down the girl’s arms.

“My mama.” the little blonde answered with a shrug. “She talked ‘bout you lots.” Xena frowned at the statement. Apparently, the child knew that her mother was dead, or at least not coming back. She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. On one hand, it would save a lot of time on explaining what had happened. On the other hand, no one should have to grow up without their mother.

“Well, since you know my name, what’s your name?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Nexa.” the girl replied. “My mama wanted me to go with you.” she said before looking up at Xena with sparkling blue eyes. “I want to be good for my Mama. Let me go with you?” she pleaded. Again, Xena blinked. This was definitely not going how she had planned.

“What about your father? Does he want you to go with me too?” the warrior asked, trying to be as patient as she could with the little girl. It wasn’t like she could really

take the kid with her. She was Xena: Warrior Princess, not Xena: Adoptive Mother of Cute Little Blonde Children.

“Daddy... Daddy’s gone.” Nexa answered, not knowing the word for what happened to her Daddy.

“I’m sorry.”

“S’okay. Daddy wasn’t very nice. He gave Mama lots of boobos.” Nexa told her, shaking her head. When she heard this, Xena: Adoptive Mother of Cute Little Blonde Children was suddenly beginning to sound very nice to the Warrior Princess.

“Nexa, did your daddy... did he ever give you... boobos?” she asked, sounding silly for using the word ‘boobos’. The blonde girl shook her head vehemently.

“No. Mama ‘tected me.” she said. Xena sighed in relief. She wasn’t sure what she would have done if Nexa had been hurt by her father.

“Nexa, do you have anywhere else to go?” she finally asked, dreading the answer. She had a feeling that she knew what it would be.

“Only with you. Mama wanted me to go with you. Please help me be a good girl for my Mama.” Nexa said, tears welling up in her eyes when it became clear that there was a chance that Xena wouldn’t help her be a good girl by doing what her Mama said.

*‘Not fair.’* Xena thought as she saw the tears pooling in the crystal blue eyes. How dare the little blonde use the crying tactic to get her to comply with her wishes! Another look at those eyes so close to tears quickly found Xena shaking her head while standing up. “Come on. I’ll help you... be a good girl.” she managed to get out as she took the little blonde’s hand. “What are you looking at?!” she barked at the tied up slavers and some of the freed slaves that were staring at her. They all turned away, going back to what they were doing.

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“Xena! You came back!” an excited Solan shouted as the familiar golden mare came trotting up the hill they had decided to make camp on once it became apparent she wouldn’t be back before nightfall. The smile on the boy’s face, however, quickly turned to a look of utter confusion when he heard a squeal of laughter and someone yelling ‘Faster! Faster!’ from behind the warrior woman.

“Xena, you weren’t supposed to come back with **another** kid.” Amarice said as the Warrior Princess slowed Argo down, making it clear who had made the excited shrieks. Xena gave Amarice a look as she dismounted that said they would talk about it later. The young Amazon raised her eyebrows, before nodding in acceptance. As long as Xena was willing to talk about it with her later on, she had no problem with the kid being there... yet.

“Nexa, this is Amarice and Solan.” Xena introduced the blonde girl to her traveling companions after finally getting her off of Argo. The girl immediately wriggled out of Xena’s grip, though, and ran over to the other two.

“I’m Nexa!” she introduced herself with a grin. Amarice and Solan looked at each

other before bending down to reach eye level with the girl.

“Really? It’s nice to meet you, Nexa.” Solan said with a small smile before reaching out and gently shaking her small hand.

“She’s too young for you, Solan.” Amarice teased the boy, who shot her a dirty look that she chose to ignore. “How old are you anyway, kid?” she asked.

“Three.” Nexa said, holding three fingers up. Amarice growled quietly at the answer, which in turn made Nexa giggle. “You’re funny.”

“Xena! You and I need to have a talk right now!” the young woman demanded as she stood up. Almost immediately the smirk that had been on Xena’s face disappeared and was replaced by one of innocence. “Don’t you try to pull that one on me, Warrior Princess. You and I have a lot to talk about!” Amarice told her as she approached her dark haired companion. Before she could protest, a certain Warrior Princess was being dragged off rather unceremoniously.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone cause a mood swing in her so fast since I’ve known her.” Solan mused. “Did you do something to her on the ride here?” he asked suspiciously, although he still had a smile on his face.

“Mood swings?” Nexa asked, thoroughly confused. Solan chuckled before ruffling her hair.

“Never mind. You’ll understand when you’re older.” he assured her.

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Strife observed the scene from afar, choosing to stay invisible rather than pose as some old man making his way down the road. The overall happiness of the events that played out before him made him feel sick. He would much rather see them at each other’s throats. Unfortunately, he was not allowed to mess with Xena.

*‘I probably shouldn’t even be here.’* he thought with a chuckle. He just had to see the object of his Uncle’s obsession, though. Strife needed to see just who it was that the God of War desperately wanted in his possession. He also needed to know why Ares had just sent him to make the life of one little bard a Tartarus on Earth. After watching the scene with the little girl, though, he wasn’t very impressed. Now that he had seen what he wanted to see, the lesser God winked and disappeared into the air. It was time to tell Ares that all had gone well.

## **Part 8**

Two days after rescuing Nexa and unofficially adopting her into the family, the group of four finally made it to Amphipolis. Nothing had changed since the last visit that Xena and Amarice had made. The weapon shops were still where they always were and children still continued to play between the houses. Familiar scents of desserts

wafted through the air, teasing the senses of the two youngest members of the group.

It was refreshing for the two older warriors to be in a familiar town while their worlds were changing. It seemed to balance out the chaos that their minds were in. It gave them the chance to reflect on the choices they had recently made, along with the decisions they were going to make in the future. At least, that's what they hoped they would accomplish while they were in Amphipolis.

"Xena! Amarice! You've come back!" the familiar voice of Xena's mother called from the tavern's entrance. It was actually luck that had brought the owner of the inn outside just as her daughter and Amarice came riding in to the area. She would have to thank Tara for not wiping down the dusty deck that day, since that was what had brought her outside in the first place. "Oh how I missed you two," she said as she approached the two warriors. "And who are your new... friends?"

"Well Mother uh... this is the adopted nephew of a friend of mine," Xena started, nodding in Solan's direction. "The blonde boy sitting in front of Amarice smiled shyly at the tavern keeper and quickly waved. "And this is Nexa," Xena said as she looked down in front of her where Nexa was supposed to be sitting, only to find an empty spot. 'Now where'd she go?' she wondered, although she wasn't worried. She had discovered early on that Nexa had a habit of getting out of the saddle without her noticing whenever they stopped. The stop in Amphipolis was no different. Now she just wondered how the little girl was able to slip by without her noticing. That, and where the little tyke had gotten to.

"Hi!" came the small voice of the little girl, who now stood in front of Cyrene. Xena raised an eyebrow when she saw this. She would definitely have to keep a closer eye on the girl, just in case she decided that she wanted to sneak off and talk to her mother. Who knew what embarrassing secrets and stories the older woman would tell the little blonde child.

"Hello there, dear," Cyrene returned the greeting, bending down so she was level with the girl. "What are you doing riding around with my daughter?" the older woman asked in a gentle tone. "Keeping an eye on her and making sure she stays out of trouble, I hope," she said before reaching over and playfully tugging Nexa's nose. The blonde child giggled at the feeling, wondering if that was how her Mama felt whenever Nexa did it to her.

"My mama wanted me to go with her," Nexa told the innkeeper before leaning forward. "But I can watch her, if you want. My Mama didn't call me her wawwior for nothing," she added on in a whisper. The innkeeper blinked, not expecting an answer like that from the little girl. She quickly shook off her surprise, however, and smiled at the blonde.

"You better, or I'll have to come chase you down," Cyrene mock threatened.

"Don't worry. Xena's a good girl, like me!" Nexa assured the older woman, a certain amount of pride in her voice when she mentioned how good she was.

"Oh really?" Cyrene asked skeptically, raising an eyebrow in her daughter's trademark fashion before looking up at said daughter, signaling that they would be having a serious talk sooner than Xena would like. "Amarice, you and... Solan was it?" The blonde boy nodded before she continued. "Why don't you and Solan take your horse to

the stables? You know where they are. Xena and Nexa will join you shortly." Cyrene ordered them, even if it was under the guise of a suggestion.

"Yes ma'am." Solan said with a smile, saluting the auburn haired woman.

"Don't get into too much trouble, Xena." Amarice teased her older friend, receiving a glare from the Warrior Princess as she dismounted Argo. There was no doubt that her mother wanted her on the ground for the conversation they were about to have.

"Amarice, if you don't go take that horse of yours to the stables now, Xena won't be the only one in trouble." Cyrene threatened the Amazon. Amarice visibly gulped before nodding and quickly riding off toward the stables. She had learned early on in their partnership that Xena's mother was not a woman you wanted to mess with. She did raise the Warrior Princess, after all.

"Now then, Xena. Do you think you could tell me why Solan and little Nexa here are really traveling with you and Amarice?" she asked when the other two were out of earshot.

"Mother, do you think that we could discuss this later, with Amarice present?" Xena asked, her face betraying none of the uneasiness that she was feeling. There were only two people that Xena knew that could make her feel uneasy, and they were Gabrielle and her mother. Cyrene seemed to think it over before acquiescing.

"Fine. But I want the explanation by the end of the week; no later, young lady." Cyrene said in a tone that would not allow an argument, even if Xena could think of one. She was going to figure out what was going on in her daughter's head, whether the girl liked it or not. "And remember Xena: I'm your mother. I know when you're lying." she reminded her daughter before looking down at the blonde girl that had moved to stand at Xena's side. She would have to fix that. "How would you like to learn how to cook, Nexa?" she asked. The blonde girl's eyes lit up before she took Cyrene's hand and was led into the tavern.

Xena watched them go, a nervous feeling that she hardly ever got tying a knot in her stomach. Not only would she have to explain to her mother about Solan and Nexa, but the little blonde girl had become her mother's newest ally. That could not be good. The knot in her stomach tightened once more. She was definitely in trouble.

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Gabrielle gulped as she stared up at the judge from her kneeling position on the ground. The sun was beating down on her as she knelt in her helpless position, one sword at her throat and another at the back of her neck. The heat coming from Apollo's treasure caused the heavy shackles cuffed around her wrists to burn her skin. The humming noise coming from the townspeople as they gathered for her judgement, coupled with the bright sun made her head hurt. There was no doubt about it; she was definitely in trouble.

The only thing that helped ease the twisted knot that had formed in her stomach since the day she had been captured was the fact that she had told the truth when she was forced to face the judge. It didn't help much, though, seeing as it was very unlikely that the judge would believe her story. He was a friend of Perdiccas' after all.

"Gabrielle of Potidaea, daughter of Hecuba and Herodotus." he addressed her in an official tone before getting on with what everyone wanted to see. "Do you deny killing your husband, Perdicas of Potidaea?" he asked, his cold eyes boring into hers. Gabrielle momentarily found herself wondering how someone that looked so nice could have such cold, hard eyes.

"I don't deny it, but your honor, I did it out of self-defense. Just like I told you three nights ago." she said, trying again to get him to understand why she did what she did.

"Silence! Do not try to ruin Perdicas' name with your lies." he ordered her.

"Oh believe me. Perdicas doesn't need my help to dirty his name." she scoffed. "Like I told you before, Perdicas beat me. Do you really think I would do this to myself?" she asked, wincing as she shrugged her injured shoulder. Before she could gauge the reaction from the audience, the judge continued his questioning.

"Gabrielle, is it true that you used to be a bard? That you even attended Athens' Academy of Performing Bards?" the judge asked, changing the subject. The blonde woman blinked at the quick change of topic before answering the question.

"Yes, but I don't really know what that has to do with anything."

"Is it also true that before you married Perdicas, you were an Amazon?" the judge asked. Now Gabrielle was suspicious. She hadn't even told Rosaline that, so she had no idea how the judge knew about that part of her life.

"Where did you hear that from?" she asked.

"Answer the question with a yes or no!" he ordered her as the guards holding the swords began to press the blades into her neck. Gabrielle bit her lip at the feeling before answering in the affirmative. "Much better." he complimented her with a sneer before turning his attention to the townsfolk in the crowded seating area of the small judgement square.

"My friends... Three days ago, this 'woman' came to me like all prisoners do in order to plead her case. And, like all today's criminals," he addressed them before turning to Gabrielle, "she lied to me." Almost immediately, boos and hisses erupted from the audience.

"I didn't lie! Perdicas was going to hurt Nexa!" she objected, trying to get the crowd to listen. "I wanted to leave with her. I just wanted to leave. I never wanted to kill him!" she told them, trying hard to keep her tears in check. She would not let them see her cry.

"Do not be sucked in by her lies! She nearly trapped me in her web of false words when she came to me. I actually found myself believing her after the guards came to take her back to her cell." he admitted before looking back down at Gabrielle. "Luckily, a messenger from the Gods warned me about her before I made a mistake." Gabrielle's eyes went wide. Why would a God be interested in her? The only God she had ever met was Ares, and from what she could tell about him, he was only concerned about things that affected him.

"You have to believe me. I didn't lie!" she protested once she overcame her surprise.



"You were a bard. Your whole job consisted of telling stories." the judge pointed out.

"Exactly! I told stories, *true* stories. Not lies." she said, thinking that she may be getting through to him.

"Now **that** I find hard to believe." he admitted with a forced laugh. "You told stories about Xena. Every one of them portrayed her as a hero. That's probably the biggest lie I've ever heard anyone ever tell."

"She is a hero." Gabrielle growled, not liking the way the judge spoke about her old friend. The former bard was surprised to find that she had no problem saying that. It was true that Xena was still a hero, but she was no longer *her* hero. She was no longer the person that Gabrielle could count on to get her out of trouble. The idea actually angered Gabrielle more than it saddened her, but she kept her emotions behind her mask so that the judge couldn't see what was going on in her mind.

"Xena? A hero? Little girl, you are deluded." the judge told her in a harsh whisper so no one else could hear him before addressing the public once more. "This is the bard of Xena: Warrior Princess. Using her skills as a bard, it is no wonder she was able to trick Perdicas into marrying her and then trick me into believing her." he announced.

"I didn't trick anybody!" Gabrielle objected, only to be ignored by the judge and the townspeople.

"No doubt using her skills as an Amazon princess, she murdered her husband. The wound in her shoulder was most likely received when Perdicas tried protecting himself from this murdering bitch." he concluded, grinning down at Gabrielle in triumph when the audience began yelling in agreement.

"I hereby sentence Gabrielle of Potidaea, murderer of Perdicas, to a life of imprisonment. Tonight she will be taken to the prison that I believe fits her crime." he announced, receiving a loud cheer from the crowd that had gathered. Before Gabrielle could object one last time, the guards were removing their swords from her neck and grabbing the chain that linked her wrists together.

As the two guards led her back to the jail while keeping angry villagers from assaulting her, the former Amazon could only think about where she was going to be sent. From what she could, the judge and Perdicas had been good friends. Gabrielle may not have known where she was being sent, but she was sure that wherever it was, it was going to be a living Tartarus. As she was roughly thrown into her cell by the guards, she was also sure that she was in more trouble than she originally thought.

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"God of War: 1. Irritating Blonde: 0." Ares chuckled as he watched the judgement get passed on Gabrielle. He had decided to watch it live, as well, just so he could enjoy the action without the annoying distortion from the wall that he fondly referred to as The Portal.

"Actually, Uncle... I do believe it's God of War: 2. Irritating Blonde: 1." Discord pointed out as she appeared next to him.

"Either way, I still come out on top." he reminded her with a scowl before continuing

to watch as Gabrielle was dragged back to her jail cell. "What are you doing here, anyway? Shouldn't you be bugging Aphrodite?" he asked.

"Yeah right. That hag gets to be very annoying." she said as she combed a hand through her dark hair. "I am here for a reason, though. I do believe it is time for you to thank me for helping you with the little blonde brat." she told him as she focused on a strand of her hair. *'Is that a split end?'*

"Thank you? Ha! I'm the one that did all the work." a new voice chimed in. Both Ares turned to find the dark haired figure of Strife strolling over to them. "I mean, I am the one that had to convince the judge that dear, sweet Gabrielle was a lying bitch, after all." he smirked, rubbing his fingernails on his leather armor before blowing on them. "So feel free to thank me any time, Uncle Ares."

"You know, I'm beginning to think I should just kick both your asses and not thank either of you. Then, I think I might go find some new underlings, that won't be as annoying and arrogant." he threatened. This caused both Discord and Strife to fall to the ground and begin groveling, no longer caring if they were thanked or not. "You two are pathetic." he told them, rolling his eyes at the sad display before disappearing into thin air, ready to go back to his temple and watch his Warrior Princess kick some more ass. Once he was gone, Strife and Discord glared at each other, both mentally shooting daggers out of their eyes.

"It's your fault he's mad, y'know." Discord told him as she stood up and brushed herself off. "If you hadn't shown up and acted so macho, he wouldn't be pissed off at us right now."

"You are delusional, Sis. You're the one that got him angry." Strife argued as he too got up, although he didn't bother to wipe himself clean. "'Oh Uncle Ares. I didn't come for much. Just for your favor so I can shove it in Strife's face.'" he imitated her, prancing around like a deer.

"Keep dancing around like that, Strife, and I'm sure you'll be able to make it big in dancing competition for sissies." Discord told him.

"You really think so? I... Hey wait a minute! That wasn't very nice." Strife whined. Discord just rolled her eyes.

"Face it, Bro. We both screwed up with Ares. Now we need to figure out something big to do before he finds someone to replace us." she said, taking a defeated seat on the ground, where Strife joined her.

"You don't think he'd really be able to find someone to replace us, do you? I mean, who could replace me?" he asked as his hands fidgeted nervously.

"Someone who doesn't whine as much, that's for sure." she glared at him before grabbing his hands, forcing him to stop playing with his fingers. "Now, come on. We need to go think of a plan." she said before disappearing in a flash of purple. Strife sighed before disappearing after his sister just as the sun was setting.

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"It's beautiful, isn't it, Sweetie?" Cyrene asked her daughter, joining the warrior out on the porch of the tavern as the sun painted colors across the sky. Xena simply grunted

in response, earning her a light hit on the arm from her mother. "You had better answer your mother with full sentences, young lady."

"Sorry. I meant to say 'Yes, it is a very lovely sunset, Mother.'" Xena told the owner of the tavern sarcastically. She couldn't help it. It was the last day of the week time limit that her mother had given her and daylight was quickly fading. Cyrene smiled in return, though, choosing to ignore the sarcasm in the comment.

"That's what I thought you meant." she said before looking back out at the sky. "Xena, it's been three years. If you're not going to go back to her, you should stop holding on to her. It kills me to see you trying to hold on to the past." Cyrene advised her. "There are things that if you hold on to too tightly, they crack and break."

"Now I know where I get the small bit of philosophical talent from." she joked, shaking her head at her mother's words before looking back at the horizon. "It's not that... I'm happy, really." she assured her mother.

"Xena, I think I know what it is that's bugging you. You don't want to tell me about the children, do you?" Cyrene asked, although that was now obvious what the problem was, since it didn't have to do with Gabrielle.

"You're very perceptive, Mother." Xena said sarcastically.

"Don't take that tone with me, Missy." Cyrene told her, smacking her in the stomach to get her point across. "And I don't care how much it's bugging you; you're going to tell me about those two children in there before the night's over." she said before heading back into the tavern, leaving Xena to collect her thoughts.

The sun had already been set for hours by the time that Xena finally walked back into the tavern. She wanted to make sure that Solan was in bed sleeping before she told her mother and Amarice about him.

"So Xena... there was something you wanted to tell us?" Amarice asked as she followed Xena into her mother's room.

"Yes Xena, do tell us what it is you've been worrying about all day." Cyrene said from her bed. She had apparently been waiting there since she put the kids to bed. Xena sighed, before taking a breath to go into the story about leaving her son with the centaurs.

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While Xena began to reveal the demons of her past to her mother and traveling companion, a very real demon in the form of an insane woman waited for her new cellmate to arrive. The guards had told her that if she killed this one outside of the ring, she wouldn't live to see morning. As much as she hated life, that was a prospect that did not interest her. There was still so much left for her to do; so many people left for her to torture. The guards did not disappoint her. Before the night was over, she had her new cellmate.

"Well, well, well. I never thought I'd see you in a prison." she admitted to the unconscious body that the guards had thrown into her cell. Getting up from her seat against the wall, she walked over to the prone form and turned it over onto its back. "You look a little different, but I'm sure you're her." she said, fingering a short lock of

blonde hair. "What would your precious Xena say if she found you in here?" she chuckled, even though the unconscious woman couldn't hear her.

"You know... you're going to have a tremendous headache once those drugs wear off and you come to your senses." she warned the woman before noticing one of her frequent visitors making its way over to the newcomer. "Why yes little Ares, we do have a new visitor tonight." she said as she reached over and picked the black rat up by its tail, placing it on her other hand "We should give her a warm welcome when she wakes up, or Xena might be angry that we didn't treat her little friend correctly." she whispered to the rodent as she stood up and walked back to her place against the stone wall, stroking the rat as she went.

As the sun began to rise, the insane woman giggled as if she had just learned something incredibly funny. Perhaps in her mind, the rat had told her something, but that wasn't why she was laughing. No, the only thing that could make her laugh like she was, was the fact that for the rest of her life, she'd have Gabrielle to torment.

Callisto knew she was going to be one happy prisoner, whether the guards liked it or not.

## Part 9

Once she had finished with her tale, Xena looked at her mother and Amarice. The whole time that she had been telling the story, she had been caught up in the past and unable to pull herself out of her memories to judge how her audience had been reacting to her words. That's why Gabrielle had been the bard in their partnership, and not her.

"So... We've been traveling with your son this past week?" Amarice asked once she was able to overcome her surprise. Xena nodded. "I knew there was something familiar about him!" Amarice exclaimed, almost making her chair tip over when she punched the air triumphantly. "You may not have raised him, Xena, but he sure does have your attitude." she teased the older woman once she resettled herself.

Surprisingly, Amarice had no problems with the fact that Solan was her friend's son, although it was weird for her to think of Xena as a parent. Even if Xena had lied about who the boy was, it wasn't like Amarice didn't have her own secrets that she hadn't shared with anyone yet. At least Xena kept her secret for a good reason. If anyone knew about Solan, it was very likely that the boy wouldn't have lived to see the age of ten. Cyrene, however, wasn't as understanding as Amarice.

"You mean to tell me that I've been a grandmother for fourteen years, and you **never** planned on telling me?" she asked. "Xena, how could you keep something like that from me? I'm your mother."

"That's exactly *why* I didn't tell you. If people knew that you had information like that on me, you'd be hunted down by every enemy of mine that's still free." Xena said, trying to explain. "I don't like the idea of putting my mother in danger because of my actions."

"Xena, you should have thought of that before you became a fighter. Did you ever

think that maybe I was already put in danger just by being your mother?" Cyrene pointed out. "Every decision that we make and everything we do has consequences. It's how we deal with them that determines our character. Hiding something like this from me when you had all those chances to tell me... Well, that just makes you a coward, Xena."

"Oh, and just what would you have liked me to do, mother? Just come by, tell you he was my son, and then drop him off with you?" Xena asked, quickly becoming exasperated with her mother.

"Isn't that what you're doing now?" her mother asked, immediately making Xena cringe. That was exactly what she was doing, although she had pictured it going better in her mind.

"I think I should go now." Amarice interrupted the argument, beginning to feel like she was witnessing an argument that was meant for family ears only.

"Go ahead, Amarice. I'll get you in the morning once breakfast is done." Cyrene excused the girl with a smile, her voice suddenly gentle. "Now tell me, Xena: Were you or weren't you planning on leaving Solan and Nexa with me?" she asked once Amarice had disappeared up the stairs, her voice becoming hard again.

"Mother, I-"

"Answer the question, Xena." Cyrene interrupted her daughter. Xena wasn't getting out of this one. The Warrior Princess let out a sigh of defeat before nodding her answer. "I thought so."

"How did you know?" Xena asked, curious about how her mother had known about her plans.

"I told you before, Xena. I'm your mother, so I know everything." Xena raised an eyebrow at this, skeptical that her mother knew everything. Although, sometimes it did seem like the woman did know about everything going on inside Xena's head. "Oh, alright. I knew because it was obvious." Cyrene admitted. "Come on, Xena. Don't tell me that you actually thought that I would think you were going to let those two children continue to travel with you." she continued when she noticed the questioning expression on her daughter's face. Xena had the decency to look sheepish at this accusation..

"Xena..." her mother tsk'd before reaching up and caressing her daughter's cheek. "You don't really think I'd let them follow you and Amarice around on those dangerous missions, do you?" she asked before suddenly pinching her daughter's cheek.

"Mom!" Xena groaned, pulling away from the offending digits. "You know I hate it when you do that."

"That's why I do it." her mother explained with a smug smirk similar to her daughter's.

"So does that mean you'll look after them?" Xena asked, getting back to the subject of the children. Cyrene sighed before nodding.

"Of course I will, but only if you meet a few important conditions." Xena immediately

knew she wasn't going to like what was coming. "First of all, you need to tell me about Nexa. She told me her mother said she was to go with you."

"Amarice, Solan, and I found her mother after they had been attacked by slavers. She died right after pleading with us to go save the littler girl. So we rescued her." Xena explained, leaving out the fact that she had taken on the entire slaving party and its leader by herself. "When I found the little girl, she told me that her mother had told her about me and that she wanted her to go with me." Xena brought a hand up to her face and pinched the bridge of her nose. All of this explaining was giving her a headache, and she was sure it was just going to get worse before she went to sleep. "I didn't even know the woman, so I don't know why she would want her daughter to go with me."

"Alright." Cyrene said once she was sure her daughter was telling the truth. "Now, the second condition is that you be a part of their lives. That means you'll have to stop by here more often than once a year." Cyrene explained. Xena nodded, showing that she understood; although she had the sneaking suspicion that her mother had also added that one on so she could see her more often.

"Last of all, and you probably won't like this one much, but you need to tell Solan that you're his mother."

"You sound just like Gabrielle." Xena remarked before finding an interesting spot on the wall to stare at so she wouldn't have to look at her mother. Cyrene's hand gripped her jaw and forced her to look down at the older woman, though.

"Great minds think alike then." she said while making sure that Xena didn't look away from her again. She really needed to make sure that her daughter understood she was serious. "Xena, you **will** tell that boy who you are. He doesn't deserve to be thinking that his mother is dead while she's standing right next to him."

"Fine. I'll tell him after his next birthday." Xena acquiesced.

"Do you even know when his birthday is?" Cyrene asked, her hands on her hips as she stared her daughter in the eyes.

"Yes, Mother. I was the one that gave birth to him, after all." Xena growled, although she mentally admitted that she had deserved that.

"Good. I suspect that it's a long time from now, since you picked it as the day you would tell him. That gives me time to think of a present for him." Cyrene said, already trying to think of something to get a young man for his fifteenth birthday.

"Can I go now?" Xena asked through grit teeth.

"Oh, yes. Of course you can, dear." Cyrene excused her, waving absent-mindedly to shoo her away. Xena took that as her cue to go to bed, so she began heading for the stairs. "Oh, and Xena," her mother called after her, stopping her daughter's ascent up the wooden steps, "I'm proud of you for telling us. I know you worry, even if you don't like to show it sometimes, but you have to trust people to take care of themselves. It's a part of developing strong relationships."

Xena didn't respond to her mother's words even though the older woman was right. Instead, she continued her journey to her bedroom. She wasn't tired, but she didn't

know how to deal with her mother at the moment; and her bedroom seemed like a good place to hide from her for the night, just like she used to do when she was a child.

"I love you, Xena!" Cyrene called up after her daughter. After a few moments of silence, she heard a faint 'I love you, too' coming from upstairs, making her smile to herself. Her daughter certainly had changed over the past three years, and she believed that it had been a change for the better. It was a testament to her daughter's inner strength that she could continue to better herself after losing the one person that she thought truly believed in her. *'Perhaps that's why she continues to work so hard at changing.'* Cyrene pondered as she began blowing out the candles in the room they had all occupied.

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"Sleep well?" Callisto asked as she saw her new cellmate coming to her senses. It had taken far too long, in her opinion. A day was much too long for her new plaything to lay around sleeping before finally waking up. Although she had to admit, the rats had done a good job of keeping her entertained while she waited for the little bard to wake up.

"Callisto!" Gabrielle gasped when her mind finally registered the voice taunting her. "Please let this be a nightmare." she quietly prayed to any Gods that were listening as she began scooting away from the direction that Callisto's voice had come from, only to be stopped by the feel of hard bars pressing into her back.

"Nope! You are completely awake, my dear." Callisto giggled before stepping out of the dark corner of the cell and into the moonlight that was shining into the shared quarters. "And it's about time, too. It was becoming extremely tempting to just kick you awake." she said as she knelt down next to the blonde former sidekick. "Didn't your hair used to be longer?"

"What do you want, Callisto?" Gabrielle asked, clenching her jaw to stop herself from flinching away when the willowy blonde began playing with the short strands of her hair.

"Just to have a little chat." Callisto told her with a shrug. "You see, it gets extremely boring in this prison when people aren't fighting, even if the rats decide to come visit." she explained, not caring if Gabrielle wanted to hear her explanation or not. The former bard frowned.

"Not that I'm complaining or anything, but why haven't you tried to kill me? The last time we met, that seemed to be the only thing you were interested in." Gabrielle asked, jerking her head away from Callisto's fingers so that the woman would stop playing with her hair. The insane blonde pouted when Gabrielle pulled away before sitting down beside the bard.

"Why haven't I killed you yet?" Callisto asked, just to make sure that was exactly what Gabrielle was asking, before putting a finger to her chin, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Well, little Gabrielle, the people that run this place don't want me killing you. The only explanation I can come up with for that is because they must have invested a lot of money in you."

"Since when do you listen to what others tell you to do?" Gabrielle asked in a skeptical voice.

"Since I've begun to realize that I like it here." Callisto said with a shrug. "Don't get me wrong, I'm all for hunting down Xena and destroying her name, along with anyone close to her; but you already took all the fun out of that." The blonde bard blinked, wondering just what the other woman meant by that. "Don't give me that look, Gabrielle. I'm sure if you think about it, you'll realize what I'm talking about."

"I haven't spoken to Xena in almost four years, so I haven't had the chance to do anything to her."

"And that's why you hurt Xena, the mighty Warrior Princess, far more than I ever could." Callisto said with a giggle. She frowned when she saw that Gabrielle was still confused. Then she remembered something. "Oh that's riiiight! You weren't with us when she was taking me back to jail. You missed out on our entire conversation. Too bad; your loss."

"I highly doubt that." the former bard muttered skeptically. "And why would Xena talk to you? She doesn't even **like** you."

"Well you certainly weren't around for her to talk to, were you?" Callisto growled before standing back up again and stretching her arms. When she was certain that her cellmate wasn't going to respond, she headed back to her corner. "I suggest getting some sleep, little bard."

"And what's to stop you from doing something to me while I sleep?" Gabrielle asked, not willing to trust the willowy blonde woman that shared a cell with her.

"Simple. I have to fight tomorrow and I don't want to be off my game. I'd rather experience life and all its agonizing glory while fully rested." she said. While Gabrielle didn't know what Callisto was talking about, she did admit to herself that she needed to get some sleep, too. She knew that if she didn't, she probably wouldn't be able to face whatever the next day held in store for her. Unable to keep her eyes open any longer, Gabrielle fell into a restless sleep.

The next morning, as beams from the sun were beginning to shine onto her face from between the cell bars, Gabrielle woke up in a sweat. It seemed that the fates were out to avenge Perdicas' death by giving her nightmares of him.

*'It's not fair. Even in death, I can't escape him.'* she thought as she rubbed at her eyes with her hands, trying to stop the tears that were beginning to fall. "It's just not fair." she muttered, her voice cracking.

"Didn't anyone tell you that life isn't fair?" a mocking voice asked, reminding her just where she was at the moment. "Oh, don't cry, little bard. Especially if I'm not the one making those tears fall." Callisto said as she walked out of her corner and knelt beside Gabrielle, who was now staring at the rat that had taken up residency on the willowy blonde's shoulder. "Oh, I see that Ares has caught your attention. He's been very curious about you. Always chattering away, asking if you were ever going to wake up and if he'd have to share his food with you." Gabrielle turned her attention on Callisto instead of the rat, wondering if the woman was joking or not.



“Are you insane?” she asked when she realized that her enemy was being serious when she spoke about the rat as if it was her friend.

“Only as insane as the next person in here.” was the answer she received before Callisto stood up again and returned to her corner, although it wasn’t nearly as dark as it had been the night before with the sun shining in. Which reminded Gabrielle of something that had been on her mind.

“I’ve never heard of a prison that’s outside.” she mused aloud as she painfully stood up. Her legs were still a bit shaky, but she was sure that she just needed to walk around a bit. Curious about the place that she would most likely be spending the rest of her life in, she turned and faced the bars, taking in the view in front of her.

It was a giant canyon carved into the ground by the Gods. Across the chasm, Gabrielle could see cells carved into the stone walls of the canyon, most of them hosting three or more prisoners. Anybody that wasn’t in a cell was a guard, each carrying a sword and crossbow. The top of the ledge that she could see was lined with archers. There was no doubt that it would be impossible for anyone to escape from this prison. She sighed in defeat. She **was** going to be stuck here for the rest of her life.

“That’s because nobody talks about this prison, **especially** those that do know about it.” Callisto’s voice came from directly behind her, but Gabrielle resisted the urge to turn around and face the other woman. “The best part about this place is all the way down at the bottom.” the villainess told her, a thin hand pointing down to the floor of canyon. “Down there is where the excitement happens take place and it’s also why nobody knows about this place. You see, Gabrielle, this prison also serves as an underground fighting arena.” Callisto explained before giggling. “Get it? Underground?”

“You’re lying.” Gabrielle said, refusing to believe that anybody would pay to watch other people fight each other.

“Oh, but I’m not, little bard.” Callisto said with a chuckle before wrapping her hands around Gabrielle’s arm and leaning forward. “What better way to make money while eradicating criminals? After all, we’re all just a bunch of murderers here.” she whispered into Gabrielle’s ear.

“I’m not a murderer!” the bard objected, shaking Callisto off before turning around, green eyes flaring. “**You** are the murderer! **You** are the one that belongs here, not me! **You** are the one that let your hatred of Xena lead you to destruction!” she yelled at the willowy blonde, shoving her with every sentence to emphasize her point. When she heard herself yell the last sentence, she stopped in her tracks. ‘*I am a murderer.*’ she thought before realizing that Callisto had wrapped her hand around her neck.

“Oh, you are going to pay for even thinking about touching me, little bard.” Callisto growled. Before she could do any serious damage, however, two guards were banging on the bars of the cell to get her attention. Looking over at them, she noticed that they all had their crossbows pointed at her.

“We told you already. You aren’t to kill her unless it’s in a fight.” the one on the left reminded her.

“So let go of her, or you won’t live to see your next match.” the other one threatened.

Callisto rolled her eyes before releasing a sigh.

“You ruin all my fun.” she said before throwing Gabrielle against the stone wall, a loud thud echoing in the cell when the bard made contact. The guard on the right immediately fired one of the bolts from his crossbow at her. She showed him what a mistake that was by catching the projectile and throwing it back at him, hitting him square in the chest. “Oopsies. I guess my hand slipped. I’d tell the management that you need a new partner, if I was you.” she told the remaining guard.

“You just wait, bitch. One of these days, you’re going to go too far.” the man said, a scowl on his face. “Remember: Kill her now, and you’ll be shot with so many needles, you’ll look like a pin cushion.” he warned her before shouldering his crossbow and grabbing the hands of his now dead partner. As much as he hated it, he would have to do as the murderess suggested and get another partner. That was the third one in as many months that he had gone through.

“Now you see what you made me do?” Callisto asked Gabrielle once the guard had walked away. The bard was leaning against the wall, using it to support herself. “Oh, did I give you a booboo?” the villainess asked with a smirk, making the former bard’s mind turn to Nexa. She hoped her daughter had gotten to Xena alright and that she was being taken care of. She wished she could be with her instead of in this prison.

“I’m sure that by the time you get out of here, you’ll have a lot more than the one I just gave you.” Callisto assured her before heading back to her corner to be with her rats, leaving Gabrielle to think about her daughter.

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“Nexa, is something wrong?” Solan asked from the branch of the tree he was hanging upside down from. Xena had told them about the tree that she and her brother, Lyceus, used to play on. The little girl had been talking constantly as they made their way there, even as she watched the older boy climb up the tree without her.

When he didn’t receive an answer from the little girl, Solan dropped from the branch, twisting himself as he dropped so that he landed on his feet and didn’t hurt himself. Nexa seemed to be staring at something when he looked at her. Following the girl’s gaze, his eyes landed on the tall weeds that surrounded the tree. He didn’t see anything, though.

“Nexa... Nexa!” he called her name, snapping his fingers in front of her eyes to get her attention. After a few tries, it finally worked. “Nexa, what were you looking at?” he asked, receiving a shrug in return.

“I dunno. A hard place with rats.” she replied before smiling up at him. “Will you teach me?” she asked.

“Huh?” Solan asked, thoroughly confused by the request. Nexa pointed up at the treetops above them. “Oh, that. Sure; I’ll teach you how to climb.” he told her before leading the little girl over to the trunk of the large tree. “Watch closely.” he said before beginning her lesson on tree climbing.

The blonde boy jumped and grabbed on to the lowest branch of the tree before getting a grip on the base of the tree with his feet. Once he accomplished getting situated, he

pulled himself up with his arms, while pushing with his feet. After a few seconds, he was sitting on the branch, smiling down at Nexa.

“Tada!” he told her, making her clap her hands together while laughing. He bowed as he received the applause from his small audience before slipping backwards and hanging upside down once more.

“Up! Up!” the girl said excitedly, hopping up and down as she pleaded with the older boy. For a moment, Solan wondered if it would be a bad idea to bring the girl up with him. Then the moment passed and he was gently reaching down and grabbing Nexa by the wrists. A few seconds later, they were both swinging on the branch. Unfortunately, Solan wasn’t quite strong enough to hold the little girl long enough to get them both up onto the tree branch, and Nexa ended up slipping from his grasp before crash landing on the ground below them.

“Nexa!” he cried out before losing his balance and falling from the branch he was on, landing on his back next to the little girl. Turning on his stomach and getting on all fours so he could get a better look at the small blonde, Solan found himself looking into laughing blue eyes and smiling face. “Are you alright?” he asked. “I didn’t mean to let go.”

“Again! Again!” Nexa shrieked before sitting up and wrapping her small arms around the boy’s neck in a tight hug.

“Nexa, I can’t... breathe.” he told her, trying to pry her arms off of his neck before he passed out from lack of air. For a three year old, the girl had quite a grip.

“Sowwy.” she apologized as she pulled away from him, still smiling. She lost the smile when the boy ruffled her hair.

“It’s alright. I should be the one apologizing for dropping you.” he told her with a sigh. He had really screwed up. He just thought himself to be lucky since nothing bad had happened.

“Don’t be sad, Solan. I’m alright. That’s why I’m Mama’s big wawwior.” she said proudly before standing up and striking a pose that always made her Mama laugh, her hands on her sides and her chin in the air. It worked just as well on Solan as it did on her mother.

“Come on, Nexa. I think we’ve had enough excitement for one day.” the blonde boy suggested as he stood up from the ground. The girl’s smile disappeared, replaced by a pout.

“Aw... I want to go up again.” she told him, crossing her arms to complete the sad look she was giving him. Solan only shook his, telling her that he didn’t want to risk her getting hurt. She didn’t know what the word ‘risk’ meant, but she got the message. It seemed she wouldn’t be having anymore fun on the tree after all, even after she had worked so hard on pouting with Solan.

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That same afternoon, back at the prison, Callisto was preparing for some fun of her own. The fights that she had told Gabrielle about were taking place, and she was up next. She couldn’t wait to entertain herself with whatever victim it was that they

shoved into the ring with her. Gabrielle was fun, but there was only so much Callisto could do with her before being threatened by the guards.

“Your turn.” the guard from that morning grunted, opening the door to the cell. Unlike with most prisons, they didn’t use restraints or chains. Anyone that tried to escape from The Canyon was as good as dead because of the archers that they had constantly keeping guard from above and the amount of guards that they kept in the actual canyon.

“Watch closely, little bard. You’ll be joining in on the fun soon enough.” Callisto told Gabrielle before exiting the cell, leaving the bard to wonder just what kind of people ran this place. Even worse, what kind of people actually paid to come see the prisoners fight? She shook her head, not wanting to contemplate those thoughts. The ones that replaced them weren’t welcome either, but it seemed unpleasant thoughts were the only ones that would visit her that night.

Callisto had said that she would be fighting soon. She didn’t want to, though. She wasn’t like the people here. She couldn’t stand the thought of killing another person.

*‘Yeah, that’s why you killed Perdicas.’* she mentally scoffed at herself. She had been telling herself, and everyone else, for the last two weeks that killing Perdicas had been different from murder, but it wasn’t getting through to anyone. Including herself. *‘There had to be another way to get Nexa away from him without shoving that knife into his side.’* she thought as she watched Callisto fight, her forehead pressing against the bars. Although she wouldn’t consider what Callisto was doing fighting. It looked more like the willowy blonde woman was merely playing with her opponent. It quickly became apparent that she had become bored playing with him, however, when she shoved her sword through the man’s gut.

Gabrielle looked away, unable to watch the blood drain into the ground of the canyon. She could feel the small amount of food that she had had to eat that morning threatening to rise up out of her stomach. It took a few moments for her to suppress the nausea that she was feeling. Once she finally composed herself, she looked back down where the fight had taken place.

The guards had circled Callisto, their crossbows trained on her just in case she tried anything. Although Gabrielle couldn’t see very well from her position, she could have sworn she saw the willowy blonde snap her teeth at one of the soldiers before dropping her weapons and raising her hands up innocently. Once they had her cooperation, the guards led her back up to her cell, although no one dared to try and throw her in like they did with the rest of the prisoners.

“Enjoy the show, little bard?” she asked once the guards were gone. “I sure enjoyed putting it on.” she remarked with a chuckle.

“You really are insane.” Gabrielle told her, not bothering to give an obvious answer to a stupid question.

“I try.” Callisto said before winking at the blonde and heading back to her corner, leaving Gabrielle to her thoughts once more.

## Part 10

Back in his temple, the God of War was using The Portal to watch his second-favorite source of entertainment: Gabrielle. He had to admit that Strife and Discord had done a good job, and it had impressed him that they actually had the brains to think of something so brilliant.

"Gabrielle and Callisto in one cell. You two really outdid yourselves on this one." Ares praised them. The two minions practically swooned at the comment. It was a rare day indeed when the God of War complimented someone. "It's only been a week, and already she is being pushed to her limit by Callisto. I'll have to give that crazy blonde a token of my gratitude while she's still somewhat sane."

"I think he's a little late for that." Strife muttered under his breath to Discord, who smirked in reply. Strife had seen Callisto and the way she acted. There was no doubt in his mind that she was missing one or two important pieces in her mind. *'She talks to rats, for Zeus' sake!'* he thought as a shudder ran down his spine. He did not like her at all.

"Hey! It looks like the guards are paying your plaything a visit, Ares." Discord said as she pointed at The Portal, pulling Discord out of his thoughts. "And would you look at that? They had the courtesy to bring her some new clothes."

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"Oh look, little bard. They brought you a new outfit." Callisto commented with a giggle when the guards threw in a bundle of clothing. "They must have known just how bad those peasant garments were beginning to reek. Maybe I should thank them later." the blonde thought for a moment before shaking her head. "Nah. Wouldn't want them to get egotistical, would we?" Gabrielle just ignored her as she went to examine the clothing that was thrown into the cell.

"This is armor." she pointed out when she held up the top. It was roughly her size and, while leaving her lower back exposed, it would cover her entire torso if she put it on. Etched into the leather was an image of a woman perched on a crescent moon. Gabrielle immediately recognized the symbol of the Amazons and wondered how a piece of their armor could manage to find its way into the prison.

"Aren't you the observant one? No wonder you're a bard." Callisto chuckled as she walked over to the shorter blonde. "Oh, aren't you just the luckiest little bard in the world? The Amazon that wore this armor was practically an animal in the ring until I killed her." she informed the young woman, causing Gabrielle to drop the top she was holding up.

"They don't really expect me to wear a dead person's clothes, do they?" she asked, staring down at the pile of assorted garments.

"Well you don't seriously think they'd let you fight in those rags, do you?" Callisto asked, referring to the dress that Gabrielle had been stuck in since she killed her husband. It had definitely seen better days, which was made evident by the many tears and blood and dirt stains.

"I'm not going to fight." she said defiantly, crossing her arms. "I may be stuck in this

prison, but I am not going to fight just to entertain some rich snobs with a sick sense of pleasure." Callisto simply laughed at the smaller woman's defiant words.

"What makes you think you have a choice, little bard? The fools that run this place aren't going to let you simply waste away in here. I'm betting that someone paid a fortune for you to be taken here. They're going to want to earn that money back with whatever winnings you make in the fights." she explained. "If you don't fight, the guards will simply beat you until you decide you'd rather take your chances in the arena." she added on, quickly dashing any hopes of Gabrielle refusing to fight.

"How come you get your armor?" she finally asked, nodding towards the familiar black leather armor that Callisto was wearing.

"This is what I was wearing when I was brought here. Do you really think anyone was going to try and make **me** change?" she said with a shrug. After tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear, Callisto bent down and picked up the pile of discarded clothing. "Now then, you should probably try on your new outfit before the guards come back and tell you it's your turn to fight." she suggested as she shoved the armor into Gabrielle's arms before slinking back to her corner.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" the blonde asked as she watched Callisto's retreating figure.

"Oh, don't take it personally. I don't like you or anything." the villainess said. A few moments of silence went by before Callisto said, "I just can't wait to see how Xena's little bard kills someone. It must be something to watch." Gabrielle stared at the dark corner, wanting to respond, but unable to. She wanted to say that she wasn't a killer, but the fact that she was even in the prison disproved that point. So, she simply chose not to respond to the comment, and instead began looking through the new clothes.

They were definitely different from what she was used to wearing when she traveled with Xena. Apart from being made of leather, she had never worn anything that was made to be so decorative. The back of the top was lined with red and blue feathers; and the leather strap that tied around her waist had the teeth of carnivorous animals hanging from it. There was another strap that tied to the leather that went around her waist and went across her back and over her torso, tying in the front. The bottom half of the armor consisted of pleats and a skirt.

The dark, leather pleats had a rather complex design, making it obvious that whoever made it had put a lot of time into them. The pleats were in the shape of feathers, each one different from the other. The skirt that she would wear underneath was made of soft, black fur that Gabrielle guessed came from a wolf. To complete the ensemble was one shoulder guard, two bracers, and a pair of sandals that laced all the way up to her knees.

"Could you um..." Gabrielle wasn't quite sure how to say what she wanted Callisto to do, feeling rather foolish about what her request would come out as. The truth was, she didn't want the crazy woman to see her change. She may have been in a prison, but she found it hard to get rid of the modesty that she had been cursed with. It became apparent that she wouldn't have to worry about Callisto sneaking peeks at her when she saw the insane blonde talking to her rat again. Just to be sure, however, she changed as fast as she could.

"Hm... It seems there was a reason Xena kept you around after all." Callisto chuckled as she stood up from her corner and walked over to Gabrielle once the girl was changed. "I don't know why you had such a problem with wearing these..." she said as she came up behind the bard. Gabrielle shuddered when she felt Callisto place her thin hands on her shoulders. "You look much better than the killer that wore these last." the blonde purred into the smaller woman's ear. Gabrielle's eyes narrowed at the last comment, and the small bard pulled herself out of Callisto's grasp.

"Let me get this through to you, Callisto." she started as she turned around. "I. Am. Not. A. Killer." she told the woman, getting up as close to her face as she could without touching her. Although she knew Callisto wouldn't kill her, she had learned her lesson the last time she had touched the woman. She didn't fancy the idea of being thrown into a wall again. Although, she had expected some sort of retaliation from the woman, besides the crazy laughter she received.

"Then what do you call yourself, little bard?" Callisto asked when she finally stopped laughing. "Hm? It seems that you and I must have a different definition of the word 'killer'. You see, to me, a killer is someone who ends another person's life." she said. When she didn't receive an answer from the young woman, she smirked and leaned forward. "What's the matter, little bard? Did having your definition proven wrong make you speechless? Or are you just busy trying to take in the fact that you've become like me?" she taunted the smaller blonde.

"Shut up, Callisto!" Gabrielle yelled before tackling the other woman to the ground. "I am nothing like you!" she said as she aimed a punch at Callisto's face. The willowy blonde stopped it, however, and used it to flip Gabrielle over so that the bard was on the bottom and she was on top, pinning the other woman's arms to the hard ground.

"Ooh. So Xena's little kitty has claws after all. I knew there was a reason she kept you around." she said before Gabrielle spit in her face. "She does tricks, too! This is just turning out to be my lucky day!" she exclaimed excitedly before leaning forward and giving Gabrielle a rough kiss on the mouth, engaging the plan that had been developing in her head over the last week.

It would be nice to brag to Xena, if she ever saw the woman again, that she was able to obtain what the dark-haired woman wanted: Gabrielle's heart. Of course, it wouldn't be in the way that she originally intended, with a knife or sword, but either way worked for her. When she saw how broken Xena was after Gabrielle had married Perdicus, she began to wonder how the woman would feel if she lost her heart to the woman she hated most.

Gabrielle, unaware of the plans running through Callisto's head, was thoroughly surprised by the rough kiss that caught her off guard; but it only took her a moment to get over it and head-butt Callisto. Once the insane woman's hands were off of her arms, she shoved Callisto off of her and rolled to the side, before jumping back to her feet. The former bard immediately began spitting, trying to get the taste of Callisto's tongue out her mouth, while rubbing her hand across her mouth vigorously, trying to get the feel of her lips on her to go away.

"What the Hades was that?" she breathed out once she was done. She was careful to remain in a defensive stance, just in case Callisto tried that again.

"A girl has to have some fun, doesn't she?" the willowy blonde replied with a shrug, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "Besides," she continued with a smirk, "you started it."

"You really have gone insane, if you think that was me starting it." Gabrielle told her before relaxing out of her fighting stance and heading back to the bars of the cell.

"I thought it was great foreplay." Callisto told her, blowing the same stray strand of hair out of her eyes just to have it fall back in front of her face. It seemed it was having as much fun bothering her as she was having tormenting Gabrielle, who just ignored the comment she made. Instead, she began to allow her thoughts to wander as she stared up at the blue sky. She hated it.

Before Perdicus, when she was happily traveling with Xena, a clear sky was something she could gaze at forever while coming up with a new way to tell a story. It always reminded her of her best friend's eyes, something else she could have stared into forever if it wouldn't make her friend suspicious. Even when she was with Perdicus, even if she never got that same feeling she used to get with Xena, a blue sky never bothered her. At that moment, however, she wanted to bring the sky crashing down to the ground.

After almost four years of enduring beatings from a man she should have never been with, Gabrielle had lost the one thing she had gone through them for; she had lost her tiny, blonde world. At least when she had Nexa with her, Gabrielle could forget about Perdicus for a little while and enjoy the blue sky that reminded her, not only of Xena, but of her daughter as well.

*'The Fates are cruel to create a Tartarus like this one above Hades' realm.'* she thought as she pressed her forehead into the bars of her cell. *'If I don't look up, I'll lose whatever connection it is that I have with the ones I love.'* she mused silently, *'But if I do look up, I remember that I lost them.'* Gabrielle sighed as she sank to the ground, defeated. It took her a moment to register the feel of wet tracks running down her face. She hadn't realized that she had been crying.

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Xena woke to sound of small sniffles coming from someone laying beside her and the feel of something warm and wet on her shoulder. When she looked down to see who had snuck into her bed, she found herself staring into watery blue eyes framed by dark blonde hair.

"I'm sowwy, Xena. I didn't mean to wake you up." the small blonde apologized as she wiped her eyes. The warrior princess smiled softly, something that only Gabrielle had ever seen, before placing a gentle hand on the girl's head.

"It's alright. Now will you tell me what's wrong?" she asked as she stroked the soft hair beneath her hand, trying to comfort the little girl. Nexa seemed to think about it for a moment before shrugging.

"I don't know. My Mama is sad, and I don't know why. It makes me sad, because I can't make her happy." she explained before sniffing again. Xena mentally sighed and sat up, pulling the girl up with her. Comforting people was definitely not her



strong suit.

“Nexa, you were probably just dreaming. I’m sure your Mama is happy.” she said before thinking about something for a moment. “If she is sad, though, it’s probably because she misses you.”

“But I don’t want Mama to be sad because of me.” Nexa sniffled before rubbing her nose on her arm. Xena made a face, mentally deciding that she would have to teach the kid better ways to get rid of a runny nose, before going back to trying to comfort the child.

“I think I know a way to make her feel better.” Xena suggested. Nexa looked up at her with hopeful blue eyes, practically pleading her to tell. “Try thinking of her right now. Tell her how much you love her.” The small blonde did as Xena said, thinking as hard as she could of her mother. “You know, you and your mother aren’t really separated. She’s in here with you.” Xena tapped the girl’s chest while Nexa’s eyes were closed. “And all you have to do to be with her is close your eyes and think of her.” she continued before laying back down. “You should go back to bed, Nexa.”

“Can I stay with you tonight?” the girl asked as she laid down and rested her head on Xena’s shoulder once more. It reminded her of when her Mama used to take her to the lake while her Daddy was gone. She heard Xena sigh before mumbling a ‘yes’. The girl smiled to herself before snuggling closer to her Mama’s friend and slipping back to sleep.

While the small girl slept, Xena found herself wide awake and her thoughts were beginning to pester her. She was supposed to be the stoic and mean warrior princess, and she had just shown a little girl a gentle side that she thought she had lost. It made her question what kind of influence Nexa had over her. She must have had some affect on her if she had made the Warrior Princess stay in one spot for longer than two days. They had been in Amphipolis for a week, and Xena wasn’t even feeling restless like she thought she would.

*‘Am I getting soft?’* she wondered as she absent-mindedly began stroking the blonde hair beneath her when she felt Nexa begin stirring again. *‘No. The Warrior Princess doesn’t get soft. Maybe I’m just... going through a phase.’* she thought, trying to convince herself that she was still as tough as she used to be. It was then that she realized what she was doing with her hand. *‘Traitor.’* she thought as she stopped her hand from moving and let it fall limply beside Nexa. She decided, however, to stop thinking about for the night. *‘As long as nobody else sees me being nice, my reputation will be fine.’* This thought convinced her that everything would be alright, and it wasn’t long before she was being pulled back into Morpheus’ realm.

The next morning, Xena woke up to find Nexa still nestled beside her, practically burrowing into her side. It almost made her feel bad that she would have to wake the little girl up by moving; almost, but not quite. She smirked when she got out of the bed and Nexa gave a little shriek at the loss of her body heat.

“Come on, kid. I’m sure Mother has food on the table for you by now, and is wondering where you are.” she told the girl, who responded with a yawn and a sleepy nod before clumsily climbing out of bed and following after Xena. When she realized that the girl may have some trouble making it down the stairs without falling down them, Xena placed a steady hand on her shoulder and made sure that she was able

to make it down the steps without incident.

“There you two are. I was beginning to worry that I’d have to give your breakfast away.” Cyrene said when she saw her daughter and her small charge come down the stairs. “Go on and eat. Solan and Amarice are already at the table.” she ordered them. She grabbed Xena’s arm as she walked past, though, and pulled her down to her level. “If they continue on like they are, you’re paying for the damages to my tavern and cleaning up their mess.” she whispered before releasing her daughter and heading back to the kitchen, leaving Xena to deal with the children. Deciding that she would rather not spend her dinars on anything Amarice and Solan broke, Xena entered the dining area of the tavern.

“Take it back! Take it back!” Amarice yelled as she held Solan in a headlock. “If you don’t take it back, I swear I’ll pull all of that blonde hair out piece by piece and make it into a pillow!” she threatened as Solan tried to struggle against her.

“What is going on here?” Xena asked when she walked into the room and observed the damage that had been caused. Chairs were flipped over and one of the tables was broken. Broken pieces of a plate littered the floor, along with the remains of someone’s breakfast. Meanwhile, Tara, the new waitress they had hired, was jumping up and down from the sidelines and cheering the two teenagers on. The sound of her voice quickly put an end to the girl’s cheering, though, along with the wrestling that Solan and Amarice were doing.

“He started it!” Amarice said after she let go of him, pointing an accusing finger at the blonde boy.

“Hey! I did not!” Solan objected. “You’re the one that called me immature, so you started it.” he reminded her before sticking his tongue out.

“Oh yeah, **that’s** really mature.” she said sarcastically. “Just liking throwing those eggs at me was the definition of maturity.”

“Well both of you are acting like children right now.” Xena informed them. “In fact, the only one that’s acting like an adult right now is Nexa, and she’s three years old!” she said, nodding at the young girl. Nexa looked up from her plate of food when she heard her name to find everyone staring at her. She did her best impression of Xena’s ‘look’ before going back to eating. When Xena looked back at Solan and Amarice, they both looked slightly ashamed before going back to the table.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked when she saw them sit down. They both looked up at her with confused expressions on their faces. “While I’m here, I keep trouble out of mother’s tavern. You two sure look like trouble to me.” she explained. “So get out and don’t come back until tomorrow.”

“But Xena!” they both objected simultaneously as they stood up from their seats.

“Out. Now.” she ordered them. “Or do I have to haul you out like common thugs?” she asked with a raised eyebrow. Amarice and Solan both shook their heads before making their way out the door. It seemed that they would be on their own for lunch and dinner.

“Do you see what you did?” Amarice hissed at the boy as they walked together

through Amphipolis.

“Me? Like I said, you started it.” Solan retorted as he walked with Amarice. The Amazon sighed and shook her head.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter now. Xena finished it.” she said before pulling Solan out of the way of a man and his cart. “Learn to drive a damn cart!” she called after the man, shaking her fist at him. “Men. Can’t do anything right.” she muttered.

“Excuse me, but I’m right here.” Solan said, although he was grateful to Amarice for pulling him out of the way.

“I know. That’s why I said it.” she told him smugly before walking off. Solan watched her go, muttering to himself plans of revenge. He was about to go find the ingredients he would need for his plan when he felt a strong hand on his shoulder. He turned around to find Xena raising an eyebrow at him.

“What did I just hear about you putting snakes in Amarice’s bed?” she asked curiously. He smiled sheepishly at her and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Oh nothing.” he assured his older friend before an idea popped into his head. “Hey Xena, do you think we could go hunting together?” he asked, a bright smile on his face.

“And why would I want to do that?”

“Well... I am staying at your mother’s house, after all, and I do want to be able to help.” he told her. “And I kind of don’t know how to hunt very well.” he admitted in a rush before looking down at the ground. When she didn’t answer, Solan looked up to find an amused smile on her face. “What? Kaleipus didn’t have enough patience to teach me how to hunt!” he explained.

“Come on, you little urchin. I’ll teach you to hunt, but only if you promise to be nicer to Amarice.” Xena told him. When he looked like he was about to object, she put a finger to his lips. “Ah ah ah. It’s either that, or no deal at all.”

“Fine.” he said, crossing his arms. “Can we get started now? I want to learn before you leave.” Xena thought about it before shrugging.

“I guess it couldn’t hurt any.” she decided before leading him out of Amphipolis and toward the surrounding woods. When they returned a few hours later, looking like they had seen better days, Xena realized what a mistake opting to take him hunting had been.

It turned out that Solan had a problem with killing wild animals. When she brought up the fact that he ate animals all the time, he told her that he still hadn’t been the one to kill them. She couldn’t argue that. Plus, he also had worse luck than Gabrielle did. She never knew that bees could be such bothersome little pests. When Solan accidentally hit a hive with his staff, however, Xena learned that the stinging insects could hold a grudge.

“Xena, what happened to you two?” Cyrene asked when they entered the tavern. They were both covered in dirt and looked a little damp. Solan had a few bee stings covering different parts of his body and Xena had a scrape going up her arm.

“Hunting, mother... hunting.” she answered. “Come on, Solan. You need to get a hot bath.”

“But, you said that Amarice and I couldn’t come back until tomorrow.” he reminded her.

“Forget I said anything. You stink and I don’t want you running off my mother’s customers.” she told him before pushing him in the direction of the staircase. She then turned to her mother, who gave her a knowing look and sent Tara off to draw a bath for Solan. The girl muttered something under her breath before doing as she was told.

“Xena, I don’t know about that girl sometimes.” Cyrene said while shaking her head. “I know she told you that she wanted to start making up for her crimes, but did you **really** have to insist that she become my new helper?”

“She grew up without a mother. I thought sending her to the best mother I know would help her.” Xena told her.

“Oh Xena. Now you’re just trying to flatter me so that I don’t yell at you. Well, it’s working.” Cyrene told her before going in to kiss her daughter on the cheek. She stopped halfway there, thinking better of it. “Xena, Solan’s not the only one who needs a bath. Nexa and I will go find Amarice and tell her that she can come back while you go wash up.” she said before going off to find her young helper. “Oh, and do hurry. Wouldn’t want to scare away my customers.” Xena rolled her eyes before going up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. She had to admit, though; she **did** need a bath.

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“Amazon!” Gabrielle looked up from the ground when she heard one of the guards address her. “Get up. The crowd’s waiting.” he told her.

“Look, you don’t understand. I can’t go out there. I’m not a fighter.” Gabrielle told him, although she did stand up. Callisto’s words were echoing through her mind, reminding her that if she didn’t fight, the guards would find a much more painful way for her to die.

“Yeah right. And I’m the son of Zeus.” he scoffed as he unlocked the cell and opened the door. He was careful not to keep his eyes off of the insane woman in the corner, knowing that she’d take any chance to kill him.

“Actually, he’s a little taller and has darker hair.” Gabrielle informed him, earning a glare from the guard. “He also travels with a blonde man, unlike you. See, your partner has black hair, and it isn’t as long.”

“Look. Either you come out on your own, or we’ll come in there and get you.” the guard growled, although he didn’t fancy the idea of entering a cell with Callisto in it.

“Oh, I invite you to try. I’ve been a little bored since my last fight.” the other occupant of the cell said with a quiet chuckle. “Here piggy, piggy, piggy!” she taunted him, gesturing for the guard to come into the cell.

“Fine! I’ll go with you!” Gabrielle said as she hurried out of her prison. “Happy?” she

asked as the guard closed the cell once more.

“Very. Now move it.” The former bard did as she was told, walking down the rocky incline that led down to the floor of the canyon. The sound of the men in the prison cells made her uneasy, and slightly glad that she had been put in the same cell as Callisto. At least she would be able to push the willowy blonde off of her if she tried something, like she had earlier. Just thinking of that made her want to wash her mouth out.

“Choose a weapon.” one of the guards said when they finished their descent. Gabrielle looked up to find a weapon rack lined with any weapons she could think of, plus a few that she had never seen before. Too bad she had no idea how to use any of them. Fortunately, she saw a staff at the very end of the rack, right next to a large sword and a battle axe. Her eyes lit up with hope. If she had a staff, perhaps she could survive this place without killing anyone.

“Ha! This should be interesting. Alright, little one. Go out and show your stuff.” the head of the guards said, grabbing her by the leather strap that held her armor in place and practically throwing her into the fighting area. A few laughs could be heard as she caught herself with her staff rather ungracefully, along with a few catcalls. Then the laughter turned to cheers when her opponent entered the narrow fighting arena, causing Gabrielle to gulp.

The man wasn’t big, maybe a little taller than she was with a slight build, so his size wasn’t a problem. The problem was that she hadn’t fought in almost four years, and now she was being thrown into a life of fighting against her will. Her opponent seemed to be a favorite of the crowd, telling her that he had been there a long time. The problem was that he was using a pair of weapons that she had never seen before. They looked like knives, but the hand-guards curved out, forming a trident. Even the reassuring weight of the staff couldn’t bring back the small glimmer of hope that she had had just a few moments ago. The man didn’t give her much time to think about how doomed she was, though, because almost as soon as he entered, he was launching himself at her.

Gabrielle brought the staff up just in time to block the first blow from the strange weapons. Unfortunately, the shoulder that Perdicus had shoved a knife in before she killed him began to protest the use, causing her to lose her focus for a moment. The man used the distraction to kick her to the ground. Just as he was about to jump on her, she rolled out of the way and aimed a swipe with her staff at his kneecaps.

The man flipped backwards over the staff and threw one of the knives that he held, aiming for the middle of her back. Gabrielle quickly turned and caught the weapon in her staff just in time to stop it from entering her chest. She mentally thanked Xena for teaching her how to listen for attacks with her body before pulling the strange knife out of her staff. She was about to throw the knife away so the man couldn’t get it when she realized he was attacking with the other one. She sidestepped to get out of the path of the blade, but not in time to avoid the entire attack.

She felt the same pain in her side that she did in her shoulder when Perdicus stabbed her, but her opponent didn’t give her time to dwell on it. Before Gabrielle knew it, the man was kicking her in the chest, knocking the strange knife out of her hand as she fell to the ground. As she tried to regain her breath and her staff, the man jumped on

top of her. When he lifted the knife up to give the final blow, however, Perdicas' face flashed in front of Gabrielle's eyes.

She was taken back to her marriage with the bastard that had caused her so much pain in the first place. She was back to being the scared wife who was too afraid to leave her house, because if she did, Perdicas might become angrier at her. Gabrielle didn't want to go back to that. She didn't want to be Perdicus' punching bag anymore. She wouldn't let him take her back to being that, either.

"I won't let you!" Gabrielle screamed before grabbing the knife that lay beside her and shoving it into the side of the man that was pinning her down. His own knife had been inches away from her chest. She watched as the man's eyes widened, although she was still seeing Perdicas on top of her, as she dug the knife deeper into his side until the hand-guards wouldn't let the blade go any further. It wasn't until the dead body of the man collapsed on top of her that Gabrielle realized what she had done.

Her eyes widened as she stared up into the blank ones of the dead man on top of her. As hard as she tried to look away, the surprised look on the man's face entranced her. Gabrielle laid there underneath the body of the man she had just killed, her mind trying to comprehend what she had done.

"Get up, scum!" one of the guards ordered her. When she didn't move, the man pulled the dead body off of her and roughly pulled her to her feet. "I said get up!" he growled before pushing her forward, toward the rocky path that led back up to her cell. Gabrielle began to walk, although she wasn't aware of it. All she could think about was the look in her opponent's eyes as she killed him, and it was making her sick to her stomach. She didn't even notice when the guard led her to a healer and he began stitching up the wound in her side before she lost too much blood.

All Gabrielle noticed was the coppery smell of blood coming from her hands, and the feel of it running down her arms. It was sickening; literally. Halfway up the rocky path, she threw up the meager amount of food that she had eaten that day which earned her a smack in the back of the head from the guard when he stepped in it. Still, the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach wouldn't go away, even when they reached her cell and threw her back in.

"I have to say, little bard, that was quite the surprise." Callisto said once the guards closed the cell and left them alone. "I could see the angriest little fire in your eyes, even from this high up." she chuckled. Gabrielle ignored her, choosing instead to lean her head against the bars. She had hoped that the cool metal would make her head stop throbbing and the sick feeling in her gut to leave. As soon as she closed her eyes to relax into the cool feeling pressing against her head, though, the image of the man she had just killed reappeared and she remembered herself shoving the knife into his side.

Gabrielle immediately opened her eyes before throwing up again. Now she was going to need a bath...

## **Part 11**

The dark haired young woman nervously shifted her feet as she stood on the porch

that led into the inn. She was trying to decide whether to go in and request to see Xena, or if she should just go back home. The latter seemed to be the most logical choice, seeing as she wasn't even supposed to be there, but the first choice was the one that would get her what she wanted. Unfortunately, she didn't have the nerve to walk into the tavern, so she decided to go with the former choice and go home. When she turned around, however, she ran right into the woman she had been looking for.

"Lila?" Xena asked, causing the young woman to look up at her. Gabrielle's sister shifted nervously as she tried to speak. All the words she had planned on saying to Xena when she arrived had left her as she stared up at the warrior, who was holding a small, blonde child. It was the child that reminded her why she was there.

"Xena, I need to talk to you. Do you think that maybe we could have a little privacy?" she asked, her mind finally working again. The warrior raised an eyebrow but nodded before setting the child on the porch and whispering something in her ear. The girl squealed with delight before taking off into the inn. Lila looked back at Xena after she watched the blonde run out of sight. "She's not yours, is she?" she asked.

"Mine? Of course not." the older woman told her, shaking her head. "Do I really look like the maternal type to you?" she asked. Lila wisely decided not to answer that, and instead requested that they go somewhere with less people.

"It's kind of personal." she explained when Xena stared down at her with unnerving blue eyes. The warrior shrugged and began walking away from the tavern, expecting the younger woman to follow. Lila didn't blame her for acting this way toward her; they didn't exactly like each other. Then again, the last time she had seen Xena almost five years ago, she treated everyone with the same indifference that she was being treated with now.

"What are you doing here, Lila?" Xena asked as they walked through the crowded streets of Amphipolis. "I doubt your parents are happy about you leaving home to come see me, of all people." she said, causing Lila to blush.

"While that's true, I'm a grown woman now, so I can do what I want. I even married well." the young woman told her, turning sideways so that she avoided colliding with a group of children playing in the street. "He's a wonderful, understanding man. He's the one who brought me here, even though he knew my parents were against it."

"I bet he's in their good graces now." Xena remarked sarcastically. Lila glared up at the taller woman.

"Look Xena. I didn't come here to listen to your sarcastic comments." she told her.

"Then why did you come here? Because I don't think you came here for a social visit with me." Xena hissed at her as she suddenly turned around, causing Lila to run right into her.

"I'm here for my sister!" Lila replied after she regained her footing. The sudden outburst from the young woman made Xena's thoughts come to a halt. She had figured that the only reason Lila would ever come to her was if Potidaea were in trouble, and that was only if no one else would help them. She never expected the girl to come for her because of Gabrielle. "Is that a good enough reason for you, Warrior Princess?" she asked, pulling Xena out of her trance.

"Come on. I know where we can talk." she said before she began walking again. The tree that Lyceus and her used to play on would be the perfect spot to talk with a decent amount of privacy.

"Alright, what about Gabrielle? Is she in trouble?" Xena asked once they came to the shaded area beneath the large tree.

"I have no idea. That's why I came to you." the younger woman said with a shrug as she took a seat and leaned up against the trunk of the tree. "Mother told father and I that you had come and informed her that Gabrielle married Perdicas. We were all very happy for her and couldn't wait for her to come back. We were a little curious about why she hadn't returned in the year that she had been married to him, but we figured that she was just busy, being a newlywed and all."

"But...?" Xena asked, prompting Lila to go on. She hated it when people drug out the news. It was frustrating.

"Xena, we still haven't heard from her. The last time I saw my sister was four years ago, when she came home from traveling with you and helped Meleager." she continued. "Mother and Father think that you lied to them, but I know that my sister would never travel with someone that made a habit of lying." Lila said. Xena could almost feel herself overflowing with guilt. She had lied to Gabrielle the day that she said she would come visit her. Now something might be wrong with her, and it would be all her fault.

"So you came here to find me?" she asked, hiding the inner turmoil that she was going through.

"Xena, I know you didn't lie. I came here to ask for your help. I need to know that my sister is alright, and you're the only person I trust to care about her enough to find out if she is okay." Lila explained. Xena mentally berated herself as she heard the words coming from Lila. It seemed that she had betrayed not only Gabrielle's trust, but her sister's as well. There was only one thing she could think of to make things right.

"I'll find her Lila." she assured the young girl, placing a hand on her shoulder. "And when I do, Potidaea will be the first place we stop."

"Are you serious?" Lila asked. She had been expecting a bit more resistance from the Warrior Princess, considering how little they liked each other, so she had made a whole list of reasons why Xena should feel inclined to help her. It looked like she wouldn't be needing that list after all. *'And I worked so hard to think of it, too.'* she thought.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" Xena responded before reaching a hand out to help the young woman up. Lila tentatively took hold of it and pulled herself back to her feet.

"Xena, I don't know how to thank you for helping. I'm really worried about Gabrielle, and I wouldn't know who to turn to if you refused to help." she admitted.

"You're Gabrielle's little sister. We may not like each other, but that doesn't mean I won't help you when you need it." Xena assured her. *'Not to mention I need to make things right between Gabrielle and me.'* she added on mentally. "Go tell your husband that you two are free to stay here as long as you like. You can stay at my mother's



tavern." she ordered the young woman before heading back to the city.

Lila practically beamed at her good fortune. With Xena on the job, she would hopefully see her sister soon. She also wouldn't have to spend the night outdoors again, since Xena was letting her and her husband stay at the tavern. *'Leo may be a good man, but he was definitely not raised to be an outdoorsman.'* she thought with a shake of her head as she followed after Xena.

Later that night, Cyrene's inn was filled with tension. Amarice kept shooting glares at Lila and her husband while Cyrene shot glares at her daughter from behind the counter she was wiping down. True, she didn't mind that Xena had promised the couple that they could stay with them for the night, but she would have liked it if her daughter had had the mind to ask her permission first.

*'Being a warlord must have convinced her that she will get whatever she wants, when she wants.'* the innkeeper mused as she stopped glaring at her daughter and instead chose to watch Amarice throw dirty looks at Lila and Leo. She found it amazing that even from halfway across the room, the young Amazon could make the young couple uncomfortable while they ate.

"What is your problem?" Lila asked, finally tired of the looks she was receiving from the auburn haired teenager.

"What's my problem? You're my problem. I mean, look at you!" Amarice told her. "You can't be much older than me, and yet you're already married. What kind of self-respecting woman would throw her life away when she has so much more to give?"

"Excuse me, but I don't consider wanting to have a family throwing my life away." Lila told her, standing up from her seat at the table. "And furthermore, I know plenty of self-respecting women who get married."

"Lila, ignore her. She's just trying to get you angry." the young man said, placing a calming hand on his wife's smaller one that was resting on the table. Lila wasn't listening, though.

"In fact, most of the women I know have families. I'm sure your mother didn't traipse around the countryside, trying to be a warrior." she spat at the other girl.

"I do not 'traipse!'" Amarice argued, standing up from her own table and walking over to Lila's.

"Ladies, calm down." Leo pleaded gently. By now the entire tavern was taking in the scene between the two women with great interest. Many of them were expecting the verbal fight to turn into a physical one. A few were even calling out for one; one of those few being Tara.

"You calm down!" they yelled at the blonde man simultaneously, making him throw up his hands in defeat. There were definitely some disadvantages to marrying a daughter of Herodotus and Hecuba. They were both extremely stubborn.

"Don't talk to my husband like that!" Lila ordered Amarice before shoving the other girl backwards. She was the only one allowed to yell at her husband.

"I'll talk to him however I like." Amarice growled as she shoved Lila back. Leo just

dropped his head to the table and tried to block out the fight that was going on.

"Amarice! Lila! That's enough." Xena shouted as she walked over to the arguing duo. She had been watching with mild amusement at the fight that was going on, but now that it was beginning to get out of hand, she decided to cut in. She didn't feel like spending her free time fixing up any damages the two of them made. She raised an eyebrow when the two of them seemed to ignore her. Nobody ignored the Warrior Princess.

Without warning, she grabbed the back of Lila's dress and Amarice's armor. Lila shrieked in surprise as she found herself being bodily thrown over Xena's shoulder. Amarice merely grunted when Xena practically dragged her away from the table and threw her over her other shoulder.

"Put me down! Put me down this instant, Xena!" Lila yelled as her legs kicked in the air.

"What's the matter, Lila? Afraid everyone will see up your dress?" Amarice mocked her. Lila's eyes narrowed as she reached her arms out in an attempt to strangle the Auburn haired woman.

"Put me down so I can pound her, Xena!" Lila commanded as they began ascending the staircase.

"Oh, I'd like to see you try. What are you going to do? Hit me with a broom?" the young Amazon asked. "Oh no! Please don't!" she said, feigning fear. Xena simply rolled her eyes at the two of them. Amarice was acting worse with Lila than she did with Solan.

*'And I thought that wasn't possible.'* she thought as they finally made it to the top of the stairs. Xena then walked over to Amarice's room and kicked open the door before dropping the Amazon. Amarice hit the floor with a loud 'thud', and it took her a second to recover from the surprising drop. By the time she had regained her composure, however, the door had been slammed shut and locked from the outside.

"Well, I never thought I'd be locked in my room ever again." she grouched before walking over to her bed and sitting down, resigned to her fate. Besides, she did have to admit that she probably shouldn't have acted the way she did. *'It made me feel better, though.'* she thought with a grin as she laid back on her bed and stared up at the ceiling. She just couldn't understand why someone would want to get married so young and throw away whatever potential they had to give to the world.

Meanwhile, Xena was throwing a very upset Lila onto the bed of one of the vacant rooms in her mother's inn. Before the young woman could object and run out of the room, Xena was shutting the door and locking it like she had done with Amarice's room. She could hear the girl getting up from the bed and walking over to the door, yelling obscenities at Xena the entire time while she pounded on the barrier between them. The Warrior Princess just rolled her eyes again while thinking that Lila and her big sister had a lot in common.

By sunrise the next morning, Xena was already saddling Argo while waiting for Amarice to join her. Lila and her husband had decided that they would be leaving shortly after Xena, and they were already hitching their horses up to the wagon that

had carried them to Amphipolis. Both Xena and Cyrene were relieved, since that meant Amarice and Lila would not be around each other for much longer.

"Sorry I'm late. I had a few tag-a-longs that wouldn't take no for an answer." The familiar voice of the teenager pulled Xena's gaze away from Argo for a moment. The scene she saw made her stifle a chuckle. Solan was practically hanging from Amarice's neck, while Nexa had wrapped herself around the young woman's leg. "Yeah, laugh it up, Warrior Princess. Just remember it's a long ways to Volos." she growled as Solan dropped to the ground and Nexa let go of her leg.

"Am'wice, I go up!" the little blonde commanded, her arms lifted so the teenager could pick her up.

"And what makes you think I'm going to do that?" Amarice asked before crossing her arms defiantly, although the look on Nexa's face immediately made her regret asking. The small blonde's eyes narrowed before she kicked Amarice in the shin. "You little brat!" the teenager hissed as she reached down for her sore leg.

"I go up!" Nexa commanded again before jumping into the lowered torso of the Amazon. Amarice wrapped her arms around the little girl on instinct before realizing that Nexa had tricked her. "Told you." she said as Amarice straightened again, ignoring the chuckles that were coming from Solan.

"You're a cocky little thing." Amarice commented before looking at Xena. "I think she's been hanging around you too long. She's beginning to act like you." The other warrior simply shrugged, hiding her amusement at the display that Nexa had put on.

"Xena, I wanted to ask if I could come with you." Solan finally said once he was sure he could speak without breaking out into laughter. He had been thinking about it since he found out the night before that Xena and Amarice would be leaving to find Gabrielle.

"And why would you want to come with us?" Xena asked boredly as she checked Argo's reigns before moving on to check her saddle.

"I want to be able to protect your mother and Nexa?" he said, as if asking if that was a good enough reason. Xena looked at him for a moment before shaking her head and turning back to Argo. "Okay, fine. My birthday is coming up soon and I want to spend it with you." he admitted, causing Xena to stop what she was doing. *'I knew it! I knew it was a stupid reason! I should have just lied!'* he berated himself when he heard her sigh.

"Solan, you can come."

"Yeah, I knew that was a stupid reason. I don't blame you for making me stay... wait, what?"

"I said you can come with us. I don't know why you would want to spend your birthday with me, but I won't deny you the chance." she told him, sighing to herself once more. "But you have to promise to behave." she added on when she caught the glare from Amarice that was sent her way.

"I promise!" Solan exclaimed excitedly before wrapping Xena in a hug. Feeling uncomfortable with the contact, she awkwardly returned the hug before the boy

released her. "I'll go get my things. I won't be long." he said before running out of the stables and heading back to the tavern.

"I go, too?" Nexa asked, looking at Xena with hopeful eyes. The warrior chuckled before shaking her head.

"Sorry, Nexa. Not this time." she said as she ruffled the girl's hair, ignoring the protests she received.

"Next time?"

"Maybe." Xena replied, earning a small cheer from Nexa as she took her from Amarice. The Amazon sighed in relief when the handful was taken out of her arms. "Want to go help Mother in the kitchen?" she asked the little girl, who nodded vehemently. Xena chuckled before heading for the tavern, leaving Amarice to saddle Ice.

"Why are you here, little bard?" Callisto asked as she watched the smaller blonde throw up what she had eaten that day. A week had gone by, and Gabrielle had fought in the arena once more, where she had killed again. Seeing Xena's so called pure bard killing; and seeing the look of pure hatred when she shoved those knives of hers into the body of her opponents... It would warm Callisto's heart, if she had one.

"What makes you think I would tell you?" Gabrielle asked after she finished retching. She leaned her head against the cell bars and wiped her mouth. The burning sensation reminded her of what she had done not too long ago.

It had been the same as the first fight, only she hadn't chosen the staff as her weapon. The first match in the underground fighting ring that her shoulder couldn't handle the strain of using a staff. So, she had decided to use the weapons that her first opponent had used. The guards told her they were called sais, and from what she could tell, she could use the weapons to simply knock an opponent out with the blunt handles. She hadn't counted on seeing Perdicas' face whenever she fought, though.

"I have got to get out of here." she muttered under her breath as she looked up at the night sky. The crescent moon reminded her of the image on her armor, which in turn reminded her of the man she had killed that night. It took all her self control to keep her stomach down.

"Now why would you ever want to get out of here? It's not so bad." Callisto's voice remarked from behind her. "The company's not so bad, either." she chuckled. Gabrielle jumped when she saw a rat on the hand that was so close to her face. "Oh, don't be like that. Ares just wanted to say hello."

"And you wonder why I want to get out of here..." Gabrielle remarked, rolling her eyes. "If I stay here any longer, I'll end up like you."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Callisto asked as she dropped her rat to the ground, suddenly defensive. "It wasn't this prison that made me how I am, little bard. It was your precious Xena."

"Xena is not to blame for your choices in life, Callisto." Gabrielle growled, turning around so that she was facing the insane woman.

“She ordered my village destroyed. She killed my family. She created me.” Callisto said with a shrug.

“Callisto, Cirra was a mistake! Xena didn’t order it burned. Her men got out of control.” the smaller woman explained, trying hard to defend her old friend. Despite the fact that the warrior had gone back on her word, Gabrielle still couldn’t help her reflexive instinct to defend her reputation.

“Look here, you irritating blonde!” Callisto said as she wrapped her fingers around Gabrielle’s throat and shoved her up against the bars of the cell. “I don’t care what she told you. Xena is the reason why I no longer have my mother and sister. Xena is the reason why I had to grow up alone. Xena is the reason I’m like this!” she hissed, ignoring Gabrielle’s fingers that were clawing at her hand. “Do not try to explain away her actions!” she said before dropping the smaller blonde.

“The only way... to stop the circle of hate... is with love.” Gabrielle said, repeating the words that she had told Xena many years ago as she tried to regain her breath.

“Oh please. Love hasn’t been working very well for you lately, has it?” Callisto taunted her. “Besides; like I told Theodorus: Love is a trick that nature plays on us to get us to reproduce. It doesn’t exist, little bard.” she said before leaving Gabrielle to wallow in her pain.

Gabrielle simply turned on her side and looked back up at the moon again. She knew love existed. Her love for her daughter was what kept her going when she was with Perdicas. Her love for Nexa gave her the strength to stand up for herself. Her love for her world kept her hope of escaping this prison alive.

*‘If love didn’t exist,’ Gabrielle silently mused as she traced the stars with her eyes, ‘then I would have died a long time ago.’* This thought scared her, and caused her to stop making shapes with the blinking stars above. It frightened her that she could still put so much belief in something that she couldn’t see; that she could base her life on it. She fell asleep pondering why she could still believe in love after all she went through, while Callisto couldn’t.

She hadn’t been asleep long when the sounds of shouts and weapons reached her ears. Unfortunately, it was Callisto’s insane laughter that finally pulled her out of her slumber. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she looked up to find the insane blonde standing next to her, although she was looking outside the cell instead of down at her. Wanting to know what it was that had captured Callisto’s attention, Gabrielle looked outside the cell and gasped.

Prisoners were running around everywhere while the guards chased after them. A storm of arrows rained down from the edge of the canyon as the prisoners fought to escape, but the attacks were futile. They were hitting their own guards along with the prisoners.

“It seems you weren’t the only one that didn’t want to end up like me.” Callisto giggled as she continued to watch the chaos. Gabrielle was about to respond, but the willowy blonde’s hand was snapping between the bars of the cell and grabbing a guard before she could get the words out of her mouth. She realized the guard that she had grabbed was the one that she usually taunted. “I have been waiting a long time for this, Dear.” she purred before snapping the man’s neck. The now dead guard fell to

the ground with a sickening thud, making Callisto giggle. "I've always wanted to do that." she admitted before bending over and pulling the fallen body closer to the cell.

"What... What are you doing?" Gabrielle asked as she fought to keep her stomach down. Callisto's gaze lifted from the dead body of the guard and Gabrielle found herself staring into the woman's brown eyes. From the look in them, the former bard guessed that this was a rare moment of clarity for the blonde.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she asked before holding the keys up in front of Gabrielle's eyes. "We're getting out of here, and then I'm taking you back to Xena." she explained as she stood up, pulling Gabrielle up with her.

"What? Why?" Gabrielle was thoroughly confused. 'Is Callisto helping me?' she silently wondered.

"Well I can't kill you in front of her if we're still stuck in here." the blonde said with a giggle as she reached around and unlocked the prison cell.

*'Nope. Just herself.'* Gabrielle mentally sighed before Callisto roughly pulled her through the now open cell. "Callisto, stop!" she ordered the woman, digging her heels into the ground to stop herself from being moved.

"Oh what is it now?" the blonde asked before kicking backwards at one of the guards that was coming up behind her. The man yelled as he lost his balance and fell to the ground.

"I'm not going to let you use me to hurt Xena." Gabrielle said, trying to escape the woman's grip.

"Who said you have a choice?" she asked before ducking a swing from the guard and kicking him again. Before she could say something else, the man was coming at her again. "Do you mind? I'm trying to have a discussion here." she growled before kicking the guard, this time sending him toppling over the ledge. "Oops. Well, that got rid of him." she said with a shrug before tugging on Gabrielle again.

"I said no!" the smaller blonde repeated, pulling in the opposite direction. She quickly had to move out of the way of a sword, however, which gave Callisto the chance to pull her to her.

"You're coming with me, and that's that." the insane woman growled before heading up the path, Gabrielle struggling behind her. "Oh, will you cut it out? If it makes you feel better, you can try to escape when we reach the top." she told her as she threw another guard over the ledge.

"Callisto! I am not going to go with you!" Gabrielle protested before doing something she never thought she would stoop to doing. She brought the arm up that Callisto's hand was wrapped around and bit down hard on the other woman's fingers. The willowy blonde shrieked in surprise, loosening her grip enough so that Gabrielle could escape her grasp and make a run for it.

"Get back here, you irritating little blonde!" she yelled before flipping in the air and cutting off Gabrielle's escape. "You don't just bite me and run away." she growled before tackling the former bard. Gabrielle winced as she made contact with the hard ground, but managed to pull herself quickly. She brought her arms up in time to stop a

punch at her face from Callisto.

“Get off me!” she yelled, trying to roll away. Callisto was having none of that, though. One of the insane woman’s hands found its way to Gabrielle’s neck and held her in place so she couldn’t escape. She was about to knock the little bard out when she felt an arrow pierce the skin of her upper left arm. She saw Gabrielle’s eyes widen at the sight of the arrow sticking out of her arm and had to smirk.

“Looks like we’ll be working together if we don’t want to die here.” she said as she released the other woman’s neck and flipped off of her, landing behind the guard that had shot her. As soon as he turned around, she kicked the crossbow out of his hands and pushed him over the edge with her good arm. She looked over to see Gabrielle handling her own guards, although it looked like she wasn’t having much luck. An loud shriek left her throat as she ran into the fray to help. The only one that got to kill Gabrielle was her, and only if she had an audience made up of Xena.

Standing back to back, the two enemies made allies fought against the onslaught of guards, but they could only go so long before starting to tire. The guards just kept coming at them, making Gabrielle wonder how many people actually worked for this prison. She even noticed that some of the people that attacked them were prisoners out for revenge, usually for killing a friend of theirs in the arena. The never-ending enemies were beginning to take their toll on them, even the insane Callisto. Even in her tired state, however, Gabrielle was still able to see the archer at the top of canyon loading his crossbow out of the corner of her eye.

“Callisto, look out!” she yelled in warning when she realized that the archer was aiming at the willowy blonde.

“Kind of busy here!” Callisto responded as she held off an overhead strike with a sword that she had taken from one of the dead guards. The smaller blonde was about to warn her about the archer, but the crossbow had already been fired. Gabrielle found time slowing down as she confidently reached into the air. It sped up again when her fingers wrapped around the shaft of the crossbow bolt.

*‘I caught it!’* she thought as she stared in disbelief at the arrow in her hand. It was her last conscious thought before a guard took advantage of her distraction and knocked her out with the hilt of his sword.

When Gabrielle awoke, she was back in her cell and had a throbbing headache. The rest of her body hurt as well, but her head was causing her the most discomfort. She reached up and gingerly felt the sore spot with her fingers, making herself wince. She had most definitely been hit in the head.

“It’s about time you woke up. A day really is a long time to make me wait for someone to talk to.” a familiar voice called from the corner of the cell. Gabrielle looked up from her hand and in the direction that Callisto’s voice had come from. The moonlight shining into the cell only illuminated half of the insane woman’s face, which Gabrielle thought suited her personality in a strange way.

“They didn’t kill us?” the former bard asked in surprise. She hadn’t expected to live through the night.

“Of course they didn’t kill us. We put on quite a show last night.” Callisto said with a

giggle. "In fact, they want us to work together in the fighting ring from now on. Apparently, we make quite a team." she continued before stepping out into the moonlight, making Gabrielle gasp. There was a long cut running diagonally across Callisto's face that hadn't been there the day before.

"What happened?" she asked as she stared at the wound. It looked like Callisto was lucky that her eye hadn't been taken out.

"Well, after you decided to save my life, one of the guards decided to knock you unconscious. It was a little hard to keep fighting by myself after that." the other woman explained. "Someone got in a lucky shot, is all." Gabrielle couldn't believe what she was hearing. Callisto had been cut across the face by someone and she was waving it off? Before she could ask if her cellmate was insane, Callisto asked a question of her own. "After all this time, do you really care for Xena so much that you would give up your freedom to keep her from being hurt?"

"... Yes."

## **Part 12**

When she opened her eyes, everything around Gabrielle was dark. At first, she wasn't sure if she had actually opened her eyes, it was so dark. Gradually though, a small light began to shine in the distance. It wasn't bright, more of a dull glow, but it was there. As the seconds ticked by, however, the light began to get brighter and Gabrielle could feel a warmth building in her chest. Once it was finally bright enough to see, Gabrielle started taking in her surroundings.

The area around her was a barren wasteland, and bodies hung from burning trees. The sight made Gabrielle sick to her stomach, but she managed to stop herself from throwing up. Trying to ignore the smell of burning flesh and wood, along with the sight of the dead bodies, the former bard walked towards the source of the light that illuminated the macabre land she found herself in.

With every step she took, she found less bodies and a weight that she hadn't been aware of was beginning to lift itself from her chest. In fact, it looked as if the land was trying to repair itself the closer she got to the light. Small saplings were beginning to shoot out of the ground, along with a few flowers. It wasn't magnificent, but it was much better than seeing burning bodies hanging from tree branches. When she finally reached the source of the light, however, Gabrielle was surprised by what she saw.

Giving off a light brighter than she had ever seen was an image of herself, back before Perdicas. It seemed that the light radiating from her image was pushing the darkness back and giving the trees and flowers the strength to grow. Her curiosity getting the best of her, Gabrielle reached out and touched the replication of her younger self.

As soon as she touched it, the image shimmered before melting into a puddle. The former bard gasped as she jumped back, afraid that she had broken something that she shouldn't have. When the light continued to come from the silvery puddle, however, she stepped forward once more and went down on all fours so she could get a better look at the strange puddle. Again, she was shocked by what she saw: Solan.



What made it even stranger was the weird sensation that she was moving while getting wet at the same time. When she thought this, the shimmering images in the puddle made themselves clearer and she began to realize what was going on. She was asleep, and her dreams had taken her to another mindscape. It was something that she learned came along with her prophetic dreams, although she hadn't had one of those since she left Potidaea. Trying to figure out who's dreamscape she was in, she took in the images that were in the shimmering pool.

There was an auburn haired young woman dressed in Amazon garb riding on a grey stallion beside her. Gabrielle furrowed her brow as she tried to figure out who she was. Unable to figure it out, she continued her scanning of the area.

"Argo!" she cried in excitement when she noticed the mare's head in her line of vision. "So... This must be Xena's mindscape." she mused as she looked around. It explained all the dead bodies hanging from the burning trees. It didn't, however, explain why she was the source of the bright light that illuminated Xena's mindscape. She filed the information to think about later. At the moment, she had more important business to deal with. Finding out what was going on with her old friend, for example. Looking back into the shimmering pool, Gabrielle watched as Argo slowed down and felt herself dismount from the horse...

Rain was pouring down and clouds blocked out the light of the moon. The only thing that allowed Xena and the others to see was the flashes of lightning that occasionally lit the sky. The interval between the lightning, however, left them in complete darkness, so Xena had stopped Argo and dismounted. True, she had hoped to be in then next town by now, but the stormy weather had slowed them down. None of the travelers were very happy about having to travel through the rain, either.

"Are you sure we cant' make it to the next town? or at least somewhere the rain can't get to us?" Solan asked as he dismounted after the warrior. The older woman shook her head and took the bridle off of her golden mare. Amarice dismounted Ice as well, but had to tether him to a tree near the path that they were traveling on so that he wouldn't take off. Unlike Argo, he hadn't been trained to return to them if she let him loose. At least, that's what she told Xena anyways. The truth was that the young woman didn't trust the stallion to stay put because he was a male.

"No, Solan. Without the moon, it's dangerous to ride at night," Xena explained as she pulled two bedrolls off of Argo, handing one to Solan, and began taking the saddle off of her horse.

"Not to mention that if we run Argo any harder, she might be run straight into the ground," Amarice added on for Xena. "She can't handle both your weight and Xena's."

"Oh." There was something about the way Amarice said it that made Solan think that she thought it was his fault they were stuck out in the rain.

"Don't worry. Now that the lightning has finally stopped, we can camp under the trees. That should stop some of the rain."

"Yeah. Maybe we'll find some place dry," Amarice huffed as she pulled her own bedroll off of Ice and followed after Xena into the trees.

"What? Afraid the water will make you melt?" Solan asked with a chuckle. "I heard it does that to bitches." Xena nearly stumbled over her own feet when she heard her son.

"Xena, didn't you tell the brat here that he had to behave on this trip?" Amarice growled. Xena turned around and looked at Solan.

"Yes, I believe that was the deal. I guess he's tired of traveling with us already if he's using that kind of language."

"Yeah. It has been a week since we left, after all. That can seem like such a long time to a little *boy*."

"It's a shame, too. We're almost to Volos," Xena said, feigning pity.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Solan apologized in a frantic voice. He didn't want to be left in the next town until they came back for him. "I'll behave, I swear."

"Hm..." Xena said, looking as if she was contemplating her decision. Of course, she already knew that she was going to let him stay. "He seems pretty sincere to me. How about you?"

"I don't know. He might be faking it just so we don't leave him behind," the younger woman grumbled. Solan may have been Xena's son, but that didn't stop her from being annoyed by him.

"No, I mean it! I promise, I won't say anything else," he said as he looked pleadingly up at Xena. The warrior seemed to think about it for a few moments before nodding her head and walking away again. "Hey wait! Was that a 'Yes, you can stay' nod or a 'We'll drop him off in the next town' nod?" he called after his retreating friend's back.

"It means you'll be staying with us, kid," Amarice told him before following after Xena, ruffling Solan's hair as she walked by. It would probably be the only time she got to tease him without him being able to retaliate. '*Besides,*' she thought with a smirk, '*he's kind of cute when he's frustrated.*' That thought nearly stopped her in her tracks. She hadn't just thought that Solan was cute! Looking behind her, she saw the boy trying to stop himself from doing something to get back at her for treating him like a kid. Amarice mentally slapped herself when she caught herself thinking how adorable he looked when he was angry.

"Alright. This should be a good spot," Xena announced, pulling Amarice out of her thoughts. The teenager mentally thanked her older friend for interrupting her thoughts; she definitely hadn't liked the direction that they were going in.

"Thank the Gods. Any longer in the rain, and I may have drowned," Solan remarked before shaking his head to dry his hair.

"Watch it!" Amarice exclaimed as some of the water droplets from his hair hit her. '*Okay, whatever attraction I held for him, just left,*' she thought angrily as she leveled a glare at the blonde boy, who gave her an apologetic smile.

"Sorry," he apologized before laying out the bedroll that Xena had given to him earlier. Amarice pulled her own bedroll off her back and laid it out on the ground, careful to pick a spot as far away from Solan as she could.

The next morning found Amarice waking up from a restless sleep before Xena and Solan. She let out a sigh of relief as she sat up, before rubbing her sleepy eyes with a balled up fist. She couldn't believe what was happening to her. She hated men, so why was she feeling like she did towards Solan? The knot in her stomach gave her the answer when she looked over at the sleeping boy in question.

*'Ew! He's five years younger than me; and Xena's son, at that!'* she thought, nearly gagging at the thought of being in a relationship with Solan. *'Couldn't I have at least fallen for someone that was a bit older and not the son of someone that could tear me limb from limb if she wanted?'* she asked herself silently. She waited a few moments, pleading with her mind to stop thinking about him, but it wasn't obeying her.

"Something bugging you?" A familiar voice whispered in her ear, making her jump. Amarice had been so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn't even noticed that Xena had woken up.

"Uh no... nothing's wrong! What would give you that idea?" she stammered as she tried to untangle herself from her bedroll and stand up.

"Usually you're up and moving around by now," Xena commented as she watched the girl in amusement. There was definitely something on the girl's mind. If she couldn't get out of her own bedroll.

"Oh uh... just couldn't sleep well last night. I didn't really feel like getting up." Amarice told her, but Xena could tell she was lying. She'd let her friend get away with it for now, since it didn't seem to be anything serious, but she was definitely asking about it again later. "Well then, I think I'll just get a head start on you two. I mean, the kid does deserve to sleep in a little." The Amazon quickly began rolling up her bedroll before starting out of the forest.

"Amarice..." Xena called after her, a smirk on her face. The young woman turned back around with a questioning look on her face. "You don't know how to get where we're going." A sheepish expression graced Amarice's features before she replied.

"I'll just uh... wait by Ice then," her young companion said before walking off again, leaving Xena to wonder what was going on in her head.

*'There's definitely something on her mind,'* she thought with a chuckle before walking over to her son. "Solan... Solan, wake up." The boy groaned as he tried to crawl further into the bedroll. "Solan, if you don't get up now, I'm just going to leave you here," Xena threatened him. Needless to say, it wasn't long before the blonde was quickly getting out of his bedroll and beginning to pack it up.

"I'm ready to go!" he told her with a salute as he shouldered his sleeping gear. Xena simply rolled her eyes before heading off in the direction that Amarice had gone in. Once they met her at the horses, Xena whistled for Argo. The faithful mare came running in and she quickly mounted her, pulling Solan up to sit in front of her.

Forced to follow after Xena so that she wouldn't get lost, Amarice ended up thinking about Solan again; and frankly, by it was beginning to get on her nerves by the time the sun traveled closer to the western horizon. There was no way that she could be falling for Solan. He was so much younger than her!

*'That never stopped Xena from falling in love with Gabrielle,'* her voice of reason reminded her.

*'That was different! At least Gabrielle was older than Solan!'* she argued with herself.

*'Love is love, no matter how old you are.'* the voice told her. She was beginning to hate that voice with a passion.

*'That's not the point. I don't love him. He's too annoying for me to love!'* she told the voice.

*'Ha! You're just upset that he doesn't tease you because you're a woman, but because of who you actually are!'* the voice pointed out.

*'Okay fine. How about the fact that I have only known him for a few weeks, and whenever we're together, we get into some kind of fight?'* she asked, thinking she had the voice outsmarted.

*'Easy. Love at first sight. Love can also be easily mistaken as hatred for a person who isn't used to the feeling.'* the voice answered smugly.

"Look, I can't love Solan! He's Xena's son and she'd kick my ass if she ever found out!" Amarice shouted, causing her stallion to prance nervously. When she finally got him under control again, she looked up to see Xena glaring at her, and Solan trying to divide his attention between his mother and her. "Uh... did I say that out loud?" Judging by the look on Xena's face and Solan's next question, she had.

"You're my mother?" he asked, now focusing all his attention on Xena. "Why didn't you tell me?" Xena was, not surprisingly, at a loss for words. She had no idea how to explain her situation to her son.

"Solan, you know what kind of person I used to be. You've seen what my enemies are like. I couldn't risk you growing up like me, or my enemies finding out about you." she explained as best she could.

"So I was a liability to you," he stated coolly. "That's all I am, right? A risk for you, and dead weight for her," he continued, indicating Amarice with a nod of his head.

"Hey!" Amarice objected. Hadn't she just shouted that she loved him? That was what got Xena into this mess, wasn't it?

"Solan, that's not what I meant and you know it," Xena growled in response to his statement.

"How should I know what you meant? You lied to me about who you were. You let me believe that both of my parents were dead for the last fourteen years!" Xena stayed quiet, hiding her inner turmoil as she tried to figure out a way out of this situation. The argument was only made more awkward by the fact that they were both in the same saddle, since Solan still hadn't gotten off of Argo, which she was grateful for. As long as Solan was still on her horse, it meant that he wasn't thinking about running away.

"Since you've known me, have I ever treated you like I didn't want you?" she asked,

her level voice not betraying her true feelings.

“How do I know that wasn’t all an act?” he asked angrily, refusing to look back at her.

“You don’t. You just have to trust me.”

“Because you’ve really given me a reason to trust you now,” Solan remarked sarcastically.

“You trusted me before we came on this trip,” Xena pointed out with a raised eyebrow. She knew it wasn’t much of an argument, since before they had started the trip, Solan hadn’t know that she was his mother. The boy mumbled something under his breath, but didn’t bother to repeat for Xena. When it became apparent that he wasn’t going to say anything more and that he wasn’t going to run away, Xena spurred Argo into movement again. Although they still made it to Volos by nightfall, the rest of the ride had been made in an uncomfortable silence.

“Amarice. Make sure Solan doesn’t run off,” Xena ordered the young Amazon as she dismounted Argo. Both Amarice and Solan’s jaws dropped, but for different reason. Solan couldn’t believe his mother would leave him alone with someone that just claimed she loved him, and Amarice couldn’t believe that Xena was still talking to her after what she said.

“You can’t be serious. You can’t leave me with her!” Solan objected as he watched his mother lead Argo.

“I can and I will,” she told him before looking back at Amarice. “Try not to blow any more secrets. I don’t want to have to cut your tongue out because you weren’t able to keep a hold on it.” After successfully threatening the bigmouthed teenager, Xena let go of the lead and headed for the house that she knew was Gabrielle’s.

“So um... I’m really sorry,” Amarice apologized awkwardly once Xena was out of earshot. She was pretty sure that she didn’t have to mention what she was sorry for. Solan looked back at her for a moment before facing forward again.

“Can we not talk about it right now? Like my so called **mother** said, you shouldn’t risk blowing any more secrets,” he told her coldly. Amarice sighed and shook her head. She was beginning to see the similarities between Xena and her son; mainly that when they were angry, they stayed angry. She had really screwed up things this time.

Meanwhile, Xena wasn’t getting an answer at the door she was knocking on. Beginning to lose her patience, she began circling the house. The windows were all boarded up, making it obvious that no one had been in the house for a while. The building didn’t have a backdoor, either, so she ended up at the front door again with about the same amount of information that she started with.

“Excuse me, miss... but that house has been shut up for a little over a month now. It’s scheduled to be burned down next week,” came the voice of an old man from behind her. Xena turned around and faced the man that was talking to her. He was leaning heavily on a small, wooden cane, and wore a long, brown cloak that went down to his ankles. The hood was left down, easing some of Xena’s nerves.

“Can you tell me why?” she asked calmly, although in her head she was running

through possible situations. The old man shook his greying head.

“Sorry miss. I didn’t come here until after it was marked for destruction,” he told her sadly. “You could probably go ask the judge, though. He controls a lot of what goes on in this town. He lives just down there.” The old man pointed a shaky hand down the street, showing her one of the larger houses in the town. Xena nodded her thanks, all though she probably could have figured out where the house was on her own because of its size, before heading in the direction he had indicated.

“I’m here to see the judge,” she announced when she entered the large building. She could feel all of the eyes in the room turn to her, and she couldn’t blame them. She doubted that they had women decked in armor coming into their town very often.

“That would be me,” a man called boredly as he walked out of one of the adjoining rooms. “Is there something you needed?” He was flipping through some of the documents in his hands rather than paying her much attention. He seemed to think that she wasn’t much of a problem. Xena would change that before she left.

“Why is the building down the street scheduled to be burned down next week?” she asked, cutting straight to the point.

“I’m sorry, but that is classified information. Only the townspeople are entitled to that information,” he told her, not bothering to look up from his papers. That turned out to be a mistake when he found himself being grabbed by the throat and lifted into the air by an impatient and angry warrior princess.

“I think you’d better make an exception in this case,” she growled at him as he dropped the papers in his hands and began frantically attempting to get free from her grip. She lazily dropped him to the ground and knelt beside him as he gasped for breath. “So what do you think? Are you going to tell me what I want to know?”

“I told you,” he gasped as he stared at her wide eyed, “only townsfolk are entitled to that kind of information. Select townsfolk, at that.” He barely had time to gulp when icy blue eyes narrowed at him before he felt two jabs to his neck.

“I’ve cut off the flow of blood to whatever little brain you have. You now have thirty seconds left to tell me what I want to know,” she informed him as he struggled to breathe. “Now I’ll ask again: Why is that house being torched?”

“There was a murder there. A woman killed her husband.” Xena was still, thinking about his answer. “I’m telling the truth! Take it off!” he exclaimed when it looked like she was going to let him die. The warrior let him suffer a few seconds more before finally taking the pinch off and grabbing him by the collar of his shirt. Pulling him up with her as she stood up, she began questioning him again.

“The woman; what was her name?”

“Gabrielle, of Potidaea. We found her husband dead in their home one night, and she was trying to escape in the forest. We never found her daughter, so we assumed that she killed her as well, and buried her before trying to escape,” the judge explained as he stared down at the woman holding him up. Judging by the look on her face, she didn’t like the information he was giving her.

“Are you sure that was her name?” Xena asked, shaking him slightly. The judge

nodded vehemently.

“I swear it is. I judged her myself,” he assured her. The woman thought about this for a moment before putting him back down on the ground. He immediately began smoothing the wrinkles out of his tunic and wiping his bangs back once more.

“What... What happened to her?” Xena asked, almost afraid to know. She was still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that Gabrielle had killed Perdicas. At the same time, though, she was trying to think of a reason why she would be forced to kill him.

“She’s dead, of course. You can’t really think that we’d allow someone like that to run around in society, do you?” the judge told her. It wasn’t exactly a lie, either. Perdicas’ killer was as good as dead where she was anyways. When the woman didn’t answer him, the judge continued on with his story. “Yeah, she came in with some sob story about her husband beating her,” he relayed to the woman in front of him. He was so busy fixing the collar of his tunic that he didn’t see the flash of anger in the woman’s eyes.

“You mean to tell me that you sentenced her to death after she told you that her husband was hitting her?” Xena growled. The judge, although aware of the angry tone in the woman’s voice, was not going to back down from defending his position.

“I admit, I almost believed her, but a very good source informed me that she used to be a bard and was very good at spinning tales and tricking people with her words,” he told her. Xena’s fist clenched as she heard this news. She knew that Gabrielle would never use her skill with words to trick anyone. If she said she had been abused by husband, then it was the truth. She proceeded to tell the judge this.

“By the way, the next time a woman comes to you claiming that someone is abusing her, you’d better listen,” she threatened him before throwing a punch at his face. Caught off guard, the judge didn’t have time to make any attempt to dodge the punch. He was knocked out before he hit the ground. Shooting a glare at the people staring at her before she left, Xena headed back for the horses, trying hard to ignore the painful ache in her chest.

“Xena, what’s wrong? Where’s Gabrielle?” Amarice asked when she saw Xena coming back empty handed. It was also obvious that she was trying hard to keep herself from losing her composure in front of them.

“Nothing. Let’s just go. We need to get back to Amphipolis,” she said emotionlessly as she mounted Argo. She was careful not to make any contact with Solan, who was apparently ignoring her.

“Xena--”

“I said let’s go!” she barked at Amarice before kicking Argo into motion. They jerked around so fast that Solan had to make a quick grab for the saddlehorn to stop himself from falling off the mare. The dejected young woman quickly followed after Xena, not wanting to be left behind.

It wasn’t until Argo began to froth at the mouth and was covered in a large amount of sweat that Xena finally stopped the horse. Amarice pulled up beside her, Ice panting heavily beneath her.

“What is the matter with you?!” Amarice yelled at her. She had been beginning to wonder if Xena was ever going to stop.

“Nothing is the matter with me. If anything was wrong, I’d know not to tell you,” Xena said bitterly, shooting a glare at the Amazon as she dismounted Argo. Solan quickly followed after, but immediately grabbed his bedroll and headed as far away from them as possible.

“Okay, that’s it Warrior Princess! I admit I made a mistake, but it was an accident!” Amarice yelled at her as she dismounted Ice. She didn’t even bother to tether him to one of the trees this time. “You were going to tell him anyways, so I don’t see what the problem is!” she pointed out.

“The problem is, I was still trying to work out how to tell him,” Xena told her. “Because of your ‘mistake’, my son hates me. I hope your declaration of love was worth it.” The dark-haired woman turned around, planning to end the conversation there, but Amarice put a hand on her shoulder and turned her around.

“It was an accident. I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean for it to come out!” the teenager explained, desperately trying to get Xena to understand.

“Don’t be sorry. Just improve.”

“Excuse me? I’m tired of ‘improving’. I think I have improved enough! At least people know how I feel. You’re the one that won’t even tell me what’s wrong with you right now!” Amarice yelled at the warrior princess, jabbing her in the chest angrily.

“Oh, poor Xena. About to lose her new sidekick after finding out that she lost her old one,” a familiar, but unwelcome, voice chuckled. Not long after, Ares materialized behind Amarice. “Tell me, mighty Warrior Princess, how does it feel to be the cause of your best friend’s death?” he asked as he took a step forward so that he was next to the Amazon.

“What is he talking about, Xena?” Amarice asked, taking a step to the side so she wasn’t so close to the God of War. Although he hardly ever showed up on their travels, she didn’t like him. To her, he represented everything that a man was.

“Oh... you didn’t even tell her what happened to your little friend?” Ares asked, shooting a glance at Amarice. “Well, let me help fill in the gaps. You see, her little bard Gabrielle is dead. That’s why she’s been so upset. Well that, and the fact that it is practically her fault that she’s dead.” He added on the last part with a smirk.

“That’s a lie. Xena cares about Gabrielle,” Amarice spat at him. “She would never do anything to harm her.”

“Ha! Xena, you really have kept her in the dark about what happened, haven’t you?” Ares laughed before crossing his arms. “Well, I think you should explain this part, Xena. I’m obviously not much of a story teller.” With that, he faded away into nothingness, leaving Xena with a very confused Amarice.

“What was he talking about, Xena?” she asked, refusing to believe what Ares had said.



“What did it sound like he was talking about? Because of me, Gabrielle’s dead. It’s exactly like he said,” Xena told her as she pulled a bedroll off of Argo and began laying it out on the ground.

“Xena, Gabrielle can’t be dead because of you. You haven’t seen her in three years!” Amarice reminded her.

“Exactly.” The cryptic answer only served to frustrate Amarice even more.

“Xena, will you please tell me how it’s your fault?” she asked as gently as she could. If Gabrielle had been able to get her to talk about things, she surely could. Xena was quiet for a moment, staring at Argo’s saddle before looking up at the starry sky.

“Perdicas, Gabrielle’s husband, beat her. She killed him. She got sentenced to death by the judge for murder,” Xena explained, somehow managing to keep her voice even.

“Xena, I don’t see how that’s your fault,” Amarice admitted quietly. The other woman’s gaze shifted from the sky and went to her instead.

“Amarice, if I had gone back to visit her like I said I would, none of this would have happened. I would have found out about Perdicas, and I could have gotten her out of that mess. Instead, I was a coward and never went back. I thought she was better off without me,” she explained. “Now she’s dead, and it’s my fault.”

“No! Xena, I’m not dead! I’m here!” Gabrielle yelled at the silvery pool as she watched the scene play out in front of her. She couldn’t believe what she had seen. That no good judge had lied to Xena, and then that bastard Ares had made her think it was her fault! “Xena, I’m still alive. None of this is your fault!” she shouted, desperately trying to get her friend to hear her. She couldn’t bear it if her friend went through life blaming herself for a death that hadn’t even happened. Before she could get through to her friend, however, Gabrielle felt herself waking up.

“No! She needs to know I’m still alive! She needs to know that she isn’t to blame for what happened!” Gabrielle shrieked as she fought to stay in her friend’s mindscape. Her efforts were futile, however, and she soon found herself blinking back into her own harsh reality. Mainly, a reality with curly blonde hair and a scar across her face.

“I’m glad you finally decided to wake up, little bard. You make too much noise when you’re asleep,” Callisto told her boredly as she stared into the beady eyes of a rat that she was holding up in front of her face. Gabrielle ignored her, however, as she got to her feet and began pacing around her cells. It was two days after the prison break, and the escape attempt by the prisoners had inspired Gabrielle to come up with a less dangerous way to escape. So far, she hadn’t been able to think of anything.

“Oh, come now Dearie. Don’t ignore me,” Callisto pouted, looking up from her rat. “I’ve been waiting all day for you to wake up.” Gabrielle stopped pacing and glared at the other blonde.

“Callisto, I need to get out of here. Excuse me for not wanting to put up with your sarcastic comments and insane rambling,” she spat back, taking Callisto by surprise

with her comment. The willowy blonde didn't show it, though.

"I'm hurt, Gabrielle. You can't possibly be thinking of escaping tonight. I mean, it is our first fight in the ring together. I thought that was going to be something special," Callisto reminded her, standing up and walking over to the pacing bard. She placed a slim hand on Gabrielle's shoulder and leaned forward, ignoring the fact that the other woman was trying to pull away from her. "I thought that our **relationship** was special," she purred before Gabrielle elbowed her in the stomach, successfully pushing her off of her.

"Let me get this through whatever sane part of your mind that you have left: There is nothing between us," the smaller blonde said before going back to her pacing. "As for the fights... I'll just have to deal with them as they come." Gabrielle sighed before sitting back down on the ground. Security had been increased since the escape attempt, making the fortress even more impenetrable. The former bard was beginning to lose hope of escaping.

"Well, you'd better start dealing now, little bard, because here comes the guards to take us down," Callisto commented, her voice tinged with excitement for the upcoming fight. "Did you know that because we're fighting together, we get to fight a bigger group? Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"Loads," Gabrielle replied sarcastically as one guard unlocked the gate and three more kept their crossbows pointed at them, just in case they tried to make a break for it. As they walked out of the cell, Callisto snapped at one of the guards, earning herself a smack in the back of the head for her stunt.

"Ooh... someone's going to be in trouble later." The sing-song voice that she used didn't hide the obvious threat in her words, and the guard visibly gulped. He quickly began going over a list of friends that could possibly take his shift later that night.

As for Gabrielle, she was silent. She just wanted to get this done and over with so that she could go back to thinking of some way to escape the prison. Even as they led her down the ramp, her eyes were scanning the canyon for some kind of weak point. She quickly became discouraged when she couldn't find one by the time they reached the weapons rack. Callisto immediately chose the sword, of course, and Gabrielle decided to go with the sais again. She was determined to learn how to control herself so that she didn't kill with them, no matter what it took. Before she had a chance to put the sais in their proper hiding spot, the guards shoved her and Callisto out into the arena.

"You ready?" Callisto asked, a surprisingly serious expression on her face. Gabrielle looked herself over for a moment before shaking her head.

"I'm never ready," she responded quietly as she took a defensive stance. The willowy blonde chanced a glance at her fighting partner before returning her attention to the other prisoners that were being led down the natural ramp.

"You'd better get ready, then, because if you become a liability, I'll kill you myself," she threatened. She could feel Gabrielle's stare after she said these words. "You don't really think I'd let someone else kill Xena's bard, do you?" she asked, a smirk twitching at the edge of her lips. Gabrielle had no time to think about that comment, because their opponents had just entered the arena.

There were four of them. The smallest one was probably a head taller than Gabrielle, and he was wielding a staff that was slightly taller than him. The other three were roughly the same height, and wielding various two handed weapons. Gabrielle was pretty sure she could make their size work against them, but the man with the staff could end up being a problem for her. She was giving no more time to think as the insane shriek from her fighting companion announced the start of the fight.

Gabrielle was immediately attacked by one of the larger men that chose to use a two-handed sword. Luckily, her quick reflexes kicked in, and she was able to bring her sais up and trap the blade between the handles of one. Not wasting anytime, she turned her wrist so that that her sai had a better grip on the blade of the sword before flipping backwards, kicking the man in the chin as she pulled the sword out of his hands.

*'How did I...?'* Before she could finish her thought, she remembered what happened the last time she questioned her abilities and got her mind back into the fight. Just in time, too, because another of the larger men had decided to come help his buddy out by wrapping his bulky arm around her neck. Before he could snap her neck, she stomped on his foot while elbowing him in the side. As soon as his grip loosened, she slipped from his grasp and took a defensive stance between her two opponents; not a good place for her to be. To make matters worse, her first opponent had gotten his sword back. Luckily for her, neither of her opponents were very smart, and they charged her. Thinking fast, she ducked and rolled out of the way of the swordsman's blade, causing it to plunge into her other opponent's stomach. Not taking the time to think about the death she had just caused, she quickly got to her feet and wound up behind the man with the sword, who was still shocked that he had killed his own friend. She didn't give him anymore time to think about it as she plunged one of her blades into his shoulder and used the other to knock him unconscious. Her own opponents taken care of, Gabrielle looked over to see how Callisto was doing.

The willowy blonde was, unsurprisingly, handling herself nicely. She never tried to disarm her opponents or knock them out. She went straight for the kill, which was made obvious by the large body of one of her opponents that had been trying to show off with an axe before she shoved her sword through him. She was now boredly playing with the man that wielded the staff, and the crowd was loving it. Callisto soon became too bored, however, and the man ended up getting the blade of her sword shoved through his face when she sped up her strikes and he couldn't keep up with her. Then it was over.

Just like the last times Gabrielle had fought, she was led to the weapons rack, where she placed her sais. Just like the last times, she was led back up to her cell. And just like the last times, she threw up. Fighting with a partner hadn't made it any easier on her. The only thing that had changed was that in the fight, she had been paired with a psycho.

A week after Gabrielle's first team fight with Callisto, Xena, Amarice, and Solan were finally riding back into Amphipolis. The whole ride back had been filled with an uncomfortable silence. Solan was still angry at Xena, who was still angry at Amarice, who was still feeling bad for announcing that Xena was Solan's mother. Also, any conversation that she attempted with the younger boy, even teasing, was met with uncharacteristic politeness that she wasn't used to from him.

Even though they didn't mention it, Cyrene and Nexa could feel the tension radiating off of the three travelers. After allowing the afternoon to rest from their travels, Cyrene made the decision to find out what had happened, and that meant going to her daughter. Which meant at least an hour of standing outside of Xena's bedroom with Nexa beside her as she tried to work up the nerve to go into her moody daughter's room.

"We go in?" Nexa asked, looking up at Cyrene curiously. The innkeeper returned the little girl's gaze before nodding her head.

"Yes. We're going in," she sighed before using her key to unlock Xena's room and opening the door. What she found was Xena laying on her bed and staring up at her ceiling. The sight reminded her of when her daughter was just a girl. She would often find her up in her room, staring at the ceiling whenever she felt lost, or angry, or depressed. Needless to say, her daughter ended up spending a lot of time in her room when she was in child. Cyrene wouldn't be surprised if she knew how many pieces of straw made up her ceiling.

"What is it, mother?" her daughter asked, keeping the emotion out of her voice. Cyrene blinked, having been lost in her memories.

"I could ask you the same question," she remarked as she stepped into her daughter's room and shut the door after Nexa followed her. The little girl immediately ran to Xena's bed and climbed up, quickly nestling herself close to the dark warrior.

"You're the mother that knows everything, so you tell me what's going on," Xena reminded her as she subconsciously wrapped her arm around the girl that had joined her on the bed. She sighed before shaking her head. "I really screwed up, mom." Cyrene could hear the effort it took her daughter to keep her voice level, and it even cracked at the end of the sentence.

"I'm sure you didn't screw up, honey. Just tell me what happened," she encouraged the distressed girl as she walked over and took a seat on the edge of the bed. Xena huffed in annoyance as her mother began stroking her head, but she didn't pull away from her touch.

"Amarice loves Solan; Solan hates me; and I practically killed my best friend," she explained. Cyrene's eyebrow rose at these statements as she watched over her daughter.

"I think you may need to explain a little bit more, Xena."

"Solan found out that I was his mother because Amarice blurted it out while proclaiming her love for him; and now he hates me for not telling him and letting him believe his mother was dead for the last fourteen years," she added on; and despite the pain that Cyrene could see in her daughter's eyes, Xena wouldn't allow herself to cry over what she had just told her mother.

"Go on..." Cyrene gently encouraged her, trying to get her to talk about the last thing she had mentioned.

"Mom, Gabrielle is dead. I didn't visit her like I told her I would, and she's dead because of it," she finally explained, the tears beginning to form in her eyes. Cyrene

was about to say something else, but when Xena mentioned Gabrielle's name, Nexa spoke before she could.

"Momma's not gone," the small girl said simply, looking up sincerely at Xena, who, in turn, looked at her mother in question. Cyrene shrugged, indicating that she had no idea what the girl was talking about.

"Nexa, we're not talking about your momma. We're talking about a friend of Xena's," Cyrene explained gently. The little girl was having none of it, though. How dare they try to tell her that her momma was gone!

"No! My Momma is Gab'yell! She tells stoy's about Xena!" she insisted, looking into eyes as blue as hers.

"Nexa... what happened to your Momma?" the warrior asked, now extremely interested in what the girl had to say.

"She told me she loved me and that she had to go. Momma gave me to the nice lady and asked her to take me to you. You found me and I went with you, just like she wanted," she said. "Momma's alive. I feel it."

Xena looked up at her own mother in disbelief. They had been holding onto Gabrielle's child for the past three weeks, and according to her, Gabrielle was still alive. Xena's mind was telling her that it was just the hopeful wishing of a three-year-old, but the feeling in her gut was telling her that Nexa was right. Gabrielle really was alive. Now, she just had to find her.

## **Part 13**

Solan stared out his window, watching the woman he now knew was his mother get ready to leave him once more. When he had first found out that he would be staying with Cyrene, he had wanted a room that looked towards the stables so that he could see when Xena was leaving; that way, he could hurry down and ask to be taken with her. He was beginning to regret that choice now that he knew Xena was his mother. When he watched her get ready to leave, it felt as if she was abandoning him all over again. Not that he didn't blame her. He hadn't exactly been polite to her on the way back from Volos.

"Serves her right. She shouldn't have lied to me," he said to himself, trying to reason his actions towards Xena while they were traveling back to Amphipolis. He was unaware that he had an audience of one standing in the doorway until the small voice spoke.

"Xena's going away again?" Solan turned around and was surprised to see Nexa standing in the doorway, her head tilted slightly to the side in question. Solan smiled slightly, before turning back to the window.

"Yes. She's leaving again," he answered her cheerfully, although it was obvious that he was trying to hide his true feelings. Nexa, like her mother, was extremely perceptive when it came to emotions, though. Using quick -but careful- steps, Nexa

covered the distance between her and the older boy in no time.

"You're sad," she pointed out as she stared up at his profile. Solan, startled by the voice that was so close to him, looked down. He found himself staring into questioning blue-green eyes. He sighed and walked away from the window, taking a seat on his bed instead.

"You're too smart for your own good, you know," he told her with a small smile as he motioned for her to come sit next to him on the bed. Nexa happily obliged and was soon jumping onto the vacant space next to the blonde boy.

"That's what Xena tells me," she said, pride filling her small voice, before getting back on topic. "Why are you sad, Solan? Xena's going to come back."

"How can you be so sure? What if she's just leaving us here so that she can go back to adventuring? She's obviously done it to me before." Solan didn't know how Nexa had done it, but the little girl had just gotten him to spill what had been bugging him in a matter of minutes.

"Because my Momma told me that Xena would never abandon someone she loves," Nexa said simply.

"Nexa, you hardly knew your... Momma... before she left you," Solan pointed out bitterly. As soon as the words were out, though, he felt ashamed of himself for bringing it up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like it sounded," he apologized, trying to prevent the sad look that was forming on Nexa's face from turning into actual tears. He wouldn't be able to look at himself if he made the small girl cry.

"My Momma didn't leave me because she wanted to," Nexa started, trying hard to keep her tears in check. She knew that Solan hadn't meant what he said, and that he'd feel bad if she started crying, but she still wanted to defend her mother's actions. "She was pwotecting me. Because she loves me. And Xena loves you." Solan stared down at Nexa, who had been successful in keeping her tears at bay, before standing back up again. An apologetic smile appeared on his face as he reached his hand down and grabbed her smaller one.

"Let's go say goodbye to Xena." Nexa nodded her agreement, and they both headed out of Solan's room. Although he wasn't quite sure that Nexa was right about his mother, he would try his best to believe it. Besides, when he had eavesdropped on his mother's conversation the night before, he had found out that Nexa's mother was Gabrielle; who else knew more about his mother than her?

Once they reached the stables, they saw Amarice talking with Xena. Solan immediately wanted to turn back. Instead, he just stopped walking and waited. He was still uncomfortable with the fact that she had shouted out her feelings towards him, and he wasn't sure how he was supposed to deal with them. Not wanting to get into an awkward situation with the older girl, Solan decided to wait until she was finished talking to Xena. He figured that it wouldn't hurt to listen in, though, once he heard his name mentioned in the conversation.

"I am really sorry about Solan, Xena. I know you didn't want him to find out like that," Amarice apologized, shifting uneasily as she spoke. When Xena looked at her, she immediately found something interesting about a spot on the ground and directed

her attention towards it.

“Amarice, I know you’re sorry. And I understand now that it was an accident that, although preventable, did happen,” Xena assured her as she finished adjusting Argo’s saddle. “I’d be more worried about your relationship with Solan right now. It’s not everyday that a fourteen year old boy hears someone yell they love him.” Amarice’s face colored slightly, although her auburn hair effectively hid the blush. Once she felt the blood leave her cheeks, she raised her gaze from the ground.

“I actually wanted to talk to you about that,” she admitted, her hand subconsciously reaching out and beginning to stroke Argo as a way to calm her nerves.

“Amarice, I’m not going to rip you limb from limb for feeling this way about Solan. Hurt him in anyway, however, and I’ll make you wish that was what I did to you,” she said as she began packing her things onto Argo. Amarice couldn’t tell if Xena’s threat was meant to be taken seriously, or as a joke. Either way, it didn’t matter. Solan obviously didn’t return her feelings.

“You won’t have to worry about me breaking his heart, Xena,” she muttered. “That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Amarice, that’s the second time you’ve said that. Please, get to the point,” the warrior princess told her, now facing the Amazon with her arms crossed. “Well?” she asked when Amarice still didn’t talk.

“I think I should leave for a little while,” the young woman finally said. Before Xena could object, she went on to explain. “Things are really awkward between Solan and me now, and I don’t know if I can stand seeing him shy away from me every time I try to talk to him,” she managed to get out before diverting her gaze back to the ground once more. “I just want things to be the way they were before,” she added on in a whisper. Xena looked at the young woman, who was now showing a vulnerable side that Xena had never seen before.

Gone was the cocky teenager that acted more grown up than she really was, and was sure she would never fall in love. In her place was a scared little girl that had learned the consequences of losing her heart to another, and just wanted things to go back to normal so that she could feel safe again. Xena knew from experience that things would never go back to being the same, and she told her younger friend as much.

“Listen to me, Amarice.” The dejected young woman tilted her head up and Xena found herself staring into watery eyes. “Don’t let this one experience keep you from loving again. You took a risk. Not on purpose, of course, but you did take it. Just because it didn’t pay off this time doesn’t mean it won’t pay off the next time you take one,” she told Amarice, who began to wipe her eyes so that her tears wouldn’t fall.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Xena,” she said with a sniffle before cracking a small smile. “When you find Gabrielle, you should take a risk of your own.” Xena simply rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, yeah... Get going, Amazon. You wouldn’t want anybody to see you going soft,” she told her. Amarice let out a choked laugh before leaning forward and wrapping Xena in a goodbye hug. Surprised, Xena awkwardly returned the hug before releasing Amarice.

"I'll be back once I have everything sorted out, I promise. You won't get rid of me that easily," she said with a smirk.

"And whoever said I wanted you to come back?" Xena teased her, earning a playful punch in the arm from Amarice.

"Someone has to help Gabrielle keep you out of trouble," the Amazon told her with a smirk before walking into the stables to get her own horse ready to go. Xena shook her head before turning back to Argo.

"Ready to go, girl?" she asked, stroking the golden mare's neck. Argo neighed, nodding her head up and down. "Me too," Xena chuckled. Before she could mount the horse though, Solan and Nexa appeared at her side.

"Am'wice is leaving, too?" Nexa asked, looking up at Xena with curious eyes. The warrior nodded before crouching down so that she was level with Nexa.

"Why don't you give me a hug and then go say goodbye to her?" she suggested. Nexa smiled brightly before wrapping her small arms around Xena's neck. Xena returned the hug before sending Nexa on her way to say goodbye to Amarice. Once the girl was gone, Xena stood back up and turned her attention on Solan.

"So... you're both leaving?" Solan asked, keeping his tone as neutral as he could. The last thing he wanted was Xena knowing that he had begun to understand why she had done the things she did.

"Yeah." Xena studied Solan's expression, trying to figure out what was going through her son's head. It was obvious that he was her offspring, however, when she realized that there was no way she could figure out what he was thinking. Long moments ticked by before Solan spoke again.

"Be careful, okay? I don't want to lose my mother all over again," he said. He had planned on just walking away after he told her that, but something rooted him to the spot. Before he knew it, Xena placed a hand on his shoulder and was giving him a half smile. He could tell that she wanted to pull him into a hug, but the stoic warrior persona wouldn't allow her to do something like that. Saving her the trouble, Solan moved forward and gave Xena a quick hug before pulling away. The moment between the mother and son was ruined, however, when they heard Amarice shriek.

"Xena! Why did you send Nexa in here to kick me?!" Amarice asked as she carried the blonde child out. Nexa had a grin on her face as the Amazon carried her out.

"I sent her in there to tell you goodbye," Xena said, trying hard to keep a straight face. Amarice rolled her eyes before handing the girl over to Xena.

"You know her goodbyes involve kicking me," she growled before she noticed Solan. "Well uh... I should be going. I'll see you around, Xena," she excused herself before going back into the stables and mounting Ice. It wasn't long before she was exiting the stables and heading away from Amphipolis. Xena watched her as she left, knowing that she would see the girl again before she knew it.

After sending Solan and Nexa back to the inn and saying goodbye to her mother, Xena was back on the road again. It was strange traveling by herself after having a



companion for so long. At the same time, though, it was nice to have some space. At least, that's how she felt the first day traveling by herself. By noon of her second day on the road, Xena couldn't wait to be with Gabrielle again. By the time she reached Volos, she had taken to having entire conversations with Argo, just like she used to do.

A small smile appeared on her face as she entered the town, but it was quickly replaced by a cool mask. Although she was anxious to find out where Gabrielle had been taken, a feeling in her gut was telling the warrior that something was wrong. The feeling was confirmed when she saw a circle of people huddled together in the center of the town.

"What's going on?" she asked as she pushed her way through the crowd. No one answered her, but Xena was able to follow their gaze to the ground once she made her way to the front of the crowd. What she saw was enough to dash almost any hope of her ever finding Gabrielle.

Lying in the middle of the crowd, in a pool of his own blood, was the arrogant judge that Xena had spoken with two weeks before. The warrior could have sworn she felt her heart stop during the long seconds that she stared at the dead body that had held all her hope of finding Gabrielle. Xena found herself having to blink back tears of frustration as her gaze joined those of the townspeople. She had been so close to being reunited with her friend, just to have the hope ripped out of her hands once more.

Refusing to allow herself to become too emotional, Xena pulled away from the crowd and began investigating the area. Perhaps there was some clue that would help her find the murderer.

"Miss? What are you doing?" one of the men asked. Xena didn't even bother to glance back at the group of people when she answered.

"I'm trying to figure out who killed your judge. In case you didn't know, people usually don't just show up in a pool of their own blood by themselves." The sarcastic answer was enough to rile a few of the townspeople up.

"Look lady. This is our problem. We'll deal with it ourselves," a man told her. Xena ignored him as she continued to look for anything that could assist her. "Hey!" the man objected when she turned over the judge's body. "This is none of your business, warrior, so I suggest you get out of here." Before he could say another word, Xena's chakram was pressed to his throat.

"This man knew where I could find my friend, which makes it my business. So I suggest that you be quiet before I make you lose your voice. Permanently," she growled at him threateningly, pressing the edge of her chakram into his neck. The man brought up his hands in surrender, knowing that he was no match for the woman. Satisfied with his surrender, Xena removed the chakram from his throat and placed it back in its holster. Without another word, she left the scene. No one ever saw her place a chain necklace in her armor, right next to her breast dagger.

Once she was sure she was alone in the forest, Xena pulled the chain out from between her breasts and began examining the pendant that dangled from it. It was two swords crossed over a shield. She knew who it belonged to almost immediately.

“Ares...” she growled before pocketing the chain necklace. “Ares, you bastard! You get your ass down here, right now!” she called up to the Heavens. She was determined to get to the bottom of this before the day was over.

“No need to shout, Xena. My hearing’s just fine,” a familiar voice said from behind her. A low chuckle erupted from the God of War’s throat as he lowered his head beside Xena’s ear and began speaking to her. “Now what is it you wanted, my Warrior Princess?” Xena jerked herself away from him and turned around.

“We both know damn well what I want, Ares,” she told him as she crossed her arms and glared at him.

“Ah ah ah. You only *think* you know what you want,” Ares tsk’d as he began circling her. “You *think* you want to find your little blonde bard.”

“And I suppose you’re going to tell me what I really want?” she asked, keeping her eyes on him as he circled her like he was some kind of predatory animal.

“That’s what I always liked about you. You’re able to predict almost any move your opponent makes,” he told her before drawing his sword and lunging at her. At the same time, Xena drew her own and blocked the attack. They stood there, locked in place. “See what I mean?” he asked with a chuckle.

“I hate to disappoint you Ares, but you’re extremely predictable,” she said before kicking him away from her. “Now tell me. Why did you have someone kill the judge? Afraid I was going to find out where Gabrielle is?” she asked, keeping her guard up.

“Oh Xena. You have such a one track mind. Is Gabrielle all you think about?” Not waiting for a response, he flipped over Xena and brought his sword down on her neck. Or at least, where her neck had been. Metal hit metal as Xena blocked the attack and spun around so that she was facing Ares.

“I wouldn’t be talking, Ares. I seem to be the only one you think about,” she pointed out. “At least I have a chance with Gabrielle.”

“Oh, now that’s just hitting beneath the belt.”

“No. *This* is hitting beneath the belt.” Before he could move, Xena brought her foot up in a kick, landing a blow to a very sensitive part of the male anatomy. Although he couldn’t feel the actual pain, the shock of actually being kicked there made Ares back off a few paces. “Now then, Ares... tell me what I want to know. Where is Gabrielle?”

“Like I said. One track mind,” he said as he sheathed his sword. There had been enough playtime, and if his plan worked, there’d be more than enough time later to play again.

“Tell me, Ares!” Xena shouted at him, beginning to get impatient. “Where is Gabrielle, and why have you been meddling in our lives?”

“Oh, so now I’ve been ‘meddling’ in your lives?” he asked, making imaginary quotation marks around the word ‘meddling’.

“Ares!”

“Whoa! Now there’s that fire I’ve been missing, Xena,” he exclaimed with a smirk.

“Maybe if I wait long enough to answer, you’ll use it for me, instead of against me. What do you say Xena?” Xena’s eyes narrowed in anger.

“What makes you think I would ever want to join you?” she asked, her voice dangerously low. Ares ignored the threat in her voice, calmly crossing his arms before answering.

“Information. You head my army, and I make sure you find your little blonde friend in no time,” he offered.

“So that’s what this has all been about. You did all this just to get me on your side. Is that it?”

“Pretty much, yes.”

“You are an idiot. Gabrielle would never want me to go back to what I used to be just to find her,” she told him.

“You’re Gabrielle is dead, Xena. Who knows what this new Gabrielle wants,” he chuckled before disappearing into thin air, ignoring Xena’s angry yell as she grabbed her chakram and threw it where he used to be. *‘It’s good to be a God.’*

“You miserable bastard! Get back here!” Xena called after Ares as she pulled her chakram out of the tree it had become embedded in. When it became clear that he wouldn’t be coming back, she punched the tree in frustration. She could feel tears stinging the back of her eyes once more, but she refused to cry. Now was not the time to let her emotions get the better of her. Now was the time to find her friend. And as much as she hated to ask for it, Xena was going to need some help.

After leaving the woods and going back to the town, Xena found Argo and began her journey back to Amphipolis. A plan was forming in her head as she rode. She was going to find Gabrielle without Ares, no matter how long it took. The words that Ares had spoken, however, had instilled a sense of urgency in her. Something told her that she would have to find Gabrielle soon, or she would lose her bard completely.

A week after leaving Volos, Xena was back in Amphipolis; much to Cyrene’s surprise.

“Xena, I didn’t expect you to be back so soon,” her mother greeted her when she walked into the tavern.

“Me neither. Something happened, though, so I’m back,” Xena told her. “Mother, when does the next messenger come through here?” she asked suddenly.

“Let’s see... three days from now, I believe,” Cyrene said. “Xena, what happened? Where’s Gabrielle?”

“That’s exactly what I want to know, Mother,” Xena replied as she began pacing the floor, trying to think. “Unfortunately, I’m going to need some help if I ever want to find out.”

“Xena, will you stop pacing for a moment and just tell me what happened in Volos?” Cyrene asked, blocking the path that Xena had been walking back and forth over. Xena was quiet for a moment as she stared down at her mother while trying to keep

her stoic warrior mask on, but Cyrene could see right through it; right down to the pain in Xena's core.

"The judge was killed before I could get there, Mother, and I have no idea where Gabrielle is," she explained once she was sure she could talk without losing her composure.

"Oh Xena..." Cyrene said before placing a comforting hand on her daughter's cheek. "I'm so sorry." Before she knew it, the tavern keeper was holding on to a silently crying warrior princess. A warrior princess that she hadn't seen cry since she was twelve. In fact, if it hadn't been for the wetness on her shoulder, she wouldn't have known Xena was crying. As she ran her hand in circles on Xena's back, she began to whisper comforting words into her daughter's ear. "You'll find her, Xena. I believe in you."

## Part 14

As the sun began to sink below the horizon, Lila found the wagon pulling into Amphipolis once more. It had been at least a month since she had heard from Xena when a messenger from Cyrene's tavern came bearing a message from the warrior princess a few days ago. Now, the warrior princess needed her to come back to Amphipolis. Lila had been fearing the worst the entire trip.

Xena had told her that Potidaea would be her first stop if she found Gabrielle. Obviously, that hadn't happened; and now Xena needed to tell her something that she didn't want her parents to hear.

"Lila, stop fidgeting. I'm sure what Xena has to say will be good news." The feel of her husband's hand resting on her forearm made Lila come out of her melancholy thoughts.

"I hope you're right, Leo," she said with a sigh before a scowl appeared on her face. "I'm not fidgeting!"

"What do you call it, then?" Lila looked down at her hands and discovered that she really had been fidgeting. A slight pout appeared on her face as she turned her head and watched the small shops go by. "That's what I thought," Leo chuckled. The rest of the ride went by in silence. Luckily, they were soon pulling in front of Cyrene's tavern, where they would be meeting Xena.

"Ready?" Leo asked, looking over at his wife. Lila was quiet for a moment, her mind going through a whirlwind. Did she really want to know what Xena had to tell her? She didn't know if she'd be able to handle it if the news was anything but good. She felt her husband place his larger hand over hers and give a reassuring squeeze. Lila closed her eyes and came to a decision.

*'Gabrielle's my sister. I deserve to know what's going on, even if it's not what I expected.'* Taking a deep breath, Lila opened her eyes again and nodded her head. "As ready as I'll ever be," she told him before getting down from the wagon. He was by her side in no time, and she found her hand subconsciously slipping into his for comfort.

Once she had mentally prepared herself, Lila led the way into the tavern with her head held high.

It took a few moments for the busy inn-keeper to notice the familiar couple that walked into the tavern, but she greeted them with a friendly smile when she finally saw them. Once she was finished dealing with an angry customer, she quickly approached them and wrapped the two friends in a hug.

"It's good to see you so soon. Xena should be back in a moment," the older woman told them as she pulled out of the hug, "Two friends of Xena's showed up rather unexpectedly, and she had to go talk with one them. Or at one of them. Whatever it is my daughter prefers to do when people don't listen to her." Cyrene shook her head slightly when she said the last part.

"We understand. Do you want us to go put our stuff up in the room we stayed in last time?" Leo asked when it became apparent that Lila wasn't going to say anything.

"I had the room reserved specifically for you two," Cyrene replied with a smile before her attention was brought to one of the waitresses, who was holding a mug of ale over one of the patrons that had been giving her a hard time. "Tara! Don't you even think about it!" The teenager's head shot up and looked over at the stern inn-keeper, who was now tapping her foot. Giving Cyrene a sheepish smile, Tara brought the mug down to her side once more and walked away to serve more of the hungry customers. "I don't know what I'm going to do with her. It's like trying to raise another Xena," Cyrene admitted as she shook her head.

"I'm sure she'll turn out alright then," Leo told her with a smile before leading his wife to the staircase and ascending the steps. Soon, the couple was in the familiar room that they had been allowed to stay in the first time they came to Amphipolis to see Xena.

"Leo, I'm not sure if I can do this. What if... What if something horrible has happened to Gabrielle?" Lila sat down on the bed and wrapped her arms around herself. Leo came and sat beside her, wrapping his own arms around her.

"Lila, you and I both know that you'll listen to what Xena has to say. If something bad did happen, it's better for us to know than be left in the dark," Leo reminded her, gently kissing the back of her head in reassurance. He felt Lila sigh before resting her head on his chest.

"If you say so," she said sadly, closing her eyes in an attempt to bring back all the resolve that she had had when she got off the wagon. Her eyes snapped open, however, when she heard yelling coming from outside. Pulling away from her husband, the dark haired girl got up from the bed and walked over to the window. From her vantage point, she could see the familiar warrior princess, but it was impossible to see who she was yelling at.

"For the last time, no. Absolutely not!" The dark haired warrior was putting her foot down. Finding Gabrielle should be her problem, not everyone else's! When her friend merely smirked at her, she continued her rant, but in a much quieter voice. She had seen Lila watching her from her window, and she didn't want the girl to find out because she couldn't control her volume. "I appreciate the offer, I really do, but this is my problem. You don't have to do this."

"Xena, Gabrielle is my friend, too," the sandy haired demigod reminded her. "Iolaus and I truly want to help." The large man crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for Xena to respond. "Face it, Xena. You're good, but even the best need help sometimes," he pointed out.

"How did you even find out?" she asked, more interested in finding out how Hercules had found out what she was going to do before she even knew what she was going to do than she was in conceding to his point.

"Let's just say that not all Gods are like Ares," he said with a shrug.

"I don't think I need anymore godly interference," Xena growled in response.

"She only wants to help you and Gabrielle. Even if her reasoning is a little... self-centered." He muttered the last part to himself as he remembered his half-sister's attitude, and the reasons she had for telling him about the problem between Xena and Gabrielle. An angry fire in Xena's icy eyes flared at the information.

"Are you telling me the goddess of *love* is the one that wants to help me take on Ares? Please tell me you're joking."

"She may seem a little... egocentric," Xena snorted at this, earning a look from Hercules, "but Iolaus has been getting close to her, and I believe him when he says there's more to her than she wants people to believe." Xena still had a look of disbelief on her face, so Hercules tried a new tactic. "She sent me to you, didn't she?"

"If she really wanted to help, she'd use those godly powers of hers to bring Gabrielle back to me," Xena argued as a last defense.

"Like you said: She's the goddess of love. Do you really think Aphrodite would stand a chance against Ares if he caught her interfering in his plans to get you back on his side?" Hercules pointed out. Xena was silent, not wanting to admit that her friend was right.

"Fine," she finally said before walking away. The demigod smiled to himself as he followed after her, glad that he had been able to get Xena to see things his way. He knew that Xena knew he was right from the very beginning. She was just too stubborn to ask for help or receive it without a fuss.

"Hercules, I do believe that your friend here may be one of my favorite patrons now," Cyrene called out from the bar when they entered the tavern, nodding towards the table that Iolaus occupied. "Oh, Xena!" The warrior stopped her trek over to the table with Hercules and turned around. "Lila and Leo arrived not too long ago. They're getting settled upstairs if you want to talk to them now."

"I'll be right back, Hercules." The large man waved her off before taking a seat at the table with Iolaus, who was currently trying to fit all of Cyrene's food into his stomach in one night.

Not wanting to keep Lila waiting any longer, Xena took the stairs two at a time. She wasn't exactly sure how she was going to tell Lila what she had learned, but she knew the girl had to find out someday. Once she reached the top of the stairs, Xena made her way to Lila's room. She stood outside of it for a moment, trying to collect her

thoughts and think of a way to break the news to her friend's younger sister. As ready as she could be, she opened the door.

"Lila, there's something I need to tell you about your sister," she said, shutting the door behind her as she began to reveal what had happened to Gabrielle.

After many interruptions and tears on Lila's part, Xena was finally able to finish the story an hour later. Leo sat holding his crying wife, comforting her the best he could, while Xena tried to tell her that she would do everything she could, and possibly a few things she couldn't, just to get Gabrielle back. Lila couldn't be calmed down, though.

"Why did we have to push her so hard into marrying him?" Lila asked through her tears, her voice muffled by Leo's shoulder. "Why didn't we see what he was really like?" Not having the answers to his wife's questions, Leo held his wife while Xena tried her best to pull the young woman out of her guilt.

"Lila, no one knew what Perdicas was like. Even I didn't, and I'm an expert at judging hostility," she reasoned. "He had everyone fooled. And even though we can't do anything about that now, we can try our best to save Gabrielle." Lila sniffled as she pulled her dark head away from Leo's shoulder and wiped her tears on the sleeve of her dress.

"She shouldn't **have** to be saved. She shouldn't even be gone!" Lila pointed out angrily, although she missed the flicker of guilt across Xena's face. The dark-haired young woman was correct; Gabrielle shouldn't have been out of her life. If she had just paid one visit to their home, Xena would have made sure that Gabrielle never went missing. But, she had chickened out each time she decided to go. Each time she decided to put off going was another day that Gabrielle could have been beaten.

"I know she *shouldn't* be gone, Lila, but she is. You're going to have to deal with it until we find her again. So either you quit playing the blame game and pinning it all on yourself and help find her, or go back to Potidaea with Leo and forget that any of this ever happened," Xena told her, deciding that tough love was about to become a familiar concept to Gabrielle's sister.

"You don't even know if she really is alive. You're practically basing the idea on words of her three year old daughter, and there's the possibility that she isn't even Gabrielle's daughter!" Lila countered.

"She is alive, Lila. Otherwise, Ares wouldn't have tried to cut a deal with me." Xena pinched the bridge of her nose, fighting off the headache that was beginning to form. Repeating what had happened to Gabrielle had been emotionally draining, and Lila's yelling wasn't helping. She was glad she had decided to send Nexa and Solan outside to play earlier. She didn't need Nexa to hear Lila doubting that she was Gabrielle's daughter. She had a feeling the little girl would be upset if she did.

"And how are you going to find her? Just wander around Greece until you find some kind of clue?"

"Lila, I think maybe you should wait until you've calmed down a little before asking Xena all these questions," Leo suggested, beginning to rub her shoulders slightly in an attempt to calm her down. The younger woman was about to object, but the hands gently massaging her shoulders were producing the desired effect. "Xena, maybe you

should come back in a little while. She should be ready to act civil by then," he whispered as Lila's eyes began to close. Xena nodded and left the room, giving Lila the time to catch up on some much needed rest. It was obvious that the three days of worrying while traveling to Amphipolis, and then learning about her sister, had been taxing on the dark haired young woman.

After quietly closing the door, Xena headed back down stairs. The conversation with Lila had actually gone much better than she thought it would, but she still wished she hadn't been the one to upset Gabrielle's little sister so much.

*'If he wanted to help so much, Hercules could have done that part,'* Xena thought to herself as she reached the base of the stairs, even though she knew it had been better that she told Lila.

"So how did it go?" Hercules asked when his dark friend joined him and Iolaus at the table.

"I just told Lila that her sister was beaten by the husband they all wanted her to marry, killed him, and that I have no idea where she is. How do you think it went?" Xena asked coldly. Iolaus, who had been reaching for a piece of meat off of Hercules' plate, stopped mid-reach at the tone in Xena's voice. For a moment, it seemed like all of the noise in the tavern died. Seconds later, the activity picked back up and Iolaus was slowly pulling his hand back away from Hercules' plate.

"Xena, things are going to turn out just fine. I doubt that Gabrielle will be lost to us for very long with you out there searching for her," her friend assured her as he placed a large hand over hers, quickly pulling back when she gave him a cold look. She didn't want to be comforted right now. She didn't even want to be in the tavern; she wanted to be out looking for Gabrielle. And if it weren't for Lila, that's exactly what she would be doing.

"Look Hercules... I know you're just trying to help, but leave me alone for awhile, okay? I'll be alright," she told him as she got up from the table. She knew what she needed, and that was a good work out. Leaving her two friends behind, Xena left the tavern and headed for the outskirts of the small city. She knew of a spot in the line of trees that protected Amphipolis that would be a good spot to get rid of the stress that had been weighing down on her.

It wasn't long before she was entering the clearing that she used to visit when she was younger. Even before she started using a sword, the small space in the woods provided her a sanctuary. As she closed her eyes, memories of running to the woods whenever she got into a fight with her mother or older brother began flooding into her head. Even Lyceus hadn't known about the clearing.

Xena opened her eyes, ending the memories, before reaching back and pulling her sword out of its sheath. Her icy blue eyes reflected off the sharp blade as she got into a ready stance. Without a sound, she began fighting the imaginary opponent she created in her mind. The warrior princess lost track of the time as the fight between her invisible opponent continued. As the deadly dance between her and the air progressed into the night, the only audible sound was coming from the attacks she made on her imaginary enemy. By the time Xena finished, sweat matted her hair to the side of her face.



Exhausted, she sank to the ground, dropping her sword to the ground beside her. It had been a long time since she had worked herself that hard during drills, and the outlet had allowed her to take her frustration out on something other than those close to her.

“Xena?” The tentative, boyish voice made Xena turn her head. Even though the sky had darkened long ago, it was easy for Xena to make out Solan’s fair hair coming towards her. “Xena, are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Solan. How long have you been standing over there?”

“Nexa and I saw you on our way back from the tree you told us about. I sent Nexa back to grandmother’s and decided to follow you,” he told her as he sat down beside her. She gave him a questioning look, but then remembered that he couldn’t see as well as she could.

“Why?”

“I guess I was a little worried,” he admitted sheepishly. Xena found that hard to believe, considering that he had been so angry with her for not telling him who she was. She told him as much. “I may be... upset with you... but I can still worry, can’t I?” he told her. Xena chuckled in amusement. “What’s so funny?”

“I thought worrying was supposed to be my job,” she told him.

“Hasn’t anyone told you that you’ve been working too hard lately? I think maybe it’s time someone showed how worried they were about you for a change,” he responded with a smirk.

“Good to know you’re looking out for me, even when you’re... upset with me,” she said.

“Me?! Oh no. I was talking about Grandmother,” Solan said jokingly, flashing her a smile before standing up again.

“Of course you were.” Xena got to her feet as well, returning her son’s grin with a hesitant smile of her own as she picked up her sword and put it away. Although things weren’t perfect between them, it was nice to know that her son didn’t hate her. Thinking back on the conversations that she heard him have with Nexa lately, she realized it was nice to know that he was trying to figure out her reasoning for her actions, too. *‘It may take a while, but I may end up having both Gabrielle and Solan in my life,’* she thought as she led the way back to the city.

When they got back to Cyrene’s tavern, her mother told Xena that Leo had been down to tell her that Lila had calmed down significantly. Deciding she should get it done and over with, the warrior princess left Solan to look after Nexa while she went upstairs to talk to Gabrielle’s sister once more.

Passing the door to Hercules’, and then Iolaus’ room, Xena came to Lila’s and Leo’s. Once again she had to mentally prepare herself to face the younger woman. Taking a deep breath, Xena went into the room and shut the door behind her, scaring Lila, who was staring out the window once more.

“Oh, Xena! You’re back. Look, I’m sorry about how I acted earlier,” the younger

woman started to apologize before Xena held up a hand.

“Lila, there’s no need to apologize. Gabrielle’s your sister and you love her very much. I actually expected things to go much worse,” Xena assured her before looking around. There was something missing from the room that she couldn’t place for a moment. “Where’s Leo?”

“Well, after he talked to your mother, he decided to spend some time with those friends of yours. Speaking of friends, where’s Amarice? I’m not saying that I miss her company or anything, but isn’t she supposed to be your sidekick or something?” Xena watched in amusement as Lila paced around the room, straightening certain things out, as she talked. No doubt she was trying to stay in the calm state she was in by distracting herself.

“Amarice decided she needed a little time to herself so she could work a few things out,” Xena said in response to her question as she watched Lila straighten out the blanket on the bed. The younger woman paused for a moment before letting out a frustrated sound.

“Look Xena, I just need to know... How are you going to find Gabrielle?” she finally asked, unable to refrain from asking any longer.

“I have many skills, Lila. I also have a few good friends that are willing to help find her,” Xena told her. “Did you know that even the mighty Hercules wants to help find your sister?” She watched as Lila’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You mean that’s who Leo’s...?” Xena nodded, guessing what Lila’s question was. The surprise only lasted for a few moments, however, and was soon replaced by the familiar discouraged expression that had been on her face since she was called to Amphipolis. “What if no one can find her?”

“Then I go to plan Beta,” Xena told her.

“What’s plan Beta?” Lila asked curiously. By the look in Xena’s eyes, she didn’t think she’d like it.

“Ares,” Xena said simply. That was all she needed to say for Lila to see Xena’s true feelings for her older sister.

“You love her... don’t you?” A sad smile appeared on Lila’s face when Xena didn’t answer her. “Xena, she wouldn’t want you to give up everything you’ve worked at for her. No matter how much has happened to her, I know that Gabrielle wouldn’t want you to go back to Ares because of her. And as much I want to find her, I can’t ask you to do something like that.”

“I guess we’ll just have to find her then, won’t we?” Xena said before leaving Lila alone in her room until Leo came back.

Later that night, Xena’s eyes shot open at the sound of her door opening. Her body tensed as she stretched her senses in an attempt to figure out where the intruder was. Xena relaxed, however, when she heard a small snuffle before feeling the bed move at the new weight crawling up beside her. Even though it didn’t happen very often, Xena always knew when it was Nexa that was joining her.

“What has you up at this hour, Little One?” she asked in a quiet voice, her internal clock telling her that there was still a few hours until the sun even came up.

“Scared,” said the little girl as she crawled under the covers. Xena’s arm instinctively curled around the small child as Nexa got comfortable. “Mama getted a booboo.” Nexa sniffled once more as she wiped her eyes. Unsure of what to say, Xena pulled the girl closer and kissed the top of her head.

“Don’t worry, Nexa. We’ll get your Mama back as soon as we can, and then you can help fix all of her boobooos,” she promised, not only to Nexa, but to herself as well.

“Kay, Xena.” The small girl’s voice was a bit steadier now that she had been assured that she could help her Mama. “Love you,” she muttered sleepily before drifting back into Morpheus’ realm, leaving Xena to ponder what she had said.

At first, she thought that Nexa had only been having bad dreams about what it had been like before she came to Amphipolis, when she lived with Gabrielle and Perdicas. There was something telling her that there was more to it, though. It seemed like every fiber in her body was trying to tell her that Nexa’s dreams and Gabrielle were connected somehow, but the thought was almost too ridiculous for Xena to consider it. Almost. Tucking the thought in the back of her mind, Xena closed her eyes, wondering just what Nexa had seen that had scared the little girl enough to come sneaking into her room.

“I can’t believe you let that attack get through,” Callisto snickered, leaning forward and examining the bandage around Gabrielle’s middle. The smaller blonde laying on her back couldn’t help but glare at the insane woman before returning her attention back up to the roof of her rocky cell.

“Ouch!” she yelped when she felt pressure placed on the wound in her side. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked, turning her head to face Callisto once more.

“Making sure you don’t drift off to sleep,” the willowy blonde explained, attempting to look innocent and failing miserably.

“Callisto, it’s a side wound, not a concussion,” Gabrielle pointed out, feeling like she was talking to a child.

“I know that. I’m not an idiot, as much as you like to think I am,” Callisto told her. “You just make too much noise when you sleep. Not that you don’t make a lot of noise when you’re awake.” Gabrielle took a deep breath, trying not to lose her temper since she knew that would just make Callisto happier.

“I don’t think you’re an idiot. Just crazy,” she said, adding the last part on in a whisper. “And what do you mean I make too much noise when I sleep?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“Most people, sane or not, don’t scream when they’re sleeping,” Callisto told her before pressing on the wound again.

“Ouch! Will you cut it out?! I’m not going to sleep any time soon! It hurts enough as it is without you touching it,” Gabrielle snapped at her.

“It wouldn’t hurt if you hadn’t let that little runt with the knife get in between us,”

Callisto told her with a chuckle. Gabrielle shot her a dirty look from her position on the floor.

"Maybe if you had offered a little more help, instead of taking the other guy's fingers off one by one, I wouldn't have gotten hit," she reminded the willowy blonde. She regretted even thinking about the torture that Callisto had made one of the other men go through when she felt her stomach flip. Stifling a groan, she scooted a little further from the insane woman.

"Oh, but it was so much fun. You should have seen the look on his face," the willowy blonde said almost cheerfully.

"I did see the look on his face. That's exactly why his partner's dagger got through," Gabrielle pointed out. "And I'd appreciate it if you would stop talking about it like it was some kind of game. That was another man out there, and you tortured him before you killed him!" Callisto rolled her eyes at Gabrielle's words.

"Oh, like you should really be talking right now." Callisto sat back on her haunches, boredly examining her finger nails. "Get off that high horse of yours before you fall off. You're probably the biggest hypocrite I know, besides Xena. That must have rubbed off on you. Obviously her fighting skills didn't."

"Excuse me?" Gabrielle asked, glancing over to where Callisto was sitting as she waited for an explanation.

"You heard me, little bard. You may be the worst murderer I've ever seen, but you're a murderer all the same," Callisto said as she continued to stare at her hands. "So before you go preaching to me about my means of entertainment, think about where you are."

"I am not a murderer," she protested, although lately she had begun to suspect that Callisto was right. "At least, I don't kill for fun."

"Then why do you kill, little bard? Hoping you'll stay alive long enough to see Xena again?" The willowy blonde's gaze jerked up from her hands, and Gabrielle found herself staring into angry brown eyes before Callisto regained her composure. "What makes you think she's even coming for you? She certainly didn't save you from whoever it was that put you in here," she said calmly as she looked back down at her nails. "Hm... You have more light over there. Did I get all the blood out from underneath my nails?" she asked, splaying her fingers out so Gabrielle could see better in the moonlight. The former bard ignored the subject change and sat up.

"You don't know anything about Xena. All you know is that you want to kill her for something that isn't her fault," Gabrielle said, gritting her teeth against the pain in her side as she got to her feet. Chocolate brown eyes followed her.

"I suppose you think you know all there is to know about her, then?" Callisto asked sarcastically. "Well then tell me, little bard from Potidaea. Tell me about Xena. What's so great about your warrior princess that I can't see, besides the fact that she's a murderer like you?"

"She's not a murderer, you are!" Gabrielle yelled angrily.

"Ah ah ah, Gabrielle. Xena created me when **she** murdered my family," Callisto

reminded her as she stood up.

"I told you before that what happened wasn't Xena's fault. She lives with the guilt from Cirra every day."

"Good. That's the way it should be," Callisto said as she crossed the cell and stood toe-to-toe with the former Amazon. "Murderers should have to live with the blood on their hands."

And what about the blood on your hands, Callisto?" Gabrielle asked quietly, causing the willowy blonde to look at her with a puzzled expression. "In your quest for revenge, you turned into the very person you hate. You've probably killed just as many as Xena has," she explained. Callisto let out a short laugh before placing a bony hand on the smaller blonde's shoulder. Gabrielle tried to pull away, but Callisto's grip was surprisingly strong.

"All of the blood that I've spilled is on Xena's hands. If she hadn't destroyed Cirra, none of this would have happened."

"And if you hadn't chosen the path of revenge, you never would have become a murderer," Gabrielle told her sadly before managing to pull herself away from the insane woman. As she painfully made her way to the bars of the cell, which was now becoming her favorite spot in the cell, Gabrielle had a lot more on her mind than she did when the day first started. Although she didn't want to admit it, some of the things Callisto said had gotten to her.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the cell, Callisto was shooing away her rat friends. For once, she wasn't in the mood to talk to them. She didn't want to admit it, but the last thing that Gabrielle had said to her really got her thinking. She hated thinking.

## Part 15

"How many times do I have to tell you, little bard? You have to stay three steps ahead of your opponent if you want to ever see your precious Xena again." Gabrielle glared at the woman across from her as she wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. She wasn't surprised to see blood when she pulled her hand away. There was always some part of her that ended up bleeding after her now daily fighting sessions with Callisto. And even though she had been stuck in this prison for four months now, she still wasn't a match for the insane blonde when they sparred.

She couldn't remember exactly when the fighting lessons had started, but Gabrielle had a feeling that it was soon after they had had their argument about who was to be blamed for Callisto's actions.

*Gabrielle groaned as she felt herself being jostled awake by her companion. The wound in her side still hurt from her previous fight. She rolled over onto her uninjured side, hoping it would make the other woman stop shaking her.*

*"What do you want?" she finally asked when it became apparent that Callisto wasn't going to stop bugging her any time soon. When all that greeted her was silence, she*

*rolled back onto her back and opened her eyes. Now familiar brown eyes bore into her green ones, and she couldn't help feeling a bit nervous. Even though she had already been sharing a cell with Callisto for a month, she always kept in mind that Xena was her worst enemy, and she would do anything to get back at the warrior princess.*

*"You know exactly what I want," Callisto growled before reaching out and caressing Gabrielle's cheek. The former bard jerked her head away and glared at the willowy blonde. "Unfortunately, you won't give me what I really want right now," she continued. "And if you don't learn to fight, I won't get the chance to kill you in front of Xena."*

*"Is there a point to this conversation?" Gabrielle asked in a low voice, losing her patience with her cellmate.*

*"Isn't there always a point to our conversations?" Callisto responded with a smirk.*

*No,' Gabrielle thought before she was suddenly pulled up with the other woman. She yelped when Callisto shoved her into the cell bars, ignoring the threats coming from the guards.*

*"Come on, little bard. Show me what Xena taught you," the crazy blonde told her with a sneer, pressing on her harder. Trying not to think about how much stronger Callisto was, Gabrielle tried to push the other woman off her. Callisto was able to keep a hold on her, though, and suddenly Gabrielle felt like she was back with Perdicas again. With a desperate cry, she managed to slip out from under Callisto's hands and duck under her arms.*

*"What are you doing?!" Gabrielle asked, her voice tinged with anger and a little bit of fear. She received her answer in the form of a fist aimed at her wounded side. She clumsily jumped back, losing her balance and falling back to the ground. Callisto used the opportunity to jump on top of her, holding Gabrielle's shoulders down and head-butting the bard in the face. Gabrielle saw stars before she looked up into angry brown eyes.*

*"No wonder Xena never came to your rescue. With fighting skills like yours, you're just a liability to her," Callisto remarked as the dazed bard tried to regain her focus. "I can't allow you to be a liability to me. I already told you once that I would kill you myself if you became one. By the looks of it, you'll become one some time soon." A thoughtful look found its way onto Callisto's face. At least, Gabrielle thought it was a thoughtful expression. Her vision was still too out of focus to tell. "Now, I don't want to kill you just yet. It's so nice to see Xena's precious bard lose a piece of her soul every time she kills," she mused thoughtfully. Gabrielle glared at her.*

*"Get to the point," she said through grit teeth.*

*"Patience, little bard," Callisto tsk'd, wagging one finger at the smaller blonde. "I was thinking about this last night, and I came up with an idea." Gabrielle waited for Callisto to explain.*

*"And this idea would be...?" she asked as patiently as she could when Callisto decided not to continue talking.*

*"You mean it's not obvious?" Gabrielle glared. "We were just doing it. For a bard, you don't pay attention."*

*"Your plan is to beat me into a bloody pulp?" she guessed with a slightly raised eyebrow, a look she had learned from Xena.*

*"No, that's not until we meet up with your warrior princess," Callisto said. "And in order for you to live until we meet up with Xena again, you're going to have to learn how to defend yourself better in the fights."*

*"I've lasted this long haven't I?"*

*"On adrenaline and luck. As amusing as it is to watch you clumsily kill someone, it'd be much easier on the eyes for me if I could watch you kill them with some finesse," Callisto told her. Gabrielle tried to tell if she was joking, but she could not detect any hint of sarcasm. The woman really did get enjoyment out of watching her kill someone.*

*"So you're going to..." Gabrielle trailed off, unable to finish the thought.*

*"I'm going to teach you how to fight, little bard," Callisto told her with a smile that sent chills up Gabrielle's spine.*

*"You're going to teach me how to kill, you mean..."*

And teach, Callisto did. Everyday, the two of them would spar, Callisto barking out commands every so often. The lessons always ended the same way, too: with Gabrielle on her back, panting for breath, and some lewd comment from Callisto that she guessed the insane woman thought was seductive. It was definitely different than what the bard was used to. When she was with Xena, the warrior princess usually seemed to have a never ending amount of patience when she was trying to teach Gabrielle how to use the staff. If Gabrielle messed up with Callisto, she usually paid for it.

And while she didn't get to practice with her sais, the lessons still helped her build her strength. She just wished the woman would teach her how to fight without using techniques that killed. Of course, just because Callisto didn't teach her how to fight without killing didn't mean that Gabrielle *couldn't* fight without taking a life.

After every lesson with the insane woman, the bard would practice what she had learned, changing the moves slightly so they weren't fatal. Callisto would continuously mock her, asking why she bothered. She was already a murderer, after all. She did her best to ignore the insane woman, but there were always days when certain things Callisto said would break her concentration and stick with her through the night. Especially after any fight that she lost control in.

There had been some men in the arena that she faced that had reminded her of Perdicas. Or, they would hit a spot on her body and trigger a memory that she had tried to bury. As hard as she tried, she couldn't control when the flashbacks happened; and she couldn't control herself when she was lost in the past until it was too late.

"Why so quiet, little bard? Am I a bad conversationalist?" Callisto teased as she aimed another punch at Gabrielle's face. The smaller blonde quickly moved to the side and

wrapped her hands around Callisto's wrist. Using all of the force she could, she flipped Callisto over. The older woman saw the move coming, however, and once she hit the ground she used the grip she already had on Gabrielle's hand to throw the smaller blonde into the wall, her armor absorbing little of the collision.

Before Gabrielle could try to get back up, Callisto was coming at her again and aiming a punch at her chest. Gabrielle just barely managed to roll out of the way, wincing when she heard Callisto's fist make contact with the hard ground they were sparring on.

"Callisto, stop!" Gabrielle shouted as the willowy blonde came at her again. She raised her arms just in time to block a spinning kick from the older woman. "Callisto!" Her cellmate froze just as the second kick she launched was about to make contact with Gabrielle's head.

"What? Tired of playing?" she asked with a slight pout. Gabrielle shook her head before placing a hand on Callisto's boot, gently pushing it away from her head so she didn't feel so awkward. Callisto brought her foot to the ground as she waited for the younger woman to talk.

"Let me see your hand," Gabrielle insisted as she took a step forward. The other blonde took a step back while bringing her hand up to her chest.

"Now why would I want to do a thing like that?" she asked with fake curiosity. Gabrielle rolled her eyes before covering the distance between the two of them, grabbing the other woman's hand. Her eyes narrowed when she realized she grabbed the wrong hand before she reached out and grabbed the other one. "Don't tell me you're trying to help me, little bard," Callisto chuckled.

"Humor me," Gabrielle said as she began to examine the knuckles of Callisto's injured hand.

"Because we both know how much I love accepting help," the other blonde said sarcastically as she tried to pull her hand away. "Fine," she said when she realized that the bard wasn't going to let go. A few minutes ticked by before Callisto began to lose her patience. "Are you done yet?" she asked.

"Will you just wait? You hit your hand pretty hard," Gabrielle told her, not bringing her gaze up from Callisto's bloodied hand. "I think I've learned enough today," she finally said, dropping the hand and walking away from the older blonde. Callisto watched Gabrielle's retreating back, hiding her thoughts with a blank expression.

She had never had anyone care about her enough to actually force her to stop in the middle of a fight. Not since her family died, anyways. And because she knew her cellmate hated her, she had no idea why the smaller woman would even bother examining her hand. It wasn't like she hadn't faced worse in the fighting ring. A determined smirk appeared on Callisto's face as she began silently slinking over to Gabrielle. She was going to figure out what the little bard wanted from her.

"Tell me, little bard," she purred as she placed two thin hands on Gabrielle's shoulders, "how come pretend to care about me, even after I tried to kill you and your husband?" she asked, ignoring the shudder that she felt. "You know that I'm evil, and you hate my disregard for other lives."



"You're not evil, Callisto," Gabrielle said quietly, trying her hardest not to slip into a flashback as she felt the other woman's hands on her. The low chuckle she heard coming from behind her ear made the task difficult.

"I'm not? Obviously Xena didn't think that. What about you? If you don't think I'm evil, what do you think I am?" she asked, disguising her genuine curiosity with her mocking voice.

"Misguided." Callisto's hands stopped moving as she heard Gabrielle's answer, and she was still for a moment before turning the bard around so that she could face her.

"What is that supposed to mean?" she growled. She couldn't believe Gabrielle didn't think she was evil. She needed her to think she was evil. If she didn't, and Callisto really was misguided, that meant that her decisions had been wrong her whole life. If she had been wrong, it meant that her life really could have been different.

"It means that if you had found someone to help give you the right guidance, you wouldn't have turned out this way. Who was the last person to actually show you that they cared? That hate is a waste of energy and that life isn't about revenge?" Gabrielle explained, the whole time feeling dirty about it. Hadn't she wasted her energy hating Perdicas? Wasn't the reason she was in the prison talking to Callisto because she had gotten her revenge on Perdicas? Thinking about these questions, she didn't even notice that Callisto had let go of her and headed to her own side of the cell, her own mind heavy with thoughts and feelings that she had buried long ago.

Gabrielle thought back to the time Callisto had called her a hypocrite, and she had to admit that the insane woman had been right; she was a hypocrite. She also considered herself the perfect example. Because of hate and revenge, she had lost everything that mattered to her. Her ideals, her chance at seeing Xena again, and her precious daughter.

"Oh Nexa... I'm sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen," she said quietly, looking up at the blue sky and watching the clouds. She wondered if her daughter was able to see them as well. She knew that if she were with her daughter, they'd be laying out on the grass, naming what they saw in the clouds. There would be no Perdicas to worry about. They'd be with Xena. They'd be safe. "I wish I could really be with you instead of just imagining myself with you, my little warrior," she whispered, ignoring the tears that had begun to form in her eyes. Pressing her forehead to the bars, she slid to the ground with a sigh. There used to be a time when she was thankful for her imagination. Now she wished she wasn't able to process any kind of thoughts, so she wouldn't have to know what she was living without.

"Mo-... uh, Xena! Nexa's doing that weird thing again!" Solan called for the warrior princess, catching himself. Hopefully nobody else noticed. It wasn't that he didn't want to call Xena mother. It had taken a while, but he had finally been able to wrap his mind around the fact that Xena was his mother, and he could understand why she hadn't raised him herself. In fact, he had taken to calling Xena 'mom' on a few occasions. Xena noticed the almost-slip and couldn't help but smile. If they had been in Amphipolis instead of Thebes, there was no doubt that he wouldn't have had to catch himself.

Cyrene had forced Xena to take Nexa and Solan to Thebes with her to meet Hercules

and Iolaus. Xena had made quite a fuss, according to the innkeeper, so Cyrene had reminded her of her promise to be a part of their lives. So, there they were walking through the streets of Thebes together. They had already stabled Argo, and were heading for the tavern where they were supposed to meet Hercules.

"Could you bring her over here?" she asked. Solan complied, gently lifting the smaller girl up and easily carrying her over to Xena. The warrior princess took the little blonde from her son's arms and took a good look at Nexa. Like always, her blue eyes stayed open, making it appear as if she was staring off into space. And like always, when Nexa's eyes finally blinked, it took her a few moments to realize where she was.

"Are you alright, Little One?" Xena asked as she watched the little girl sleepily look around. Nexa turned towards Xena and smiled as she nodded before leaning forward and resting her head on Xena's shoulder. "Somebody's tired," Xena remarked with a smirk.

"I not ti'ed," Nexa protested just as her eyes were shutting. In moments she had fallen asleep in Xena's arms. Xena couldn't blame her, considering how rough the trip to Thebes had been for the little girl. It seemed like every other night during the journey, the small girl had one of her nightmares, even when she did sleep in the same bedroll as Xena.

"Come on, Solan," Xena said once she was sure Nexa was sound asleep. "Wouldn't want to let Iolaus eat all of our food before we got there," she told him before quickly making her way into the tavern. Solan followed behind her, excited to see the demigod and his friend again. He froze in his tracks when they were halfway to the table, however. Sitting across from the Greek hero and the blonde man was a familiar head of auburn hair. Not only that, but she was sitting next to a dark skinned young man he had never met before.

"Hey Xena, look who we found on our way here!" Iolaus announced excitedly, reminding Solan that there were other people around.

"Amarice, it's nice to see you again. Who's your friend?" Xena asked as she pulled another chair up to the table and sat down with Nexa in her arms, raising an eyebrow. Obviously the young woman had gotten over her son just fine; and rather quickly.

"This is Armon. I saved his life, you know," Amarice told her. Xena caught more than just a hint of pride in her voice when she said the last part.

"And I've been in love with her ever since," the dark skinned man insisted, causing Amarice to blush.

"Armon, it's not nice to lie. We were horrible together at first. Remember? You kept acting as if you were the Gods' gift to women when we met," the young woman reminded him, gently slapping Armon on the arm.

"Like you should talk. I can't count how many times I had to listen to all the reasons why women are better than men," Armon teased her, a smile on his lips. Amarice rolled her eyes.

"Women **are** better than men. It's not my fault you wouldn't believe me when I told you, so I had to list all the reasons."

“Do you two think you could save this argument for later? There are things that we need to talk about,” Xena growled, immediately silencing Amarice and her friend. Everyone was quiet for a moment before Hercules spoke again.

“I haven’t been able to hear anything about where Gabrielle is, Xena,” he started off, “but Aphrodite says that she’s still alright.”

“Are you sure you can’t get more out of her?” Xena asked, wishing she could strangle the Goddess of Love. She could easily tell them where Gabrielle was, if only she weren’t so worried about Ares.

“I’m sorry, but you know Aphrodite. She won’t risk getting into a fight with Ares,” he told her with a shake of his head.

“I may be a big fan of your sister, but I do have to admit that she isn’t being much help in this situation,” Iolaus muttered, resting his chin on his hands as he tried to think of where Gabrielle could be. “She could at least tell us if she were in a prison or not.” The others nodded their heads in agreement. If she was in a prison, it would narrow their search by a little bit. If she had managed to escape, she could be anywhere in Greece. It would also mean that there was a possibility something had happened to her if that was the case. They all knew Gabrielle would have come to Xena if she was able to.

“So... who is this Gabrielle?” Armon asked curiously, regretting it when the conversation died and he felt all eyes on him.

“She’s a friend of Xena’s. We’re trying to find her,” Amarice told him awkwardly before leaning and whispering in Armon’s ear, “I’ll tell you more later.”

“Oh... well um, I hope you find her, Xena,” Armon said as he shifted his gaze back to the tabletop. So much for becoming a part of the conversation.

“I will. I have to,” Xena said, adding the last part on in an inaudible whisper.

It was later that night, when she was seeing Solan off to bed, that she began to notice he wasn’t looking as happy as he usually did. After telling Nexa to wait for her in their room, Xena asked her son what was wrong.

“I don’t know,” he told her with a shrug, refusing to make eye contact as he crawled into his bed.

“I’m not buying that,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest as she waited for an answer. “You and I both know I can wait here all night until you tell me what’s up.”

“I’m not lying. I really don’t know,” Solan insisted. “I just don’t think I like Armon much. I mean, he seems like a nice guy and all, but I don’t know what Amarice sees in him.” Xena chuckled before taking a seat on Solan’s bed.

“I think I know what’s wrong. Solan, you’re not jealous, are you?” Xena asked with a small smile, ruffling Solan’s bangs. The blonde boy glared at her as he pulled his head away from her hand.

“Of course I’m not jealous. Amarice is more like a sister to me. I just don’t think

Armon is good enough for her,” he insisted. Xena smirked, getting up from the bed.

“Whatever you say, Kiddo,” she told him, blowing out the candle before leaving the room and heading to her own. She wasn’t surprised to see Nexa still up, the covers pulled up to her eyes.

“What are you still doing up?” Xena asked, closing the door behind her as she entered the room.

“Waiting for you,” Nexa answered softly, her childish blue eyes shining. “Solan okay?”

“Solan’s fine. I’m sure he’s glad that you were worried about him,” Xena told her as she got under the covers and allowed Nexa to cuddle up next to her. “We were worried about you earlier today. What did you see?” When Nexa seemed to stare off into nothing, she would always tell Xena what she saw, sometimes without a prompt from Xena. Usually it was the same thing: lots of rocks.

“There was a scary lady. Mommy was fighting her,” Nexa told her with a shrug before looking up, her eyebrows scrunched up and forming a thoughtful expression. “Why was mommy fighting her?”

“I don’t know. Do you know the scary lady’s name?” Xena asked as she stretched herself over to blow out the candle.

“Callisto.” Xena’s head snapped back to Nexa and she found herself focusing all her attention on the little girl, the candle forgotten.

“Nexa... the scary lady... was she blonde?” she asked, her heart skipping a beat when she saw the girl nod her head. “Callisto...” That was a name she hadn’t heard since she took the blonde into the authorities herself. So where ever Callisto was, Gabrielle was with her. *‘If Gabrielle and Nexa’s dreams are even connected,’* she thought skeptically.

“Take a hint, Warrior Babe,” an annoying, girlish voice said, breaking the silence in the room. Nexa giggled as the goddess clad in pink nightwear appeared in the room. Xena simply glared. “Hey Nexa! How’s my little love child?” she asked as the girl climbed over Xena and ran over to the immortal.

“Aphwodite!” Nexa shrieked as she wrapped the blonde goddess in a hug. Although she didn’t return the hug, Aphrodite gave the small girl an affectionate pat on the head.

“You two know each other?” Xena asked with a raised eyebrow, more than a little annoyance showing in her voice. What did the Goddess of Love want with Nexa, when she wouldn’t even help find her mother.

“Like, of course we know each other. We go way back. I knew little Nexxie before she was even born,” Aphrodite answered as she pried the small blonde child off her waist and zapped her back to the bed. Nexa giggled in delight at the sensation and gave Aphrodite a look that said ‘Do it again!’. Aphrodite sighed before zapping the girl once more, making her teleport across the room and then back again. Before the girl could give her another pleading look, she quickly used her powers to send the

small blonde child to dream land.

“Care to explain?” Xena asked, already losing her patience with the blonde goddess.

“Keep your shift on, Warrior Babe. I was just about to give you 411,” Aphrodite told her. Xena rolled her eyes at the goddess’ strange language. “Okay, well... more like the 210. I can’t like, give away everything right now. There are still a few surprises I want to keep secret even from you, Warrior Babe.”

“Will you just tell me what you can, then?” Xena asked in a dangerously low voice. She didn’t care if Aphrodite was a god; if she didn’t start talking soon, Xena would find a way to kill her in the most painful way possible.

“Chill out, Princess, and give me a chance to talk.” Xena did as she was told and waited for the blonde goddess to explain.

“Aphrodite!” she shouted when she didn’t say anything.

“Oh! Sorry. I didn’t know you wanted to know like, now,” Aphrodite apologized. Xena mentally groaned in frustration. It was times like these that made her remember why she hated interacting with the gods. That, and the fact that one certain god kept trying to seduce her back to his side. “Let’s just say that I played a bigger role in Nexa’s birth than that uber-bad Perdicas did. Good thing, too. I hate to think about how she may have turned out if Perdicas had actually been able to like, really knock Gabby up,” she explained.

“Wait... Perdicas isn’t really Nexa’s father?” Xena asked. Aphrodite replied with a happy smile. With that news delivered, she was about to go into why she was there in the first place. Xena cut her off, though. “If Perdicas isn’t her father, then who is?”

“Oh, I think you’ll totally dig who I chose,” Aphrodite answered, surprisingly cryptic in her own way. “Now then... what was that other reason why I came here...” she asked herself thoughtfully. “Oh! There was something I seriously needed to tell you about little Nexxie’s dreams!” she exclaimed, smiling triumphantly.

“And that would be?”

“That the connection between a mother and her child can never be broken, especially one as strong as the one between Gabby and little Nexxie,” the blonde goddess told her in a low, serious voice. “Gotta go!” she said suddenly before disappearing into the air, leaving only golden sparks in her place. Xena blinked, trying to comprehend what Aphrodite had just told her.

*‘I was right,’* she thought before practically leaping out of the bed. Once she was sure Nexa was still asleep, the warrior princess quickly left the room and headed for Hercules’ and Iolaus’ room. “I know how to find her,” she said as she burst into their room and scared them awake.

“Huh?” they both asked as they rubbed their eyes, trying to wake themselves up so that they could actually comprehend Xena’s news.

“Gabrielle. I know how to find her!” she said, trying hard to hide her excitement. She wasn’t doing a very good job of it, but she could at least say she was trying to keep her mask on. “She’s with Callisto.”

"And you know where Callisto is?" Iolaus asked hopefully, beating his buddy to the question.

"No, but I know how we can find her," Xena told them with a cocky smirk. "I'm afraid I'll have to go back to Amphipolis sooner than planned."

"Don't you mean *we'll* have to go back to Amphipolis? We don't plan to make you search for Callisto on your own," Hercules told her with a grin of his own. Xena was about to object, but Hercules cut her off. "Don't say anything. You know you'll need our help, especially if Callisto's involved. She does have a grudge against you, remember?" Xena glared at him, although she couldn't deny that he was right. She hated it when other people were right.

## Part 16

"Nexa, can you tell me anything else about what you see?" Xena asked, crouched low so that she was eye level with the child of her lost best friend. Ever since she had finally convinced herself that Nexa's strange visions and dreams were connected to Gabrielle, she made sure to pay attention to whatever the little girl could tell her. It wasn't much, though. All she had been able to figure out from the small blonde was that Gabrielle was in a prison with Callisto, and had been forced to fight. It didn't help that Xena knew there were over a dozen prisons with illegal fighting rings scattered all across Greece.

"Lots of people?" Nexa said in more of a question, deciding that the ground had become quite interesting after she answered. She wanted to help Xena find her mama so much, but she never knew how to explain what she saw and felt. She looked up at the warrior princess when she heard her sigh. "I'm sowwy," she apologized as she shifted her gaze back to the ground.

"Hey, it's alright, Little One." Xena gently placed two fingers under Nexa's chin and lifted her gaze upwards. "You've already done more than enough. At least now I know where to start looking, eh?" She smiled softly in reassurance before placing a kiss on Nexa's forehead and standing back up. "I guess I'm off to go track down your mother."

"I come, too?" Nexa asked, looking up at Xena with pleading eyes. The warrior princess chuckled as she shook her head.

"I'm afraid not. Someone has to stay here and look after Solan and Mother, don't you think?" she asked. She knew that she would have to argue less with the little girl if she made her feel like she was doing something important if she stayed at the tavern.

"I can do that!" Nexa beamed proudly up at Xena, her disappointment at not being able to help Xena forgotten.

"Of course you can. Why do you think I chose you for the job?" Xena told her.

"Because I'm so cute." Xena laughed out loud at this before ruffling Nexa's hair, something she used to do to her mother years ago.

"That you are, Little One. Now then, I believe my mother is waiting for us downstairs and the Gods know I want to get her goodbye over with." Nexa giggled and happily followed after the warrior princess as she left their room and headed down the stairs.

"There you two are. We were beginning to worry that you weren't going to come down," Cyrene told them as they reached the bottom of the staircase. Xena mock glared at her mother, but didn't say anything.

"Ready to go, Xena?" Amarice asked with a raised eyebrow, proving that she had spent too much time around the warrior princess.

"Hold on." Xena walked over to the blonde boy near the counter and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You've probably had enough of me leaving you places, huh Solan?" she asked jokingly, although she was truly afraid that her son would be angry at her for leaving so often.

"Nah. Without you around, I get to be the boss of the house," Solan told her smugly. Xena rolled her eyes before reaching over and ruffling his hair. "Mom!" he protested loudly, although he didn't pull away. He didn't know how long it would be until his mother came back, so if she wanted to mess up his hair, she could.

"I wouldn't let your grandmother hear you say that," she warned the boy in a quiet voice, her eyes glancing over to the innkeeper before she returned her attention back to Solan. "I am sorry that I have to keep leaving like this," she told the boy. "I promise that after I find Gabrielle, we'll be able to spend more time together."

"You don't have to do that, Xena."

"I know I don't have to. I want to," she assured him, cutting off the rest of his objection. "Now you be good and help your grandmother while I'm gone," she told him.

"I heard that Xena. I'll have you know that I am perfectly capable of getting things done by myself," Cyrene told her daughter before looking at her grandson with soft eyes. "But you feel free to help out if you want to." Xena mentally shook her head at her mother before motioning for Nexa to come over.

"Now remember what I told you earlier. I'm counting on you," she told the girl. Nexa smiled and saluted obediently before wrapping her arms around Xena's leg.

"I can do it," she assured the warrior princess. She was, after all, her mother's little warrior. If she couldn't look after Solan and Cyrene, then who could? After letting go of Xena's leg, she walked over to Amarice, who took a step back.

"Oh no you don't. I know exactly how you plan to say goodbye to me," she told the little girl, raising her hands up in surrender. "So how about we skip the part where you kick me, and I just pick you up?" she suggested. Nexa squealed in delight as Amarice lifted her up and gave her a hug. As much as the little brat bugged her, the young warrior had missed Nexa while she was gone. After placing Nexa back on the ground, much to the young child's disappointment, Amarice turned her attention to Solan. She knew that he was going to be the hardest goodbye for her.

Even though she had found Armon, the only reason that she had considered staying

with the young man was because he reminded her of Solan. Not physically, of course; but their attitudes were very similar. She knew it was a selfish thing for her to do, and that it was unfair to Armon, but she couldn't help herself. If Armon was the closest thing to Solan that she could get, then she was going to stay with him.

"Well..." she started off awkwardly, "it was nice seeing you again, Solan. We should talk more next time." After getting through that sentence, Amarice decided that the ground looked interesting and began giving it a thorough visual examination.

"Yeah, it was... interesting," Solan told her. *'More like awkward,'* he mentally admitted. "You take care of Xena, alright?"

"You bet, Kid," she said with a small smile before grabbing Armon by the arm and dragging him outside, where Hercules and Iolaus were waiting for them. Xena watched them go before turning back to her family, whether they were by blood or adopted.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she promised.

"That's if you ever leave. Go on, Xena. We know how anxious you are to find Gabrielle. So go out there and get her!" Cyrene told her motioning towards the door with her hands. "Go on. Shoo!"

"Alright, alright! I'm leaving," Xena said as she walked out the door, joining the small group that would be joining her on her journey. Although she wouldn't say it out loud, she was grateful for their help.

"What do you say we get this show on the road?" Iolaus asked before her began walking, excited to be traveling again. Like the others, he also couldn't wait to find Gabrielle. The one and only time that he had been able to see the young woman was when Xena and Hercules freed Prometheus. He hadn't been quite ready for a relationship with her then, but he had to admit that he often found himself thinking of the story she had told him while they were waiting for Hercules and Xena, hoping that he wouldn't bleed to death from the wound he had received.

*"Let me tell you another story," Gabrielle insisted quietly as she gently smoothed Iolaus' hair. Iolaus couldn't help but laugh softly at her perseverance. Even though he had just met her, he knew she'd keep talking forever, as long as it kept him from closing his eyes and crossing over. "Once, a long, long time ago, all people had four legs and two head. And then the Gods threw down thunderbolts and split everyone into two," she started. And Iolaus listened to her, her calm and gentle voice taking his attention away from the pain in his side. "Each half then had two legs and one head."*

*"But the separation left both sides with a desperate yearning to be reunited; because they each shared the same soul. And ever since then, all people spend their lives searching for the other half of their soul."*

When Gabrielle had asked him about it later, he had told her that he didn't remember her ever telling him that story, when truthfully, he didn't want to hurt her. He wasn't mature enough for someone as devoted to love as Gabrielle. Now that he knew he was ready to try a relationship with someone like her, he had a good idea that Xena was going to beat him to the punch. The thought made him smile to himself.



He was glad that his darker friend had been able to find someone that made her happy and stick to the path she was walking. He had felt bad for Xena when she had told them that Gabrielle had decided to marry someone from her hometown. Although she had tried to hide her sadness, both Iolaus and Hercules could feel it radiating off of her that day. It was nothing compared to the anger they could see and feel coming from her when she told them about Perdicas, but it had told them early on that Xena loved Gabrielle, even if she hadn't known it.

*'I guess it's true that love is blind,'* he thought, chuckling to himself. *'Or vain, if you're basing it off of Aphrodite.'* As his thoughts began to fill with images of the beautiful Goddess, time seemed to fly by for the blonde warrior.

As Iolaus thought of a certain blonde Goddess, a darker God with a much darker purpose howled with rage.

"I can't believe this!" Ares shouted angrily, throwing a lightning bolt at one of the pillars in his temple. "Not only am I going to lose my source of entertainment, but I'm going to lose Xena, as well!"

"Face it, bro. Xena was never yours. Not even when she was a warlord that had never heard of a thing called a brush." The annoying sound of his sister's voice immediately made the God of War turn his head. "As much as you like to believe you did, there was no way that Warrior Babe would let anyone control her."

"What are you doing here? Haven't you meddled in my plans enough already?" Ares asked her. Aphrodite feigned shock, placing a hand over her chest.

"Me? Interfere in your plans? As if," she told him. "I mean, you **are** the God of War, after all; and I'm just the Goddess of Love. No real power what-so-ever, am I right?" she asked. Ares narrowed his eyes at her and let out a low growl.

"Don't try to act innocent with me, Aphrodite," he warned her. "I know you interfered with Xena and Gabrielle."

"Come off it, bro. The only mortal that I bothered interfering with was that adorable, little Nexxie. And according to Pops, that's perfectly alright," she told him.

"Are you telling me that the irritating blonde's brat is your Chosen?" he asked in an irritated voice. Aphrodite smiled brightly at him, giving him his answer. "Argh!" Ares angrily threw a lightning bolt at his sister, hitting only air as she disappeared in a shower of sparks. "And my family wonders why I hate them..." he muttered to himself as he walked over to his throne. He had to admit, though, that his sister had actually done something smart for once.

Because she was Aphrodite's Chosen, Nexa had the Goddess of Love watching over her most of the time. That explained why Perdicas had never tried to hurt the child, even when he was angry. Aphrodite had always been there warding him off. And now that Ares knew that Nexa was his sister's Chosen, he also knew that he wouldn't be allowed to interfere in her life like he had planned to. "First my plans for Xena fail. Now I might as well cross off my plans for Nexa, as well. What's next? Callisto gets a heart?" he muttered angrily to himself.

A month later, a depressed bard from Potidaea leaned against the bars of her cell,

unaware that Xena had started searching for her. Even if she had known, it wouldn't have done much to elevate her mood. It was her daughter's birthday, and she wasn't even able to be there with her.

"Oh little baaaard... what's the matter? As much as I enjoy seeing you suffer, you're no fun when you're depressed," Callisto told her from across the cell.

"Callisto, I'm not in the mood. Go away," she told the other blonde as she stared up at the grey sky. It seemed to match her mood perfectly.

"That's what you always say," the older woman said, a slight pout on her face. When Gabrielle didn't respond, Callisto mentally sighed. Ever since the bard had told her that she was the one responsible for her actions, not Xena, she had been thinking about her past. Gabrielle hadn't helped by telling her that she was misguided, not evil. At least when she was evil, she could blame it on Xena. So, in order to keep herself from thinking about the past, she would listen to Gabrielle tell stories, and apparently that wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

"Well you had better get in the mood before we have to fight, or you're going to get yourself killed," she muttered angrily as she crossed her arms and leaned back against the rock wall.

"I guess that would make your mission in life easier then, wouldn't it?" Gabrielle said, not bothering to turn around and look at the other woman.

"Oh no, no, no, little bard. You already know my mission in life, and you getting yourself killed is not a part of it. *I* have to be the one to kill you, remember?" Callisto reminded her boredly. "There's really no fun in letting Xena know that you died because of someone that she doesn't know as well as she knows me. It would simply ruin our relationship if she ever found out that I let some common, no-name murderer kill you."

"Callisto, you and Xena don't have a relationship anymore," Gabrielle pointed out with a sigh, ignoring the footsteps that she heard coming from behind her.

"I guess that makes two of us then," she said as she lowered herself to Gabrielle's level and placed her hands on tense shoulders, ignoring the familiar shudder that she felt run through the smaller woman's body. "Frankly, I like our relationship much more anyways," she whispered into the bard's ear. Gabrielle could almost feel the smirk on Callisto's lips before she pushed the woman away from her.

"We don't have that kind of relationship either, so stop pretending we do," she told the woman, not missing the somewhat hurt look that passed across the insane woman's face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it like that," Gabrielle apologized, getting up from her spot on the ground. "We do have a relationship, and I... don't entirely dislike it... but Callisto, I'm not going to let you pull me into *that* kind of relationship just so you can hurt Xena." She placed her hand on Callisto's, not surprised when the woman pulled away and walked back to her spot in the darkness of the cell without another word. Gabrielle sighed and shook her head, wishing their arguments wouldn't always end that way.

Nexa sighed as she stared out the window of the tavern. The sky was grey, and it looked like it was going to rain. It wasn't exactly her idea of a good day for a birthday.

Then again, no one knew it was her birthday except her mama, and she could feel the sadness that her mother was radiating at not being able to be with her. Even when her daddy had been around, she knew her mama used to always make her birthday special.

“Why the glum face, little girl? A child as pretty as you shouldn’t look so down.” At the sound of the unfamiliar voice, Nexa turned around, coming face to face with a slender teenager she had never seen before. He was dressed in long, white robes that reminded her of Rosaline. When he rose to his full height, she realized that he was as tall as Xena, and had the same hair color as well, even though it was cut shorter. His eyes, however, were a deep shade of green with specks of dark blue.

“Who are you?” Nexa asked curiously, staring up at him with wide eyes. It never crossed her mind to scream for Solan or Cyrene. Even though she had never met this man, the strange sparkle in his eyes told her that he was a friend.

“I’m Jade. And you must be little Nexa,” he introduced himself in the same gentle voice that he had used when he first greeted her.

“Yeah. I’m Nexa. How did you know?”

“Aphrodite sent me to keep an eye on you,” he told her with a smile. Nexa immediately squealed with glee at the mention of the blonde Goddess.

“Auntie ’Dite! Is she here?!” she asked hopefully, thinking that perhaps her birthday could be shared with someone after all. Jade shook his head.

“Unfortunately, Aphrodite has been caught up with a mess that some bumbling fool made when she tried to win a bet against her son,” he told her. “It was Jonas... no, that wasn’t his name... Jared? No, that’s not it either... Ah! It was Joxer!”

“Aw... so I don’t get to spend my birthday with anybody?” she asked, letting out a disappointed sigh.

“Now I never said that, did I? Aphrodite not only sent me to look out for you, she also sent me to stay with you on this very, very special day,” he told her as he knelt back down so that he was eye level with her. “She also wanted me to give you... this!” When Jade pulled his hand out of his robes, he realized that he had accidentally pulled out one of his scrolls. “Oh wait. Not that,” he said as he put it back into his robe. Moments later, he pulled out a small pink box that had a red ribbon tied around it. “This!” he exclaimed triumphantly before handing it to the little girl. Nexa wasted no time in opening, although she had carefully removed the ribbon before tearing the box open. She squealed in delight when she saw what was inside.

It was a chain necklace made of gold, and dangling from the bright chain was a pendant in the shape of a heart. Inside the heart was a picture of her standing next to Solan between her mama and Xena. On the back of the pendant stood Cyrene, Amarice, and Aphrodite.

“That is the finest gold found in Greece and Rome, you know,” Jade told her. “And Aphrodite even had her hunky hubby, Hephaestus, engrave it,” he said before taking it from the small girl and putting it around her neck and clasping it for her. “Absolutely stunning, my dear,” he complimented her with a smile.

“Yay! Now my mama is with me! Xena, too!” Nexa said excitedly. Jade chuckled in

amusement at the girl's actions.

"Now, you can't let anyone see this, okay? Aphrodite doesn't want them to know about her keeping an eye on you through me," he told her. Nexa nodded her head vehemently before tucking the pendant beneath her shirt so no one could see it. "Now how about we go make you a birthday cake?" he suggested.

"Yay!" Nexa quickly ran out of her room, followed by the robed young man, although he walked at a much slower pace.

A few hours later, the kitchen of Cyrene's tavern looked as if a minotaur had tried walking through it, followed by a stampede of wild horses. Broken chicken eggshells littered the ground, along with the yolk that was supposed to be inside it. Pans were scattered across the room, along with a few spoons covered in an unidentifiable mixture. Sitting in the middle of the mess was a small, blonde girl sticking her hand into the strange substance. At least, that was how Solan found the room when he walked in.

"Nexa... what happened in here?" he asked as he walked over to the little girl and picked her up. He immediately regretted it when the sticky substance that she was covered in got all over him as well.

"I make cake," she told him with a smile, pointing down at the bowl that she had been sitting next to when he found her. "You try?" Solan laughed quietly and shook his head.

"Nexa, you have to bake the cake before you can eat it."

"No, no! Try it! It's goood," she told him, smiling in reassurance. Solan rolled his eyes before caving in to her request. Gently setting Nexa down on the floor, he dipped a finger into the mixture and stuck the digit in his mouth. It took all of his self-control not to gag. Apparently, Nexa wasn't as great a cook as her mother.

"Uh... it's good... really good, Nexa," he told her, trying hard to spit the disgusting substance out. "I'll be right back," he said before leaving the kitchen as quickly as he could.

"He liked it!" Nexa told her new friend excitedly as she looked up at Jade, who was still staring after Solan. "Jade?"

"Huh? Oh! Sorry. I was a little... distracted," he told her apologetically. Nexa's eyebrows scrunched up in confusion.

"Distracted?"

"Just wondering how well your little friend handles a sword," he told her, his voice holding a slightly dreamy quality to it.

"Solan uses a staff, though," Nexa informed him, trying to be helpful. She assumed that she had done her job right when the smile on Jade's face grew bigger.

"Even better," he said before following after the blonde boy. Nexa quickly followed after him, eager to spend time with her new friend.

Throughout the rest of the day, after they had cleaned the kitchen, Solan would catch Nexa talking to herself. At first, he thought it was because the connection between her and Gabrielle had gotten stronger, and that Nexa could finally talk to her mother. He had been so excited that he had practically ran to get closer to her conversations with herself, only to find out that she was addressing someone named Jade. It wasn't until the time that Nexa had to go to bed that Solan was able to ask her about it, since every time he approached her during the day, she took off running.

"Nexa, who were you talking to today?" he asked casually as he tucked the small blonde into bed.

"My new friend. His name is Jade," she told him happily. "He liked to ask about you."

"I see... Is Jade the one that told you to make a cake this morning?" Solan asked as he playfully tugged on Nexa's nose.

"Hey!" she objected, although a giggle escaped before she could stop it. "Yes, Jade helped me bake the cake. He told me that everyone should have a cake on their birthday." Solan blinked at this news.

"It was your birthday today?" he asked quietly, feeling guilty about not doing anything for her.

"Yeah, but don't be sad. Jade kept me company," she assured him. "Sides, you were busy helping Cywene."

"Well if you had told me today was your birthday, I would have made time for you, you little rascal," he told her, ruffling her hair before standing back up. Although he wore a smile on his face, he felt bad that Nexa had to make up an imaginary friend so that she could have someone to spend her birthday with her. He would have to talk to Xena when she came back. "Goodnight, Nexa," he said quietly before closing blowing out the candle by the side of her bed and leaving the room.

"Night, Solan," the girl said sleepily before pulling her pendant out from underneath her night shift and bringing it up to her lips. "Night mama."

Gabrielle jerked awake, swearing she had heard her name. When she looked around, however, the only things she saw were the usual guards standing outside her cell and Callisto talking to her rat in the corner. As she turned her head, she felt her bones snap back into place.

*'I must have dozed off for a while there,'* she thought to herself as she rubbed the back of her neck. She hoped it wasn't still sore when it was time for her to fight. "The fight!" she exclaimed, suddenly realizing how late it actually was.

"Well, it was nice of you to remember to wake up in time. I would hate to disappoint the crowd by going in there by myself," Callisto told her. "Don't worry. You've still got a few minutes before you get pounded again." Gabrielle glared at the other woman as she stood up, wincing as she felt her legs shake beneath her.

*'Note to self: Don't ever fall asleep against the bars like that again,'* she decided as she walked around the small space.

"Alright you two. The crowd's waiting. Try to bring us in some more gold," one of

the guards said a few minutes later as they opened the door to the cell. Callisto chuckled as she walked past them, enjoying the scared look they got on their faces when she gave them the murderous look that she had developed into an art. Gabrielle was silent, as usual, as she tried to prepare herself for the fight. Even after five months of being stuck inside the prison, she still had to mentally prepare herself for the fights.

They were soon going through the familiar routine of choosing their weapons. As she pulled the sais off the rack, she felt a chill go up her spine. There was something different about this fight that had Gabrielle on edge. For some reason, it didn't feel right.

"Callisto, be on guard," she warned her partner in a quiet whisper. The other blonde woman looked down at her with a curious expression.

"You feel it too, huh little bard? I guess I'm not as crazy as you think I am," she said before walking out into the ring, Gabrielle following after her. When their four opponents made it to the ring, the former bard sized them up. There was nothing special about them. They seemed to be just common thugs that her and Xena used to fight when they were on the road.

"Wait..." Before Gabrielle could finish her thought, she heard the pull of several bowstrings. "Callisto, it's a trap!" she shouted before grabbing the other woman by the hand and pulling her back, out of the line of fire. "I don't get it. Why are they trying to kill us?! We've been doing what they tell us to."

"Look, little bard. The people that run this place want their money," Callisto explained, avoiding another arrow as it flew past her.

"And we've been getting them their gold, haven't we?" Gabrielle asked, not sure where Callisto was going with her explanation. "I mean, we haven't lost."

"Exactly. None of the spectators have been placing bets on the other fighters when we fight, so they end up having to hand out more dinars. Eventually, they're going to be giving out more dinars than they're raking in," Callisto explained. The bard blinked, surprised that Callisto was such an expert on the subject.

"I've been here a long time, little bard. I learned a few things," she explained as she pulled Gabrielle by the arm, saving her from being skewered by an arrow. "Now if only you would learn to run and ask questions at the same time," she growled, slightly annoyed. Getting the message, Gabrielle followed after Callisto. She didn't know where they were going, but she didn't care; as long as they were safe from the hail of arrows.

It wasn't long before the guards started to get in their way, forcing them to fight their way through to safety. Callisto was much more efficient in killing them off, but Gabrielle was still a force to be reckoned with, knocking most of the guards unconscious. They were so close to making it to safety when Callisto heard the sound of a nearby crossbow being loaded. Her eyes quickly found the source of the noise, along with the intended target. Before the arrow was released, the willowy blonde found herself leaping between the arrow and its target; Gabrielle.

"Callisto!" Gabrielle shrieked as she watched the blonde woman's eyes widen slightly as she looked down at the arrowhead sticking out of her chest before slumping to the

ground.

## **Part 17**

Time seemed to slow down around her as Gabrielle watched Callisto fall to the ground. The yells of the guards and the cheering from the crowd and prisoners all seemed to be drowned out by the thud that Callisto's body made when she fell. Forgetting about the guards, Gabrielle dropped her sais and quickly ran to the fallen woman's side.

"Callisto..." Hesitantly reaching a shaking hand out, Gabrielle carefully rolled the other blonde onto her side and pulled her into her lap. Tears filled her eyes at the sight of the arrow protruding from Callisto's chest, just above her left breast. The arrow that was meant for her. "Are you insane? Why did you do that?" Chocolate brown eyes fluttered open and met hers.

"I told you, little bard... I'm the only one here that gets to kill you," Callisto told her, a familiar, albeit pained, smirk on her face.

"Why do you have to be so pig-headed all the time?" Gabrielle asked as she wiped the tears out of her eyes. "People don't just jump in front of an arrow for someone if they're going to kill them anyways." Gabrielle's voice cracked at the last part as her emotions got the better of her.

"I turned into her... into something I hate..." Callisto admitted while Gabrielle listened intently. She knew that Callisto could have told her something sarcastic, so when she began giving the real reasons, Gabrielle focused all her attention on the wounded woman. "I don't want to be her anymore... and you said that love was the only thing that could end the cycle of hate," she reminded the bard. "Just consider this my first step," she said tiredly as her eye lids began to droop.

"Callisto, come on. You can make it through this. Just keep your eyes open. Please?" Gabrielle pleaded before the guards pulled her away from the downed woman. "No! Help her! You have to help her!" she shouted as she struggled to get away from the men holding her. She watched as they began to carry the other blonde away, tears streaming down her face as they took away the only person in the prison that had been helping her. Then everything went black.

When Gabrielle opened her eyes again, she was back in her cell and there was a horrible pounding in the back of her head. The sunlight streaming in did nothing to ease it. Looking around, she noticed that she was alone. At first, she was confused; but the sight of the blood on the front of her armor brought back the memories of the night before. Before Gabrielle could stop it, a sob escaped her throat. Not long after, the dam broke and a flood of tears cascaded down her face.

With Callisto gone, Gabrielle was truly alone. She didn't know how long she'd be able to stay alive in the prison without the other woman there guarding her back, either. And as much as she hated to admit it, she had been able to forge an odd friendship with the other woman.

"Why did you have to do that?" she asked the air around her, although she already knew the answer. She had to stifle a sob as she remembered the wounded woman telling her why she had jumped in front of the arrow. Unable to stop her memories, she remembered the way the other blonde's eyelids drooped and the light in her eyes went out as she passed over to the other side. It was an image that she knew would haunt her dreams for the rest of her life.

For the next two weeks, the only thing that took her mind off of Callisto's death was the fighting in the prison. Although she didn't like when she killed her opponents, the fight itself gave Gabrielle an escape from her thoughts. It was because of this that she began drawing her fights out longer than they usually would have been. She began to play with her opponents more often while taking risks that she normally wouldn't.

She didn't know why she was still alive to fight in the first place. What was the point of killing Callisto but keeping her alive? They were partners, after all. They both had been losing the prison money. She had tried asking the guards a few times but they never gave her an answer. It seemed that ever since Callisto had died, the only times the guards even acknowledged that she was there was when they had to drag her out of the cell to fight. It wasn't until after Callisto's death that Gabrielle learned why she was still alive, when the God of War himself appeared in her cell while she was watching another fight.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked, coming up behind her and placing his hand on her shoulders. He wasn't surprised to feel a shudder pass through her body. "It's like a dance, don't you think?" Gabrielle ignored him, choosing to focus all of her attention on the fight going on below. "Come now, Gabrielle. Don't be like that. Would it really hurt to talk to me?" His question was met with silence. "Imagine that: a mute bard," he commented, getting Gabrielle to turn around and glare at him. "Fine. You don't have to talk anyways. Just listen to what I have to say."

"What happened to you was horrible, absolutely awful. I have to say, though, I've been watching you fight; and you've gotten good," he told her, moving to her side and whispering in her ear, "Real good."

"Go away, Ares. I'm not interested in anything you have to say," she interrupted him, pulling her head away from him.

"Oh, but I think you will be extremely interested in this," Ares told her, crossing his arms as he watched her turn her back to him. "Tell me, Gabrielle... Do you like it in here?" he asked. "I imagine you don't. I wouldn't enjoy being separated from my child if I had one," he told her. He smirked when he saw the muscles in her arms tighten and her fists clench in anger.

"Don't you even think about my daughter. If you ever go near her, I will find a way to make you suffer so much that you'll wish you were able to die," she threatened him in a dangerously low voice. Ares simply laughed at her.

"You didn't used to be this violent, did you? I guess being stuck in this place can change even someone as 'pure' as you," he mused. "Damn it, I like it!" he exclaimed excitedly.

"Ares, either make your point or go away," she ordered him.



“See, that’s what I like about you, Gabrielle,” he told her, only half-lying. “It’s like you’re Xena and Callisto rolled into one package. You have a combination of their fighting skills and their attitudes. Well, I’d say you’re a little more Xena than Callisto in the attitude department.” Ares uncrossed his arms and walked back over to Gabrielle, turning her around so that his eyes were boring into hers. “How about you put those skills to some use for me instead of wasting them in here?”

“If you know Xena or Callisto, then you should already know that my answer is going to be no,” she told him, hiding her surprise at his request.

“Oh, but Gabrielle. Xena and Callisto don’t have as much at stake as you do. Xena’s a free woman, and, well... Callisto’s dead.” Ares found himself dodging a punch before continuing. “Neither of them have anything to gain from joining me. You, on the other hand, do.”

“And what, exactly, do I have to gain from joining you?” she asked curiously, taking a step back only to run into the bars.

“Your freedom, of course. How long do you think you’ll last in this place by yourself? The only reason why they didn’t kill you after they stuck that insane blonde with an arrow was because they knew you’d be done for sooner rather than later,” he said. Gabrielle could feel her anger rising at the God of War as he continued to talk so calmly about her predicament. “And let’s face it: Xena isn’t going to be saving you anytime soon. She’s too busy working for that ‘Greater Good’ thing you two are so big on.”

“The answer is still no, Ares. Joining with you isn’t freedom. It’s selling my soul,” she told him with a voice of finality.

“Gabrielle, this is a once in a lifetime offer. Join me and you can make sure no one ever has to go through what you have. You could destroy every single fighting ring in the known world. You could even hunt down any man ever accused of beating his wife,” he offered. “You could see your daughter and Xena again.”

“How many times will I have to tell you no before you get it through your head that I won’t join you? Freedom isn’t worth destroying my ideals for.”

“Your ideals? You’ve broken your ideals countless times already, and that was without my help,” he reminded her. “At least you get something out of it if you break them for me.” Gabrielle remained silent, unable to argue with his point. “Face it, Gabrielle. Your ideals were a lie. Love doesn’t exist and peace is impossible to maintain.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Ares. Love does exist. Even Callisto figured that out,” she told him. “For the last time, the answer is no. Now leave.”

“Fine. I’ll enjoy watching you rot,” he told her with a sneer, the fake charm disappearing from his voice just before he vanished into thin air. Gabrielle let out a relieved sigh and shook her head before slumping against the bars of the cell. She had been so tempted to give in to him and take his offer. If he had tried a little harder, perhaps she would have. She certainly wasn’t getting out by herself and, as much as she hated to admit it, she was beginning to lose hope of Xena ever finding her again.

For all she knew, the warrior princess still thought she was dead.

"Xena, **must** our disguises get even more ridiculous every time we go into one of these prisons?" Amarice asked, looking down at what she was wearing, which wasn't much. The little bit of the top that she was wearing was a dirty, white half-shirt that was frayed at the edges and didn't even reach her navel. Luckily, her brown skirt was a decent length, stopping halfway down her thigh. Still, she felt like a harlot; and a cheap one at that!

"I dunno. I think Armon kind of likes your new look," Xena commented as she began putting on her own disguise. Amarice rolled her eyes as she thought about Armon.

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right about that," she concurred as she pulled her curly hair back. "I still can't believe he walked in on us like that. He knew we were changing. You may have to stop me from ripping his eyes out before we leave, Xena." The warrior princess chuckled before turning around and facing Amarice.

"Well?" she asked, although the wide-eyed look on Amarice's face gave her the answer she needed. She could see the young Amazon trying hard not to laugh, and she had to admit that she had gone a little overboard with her disguise. She had put on a fake goatee and mustache along with matching sideburns. Instead of wearing her own leathers and armor, which now took up the bed of the room in the inn, she was wearing a Corinthian helmet with the armor to match. It would be hard for anyone to guess that underneath the silver helmet and bronze plate armor was the warrior princess, even if she was wearing her own pleats, greaves, and boots.

"Well, you don't look like Xena, that's for sure," Amarice told her. *'More like a reject from the Athenian army,'* she mentally added on.

"Good," Xena said before leading the way out of the room, Amarice shaking her head and following after her.

"Well Xena, you look uh... different," Iolaus said when they met up in the market square of Corinth. "I'm sure no one will be able to recognize you. Hades, I barely recognize you."

"Stop staring, Armon!" Amarice barked at the dark-skinned male, who immediately turned his head away from Amarice and began looking elsewhere. "Good boy," she muttered before looking around. "Hey, where's Hercules?" she asked, not seeing the demigod anywhere in the crowded street they were on.

"Oh, he went to help a woman pull her cart back to her house after her horse got loose. He should be back soon," Iolaus told her.

"Amarice, I think you should know that there *is* one more part to your disguise," Xena said, pulling the young Amazon's attention away from Iolaus.

"You mean you've thought of something else to add on to make me feel even stupider?" Amarice asked bitterly.

"Yes." Before the young woman could react, the missing Hercules was coming up behind her and placing shackles around her wrists. Amarice quickly found her arms being weighed down by heavy chains attached to said shackles.

"Hey!" she objected, turning around and glaring at the demigod, who had a smile on his face. "What's the big idea? Why do I have to wear these?" she asked, turning back to Xena and glaring at the smirking warrior princess.

"Well, a slave is supposed to wear chains. It would look suspicious if you didn't," Xena explained with a shrug.

"And you didn't consider asking me first?" Amarice asked in a low growl.

"I considered it. I just knew you would say no."

"Of course I would say no! Hey, I have an idea. I'll be the strong warrior and you be the body slave!" she shouted angrily. Xena ignored her as she walked over to Hercules.

"Good luck, Xena. Remember: we won't be far, just in case you need us," he said before placing a hand on her shoulder. "You'll find her this time. I can feel it."

"I'd like to believe you, Hercules, but you've said that at every prison we've investigated so far," she told him with a small, sad smile.

"Well, this time it feels different. You're going to find her," he insisted as he withdrew his hand from her shoulder.

"I hope you're right," she muttered quietly before walking back over to Amarice, who was still glaring at her. "Come on, body slave," she ordered as she picked up the lead to the chain and yanked on it.

"Hey! Be careful with that, warrior princess!" Amarice protested as she clumsily caught her balance and followed after Xena. With that they were off, hopefully to the prison that held Gabrielle.

As they traversed the few miles that lay between Corinth and the prison, Xena thought back on the past month. They had searched three other prisons, each time using a different disguise. Each time they came up empty handed. After the last one, Xena had stopped getting her hopes up. She was tired of them being dashed down once she found out her efforts were for nothing.

"Xena, do you think Hercules' feeling is right?" Amarice asked, breaking the stifling silence that had descended over them. She had apparently gotten over the problem she had with her disguise.

"I don't know. If it isn't, then there's always the next prison on our list," she said. *'And if it is, I'll be the happiest woman in the known world,'* she mentally added.

That afternoon, unaware of Xena's plans to come rescue her, Gabrielle found herself staring hopelessly into the eyes of one of Callisto's rats in the dark corner of her cell. Ironically enough, it was the one her old cellmate called Ares, and he had come looking for her. Just like the God he was named after had. Of course, he had come for food, not to try and convince her to join him.

"You know, you're starting to look kind of cute," she admitted to the rat as she held him up to her face. The black rat simply stared back at her with hungry, beady eyes. Now that she thought about it, Ares and the rat had a lot in common. "No wonder why

Callisto liked talking to you," she muttered before placing the creature on the ground again. It simply continued to look at her, waiting for something. "Oh fine. Here you go," she conceded, pulling out the piece of bread she had been hiding behind her. She broke off a tiny piece and set it in front of the rat. "Now don't eat that too fast," she warned the rat as it took the piece of bread and scurried off. Gabrielle blinked when she heard herself say those words. "I can't believe this. I'm talking to a rat! You'd think I have no friends are something," she said to herself. "Oh wait..."

The blonde sighed to herself and rested her chin on her hands, staring off into the space in front of her. The offer that Ares had made her was still fresh in her mind. She would give anything to see her daughter again, but did that include her soul? Was getting her freedom back worth destroying herself in the process? Thinking back, she realized that she had started on that road to self-destruction when she killed Perdicas. After that, it had just been a downward spiral that she couldn't see the end of.

*'But I killed to save Nexa. I couldn't let him hurt her,'* she thought, trying to remind herself that she had lost her blood innocence for a good reason. *'I killed for love. And Callisto died for it.'* Gabrielle had to close her eyes and block out the memory of Callisto's body before she retreated back into her thoughts. *'Ares can't be right. My ideals can't be wrong. If they are, then Callisto died for nothing. I killed for a lost cause.'* she thought. "I won't accept that," she said with conviction. Ares simply squeaked in agreement before returning his attention back to the bread. Personally, he would have rather gotten cheese, but at least his new caretaker was trying.

"Hey Blondie. There's someone here interested in taking a look at ya." The voice of one of the guards pulled Gabrielle out of her thoughts. Quickly lifting her head up, she saw that someone had indeed accompanied the guards that usually walked by her cell. Behind the newcomer was a woman that appeared to be a slave. It wasn't hard for Gabrielle to guess what kind of slave judging by the way she was dressed. There was something familiar about the man in armor that owned the slave, but the former bard couldn't place it. The helmet obscured her view of his face, but she could see a few strands of long, dark hair trying to fight their way out. "Come on then. Come out into the light, little girlie."

Xena watched in disgust as the guard continued to taunt the prisoner until, finally, the woman came out of the shadows. She was barely able to stop her breath from catching when she saw the familiar face of her bard staring back at her. Her hair was shorter than she remembered and the woman was covered in dirt; there was also an emptiness to Gabrielle's eyes that she wasn't used to seeing there, but Xena knew it was her bard and she could feel her heart aching to pull the woman into her arms.

"Is this what you were lookin' fer? Or is yer employer interested in someone with a little more uh... thrust?" he asked. Xena had to stop herself from rolling her eyes behind her helmet before answering in a deep voice.

"I told you. My *employer* doesn't want bodyguards that'll be tempted to spoil the goods, if you know what I mean," she answered him, drawing a knowing smirk from the guard. "This one will do just fine." The guard chuckled, shaking his head as he walked off.

"I'll be back in a moment with the chains," he called back to her, leaving Xena with the silent guard, Amarice, and Gabrielle. All Xena could do was stare into the hollow

emerald eyes of her friend, wishing she could say something that would comfort her. Unable to resist, she took a step forward only to watch as Gabrielle took a step back. "Here they are," the talkative guard said as he came back with the chains, breaking the awkward silence that had arisen. "Now then... I take it you've already paid the man up top?" he asked as he began to unlock the barred door to the cell. Gabrielle watched as the man came into her cell, listening for the other man's response.

"Don't worry. He's gotten his payment in full." So that was it then. She was being sold off like an animal. Gabrielle was surprised that she hadn't figured it out already. They had her fighting in an arena like an animal. What was to stop them from selling her off like one? Watching as the guards placed the shackles around her wrists, the bard began to come up with a plan.

"Here you are," the guard said as he attached the lead chain to the one that held the body slave. "Hope you enjoy her... services," he told the man in armor, giving him a wink. Gabrielle wasn't sure, but she thought she saw the soldier's eyes narrow. It was hard to tell with the nose plate of the helmet blocking her view of his whole face.

"Thanks," he mumbled before pulling on the chain and leading Gabrielle up the rocky incline.

On the way to meet Hercules and the others, Xena could feel Gabrielle's eyes boring into the back of her head. She could almost feel the anger radiating off of the blonde woman walking between her and Amarice. Unable to take the silence between them, Xena turned around and stared at the bard. Just as she was about to open her mouth to speak, the smaller woman leapt at the warrior princess, pulling Amarice along with her.

"Whoa!" Xena barely managed to keep her balance as she dropped the lead chain and brought her hands up, grabbing hold of Gabrielle's wrists on instinct. Luckily, her size worked for her and she was able to stay standing, which was more than she could say for Amarice, who had been yanked to the ground when Gabrielle's chain pulled on hers. "Will you calm down?"

"Let go of me! I said let go!" The bard struggled to free her wrists from the grasp of her captor, only to find herself being pulled closer to the soldier. "I'm warning you. If you don't let go, I'll do something you won't like very much," she threatened. When the soldier didn't obey her, she narrowed her eyes before bringing her knee up, hitting him below the belt. She blinked in surprise when he didn't let go, although she thought she heard him stifle a groan. "That usually works..." she muttered to herself.

"If you'd just let me explain-"

"Explain what? That you bought me from a prison with bars just to place me in one of servitude? You don't need to explain that because I understand it just fine," she growled at the man before spitting in his face.

"Oh, that's pretty," the soldier said sarcastically, letting go of one of Gabrielle's wrists to wipe the saliva away. Thinking it was her chance to get away, the bard pulled on her arm once more, only to realize that the man was still stronger than she was.

"Will you let go of me?!"

"Do you promise not to run away?"

"No."

"Well, at least you're honest," the soldier said. "Look, once we get further from the prison, I'll explain everything."

"Maybe you should just explain now. It'd be less painful for the both of us," an irritated Amarice suggested as she got up from the ground, dusting herself off. "Look, Gabrielle--"

"How do you know my name?" the blonde asked, trying to back away from the man holding onto her wrists. "Who are you two?" She heard the soldier sigh before using his free hand to pull his helmet off. Gabrielle gasped when she saw the face behind it, not noticing when he let go of her wrist. "Xena?" Before the other woman could answer, the blonde felt herself pitching forward into darkness.

"Whoa!" Xena quickly found herself catching the bard before she hit the ground. "Well, that's not the response I was hoping for," she muttered to herself as she pulled the smaller woman into her arms and cradling her like a small child. "Amarice, do you still have the key to the locks?" she asked, shifting Gabrielle's weight slightly.

"Yeah, hold on," the young Amazon said before pulling said key out from between her cleavage. "Got it."

"Interesting hiding place," Xena commented, receiving a glare from the auburn haired woman.

"Where did you expect me to keep it? This disguise you picked out didn't leave me very many options," she growled at the warrior princess as she undid the locks on her shackles, mentally sighing with relief when she heard the chain slip to the ground. She then walked over to Xena and Gabrielle and unlocked the shackles that held the blonde's wrists captive.

"Okay. Lets get back to the others," Xena said, choosing to ignore Amarice's comment.

The short time it took to get back to Hercules and the others was far too long for Xena's tastes. So, the warrior princess was relieved when she saw the familiar demigod come into her line of sight. She was even happier when they actually reached each other.

"What did I tell you?" the larger man said when he saw the figure that she was cradling as if it were a precious treasure. Though judging by the rare, loving look in Xena's eyes, that's exactly what Gabrielle was to the warrior princess.

"I guess your feeling was right, Hercules," Xena admitted softly, not taking her eyes off of Gabrielle. So much had changed about the bard. Now that she was able to get a good look at her, Xena noticed that her hair had been lightened by the sun, while her skin was darkened by its rays. She had more muscle than Xena remembered, although she wasn't surprised by that. Despite those changes, and the fact that she was covered in dirt and grime, Xena still thought that Gabrielle was the most beautiful thing she had ever laid eyes on.

"What do you mean 'I guess your feeling was right'? You really need to learn how to express gratitude, Warrior Babe." Xena mentally groaned at the sound of Aphrodite's voice. "All attitude problems aside, congrats Xena. You found the bard!" The blonde goddess smiled widely at the woman carrying Gabrielle, her eyes shining with excitement. "Well, now that you totally found Sweet Pea, don't you think it's time you cleaned her up a bit? I'm sure the little bard would appreciate some TLC after what she's been through."

"And where, may I ask, would you have us do this?" Xena asked in an irritated voice. They were in the middle of a dusty road, miles away from Corinth. Where the air-headed Goddess expected them to take care of Gabrielle, Xena had no idea.

"In a tub, duh. Where else?" Aphrodite pointed out as if the answer had been clear as day.

"Do you see any tubs around here?" Amarice asked, her own patience with the goddess wearing thin. The immortal blonde giggled to herself before snapping her fingers. Before they knew it, Xena and the others found themselves standing in a bathing room of someone's house. A round, wooden tub was in front of them, already filled with water.

"I do now, Red."

"Aphrodite, I know you're a god, but that doesn't mean you can just put us in the bathing room of a stranger's home," Hercules said. Although Aphrodite was one of his half-siblings that he could put up with most of the time, there were some things about her that made him wonder if they truly were related.

"Like, don't you think I know that?" she said with a slight pout. "Don't let the blonde hair fool ya, Bro. I'm not as dumb as you all seem to think I am," she told him.

"Aphrodite, that's not what he meant," Iolaus said, putting gentle hand on her forearm.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure," she said, waving the blonde man off. Her pout disappeared, however, and the hurt was no longer in her voice when she spoke again. "I'm pretty sure that the people here will be totally more than willing to let you use your tub. Which reminds me... there's a tub filled with bubbles back on Olympus calling my name. I'll check back with you later, Warrior Babe. Be sure to clean behind her ears!" With that, the Goddess of Love was gone, leaving the mortals alone in the bathing room of a house they had never been in before. Before anyone in the group could say anything to break the following silence, someone else did.

"Leo, I don't want to go in the tub. The bed is much more comfortable." A small smile appeared on Xena's face when she heard the voice, recognizing it immediately.

"I don't care. The bathtub is the one place we haven't gone yet, and I told you that we were going to get to know every inch of this place." A blush spread across almost everyone's face when they realized what topic they were discussing. They weren't the only one's blushing, however, when Leo barged into the bathing room with his shirt off, carrying a struggling Lila over his shoulder.

"Um, Lila? We have company," he said, somehow managing not to drop his wife in surprise when he saw everyone but Xena facing at them.

"What do you mean we have company?" the dark-haired girl asked, unable to turn her head to see what her husband was staring at. She figured it was just a rat or some other animal that had gotten into their home again.

"Xena and her friends are here."

"What?! Why are you still carrying me like this if they're here?!" she asked angrily. Taking the hint, Leo set his wife down on the floor and gently as he could. "Er... we uh... didn't hear you come in," Lila said with as much dignity as she could, trying hard to cover her embarrassment. She thanked whatever gods that were listening that she was still wearing all of her clothes.

"Someone dropped us off," Iolaus said with a shrug.

"Oh. Alright then," Lila said as she nervously straightened out her skirt. "Hey wait," she started, her hands stopping their fidgeting, "if you're here, does that mean you found..." She was too afraid to actually voice her sister's name, scared that if she said it, it wouldn't be true. To answer her question, Xena turned around, revealing what she had been carrying in her arms. "By the gods... you found her! I can't believe it! You really found her!" Lila brought her hands up to her mouth, trying hard to contain her excitement. Xena had found her older sister, and Potidaea had been their first stop just like she promised.

"Yeah, we found her. But right now we need to get her cleaned up. I'm sure it's been awhile since she's been properly washed," Xena said. Lila had to agree with her, and told her that she was free to use the tub.

"I'll visit with her once she wakes up. I'm sure that after everything she's been through, she needs to get some rest," Lila said before pulling her husband out into the hall. "Well are you all just going to stand there, or are you going to help me make a meal to feed you all? The gods know I'm not going to be able to prepare it all by myself," she said, although she was really just trying to allow Xena and her sister some privacy. Taking the hint, the others followed her out of the bathing room and into the kitchen, leaving the warrior princess and the unconscious bard by themselves.

"Let's get you cleaned up, shall we?" she said quietly to the sleeping blonde before gently laying Gabrielle down and taking off the unfamiliar leather armor that covered her body. Once that was done, she carefully lifted the bard once more and slowly lowered her into the warm water, holding her up with one arm and wiping her down with her free hand.

As she washed away the dirt from the skin of the bard, she couldn't help but notice the scars that covered Gabrielle's body. Each one made her wonder if the blonde had gotten it from a fight in the prison or if it had come from something Perdicas did to her. And each one made the warrior princess feel even guiltier than the last.

Once Gabrielle was clean, Xena gently lifted her out of the tub once more and put her into a clean nightshift that Lila had left for her. That done, the warrior princess took Gabrielle to the spare room and tucked her into the bed. That was where they both stayed, the bard in the bed and Xena falling asleep in a chair next to it, until finally green eyes fluttered open once more.

"Xena?" The quiet, questioning voice pulled Xena out of Morpheus' realm. Blue eyes



met Gabrielle's and the two of them stayed quiet for what seemed like an eternity.

"I'll go get Lila," Xena said, breaking the silence between them as she got to her feet. She was surprised to feel a hand reach out and grab her own.

"Just wait. I want to talk to you before anyone else," Gabrielle said in a tone that screamed 'listen to me'. She watched as Xena shifted her weight, a sign that she was nervous, before sitting back down. "Xena, I know why you're nervous right now. You think I hate you, and you're probably trying to shoulder the blame for what happened." The warrior princess' expression didn't change, but the flicker in her eyes told the bard that she was right. Gabrielle sighed and shook her head. "It's been almost five years, and that part of you still hasn't changed," she said. Before Xena could talk, she put her hand up. "Just wait. There's something I need to tell you."

"I'll admit that at first, I did blame you. For a while, I was angry at you because you never came back like you said you would. You left me with... with that man," she started off, not missing the guilt that flickered across Xena's face. "But then I was sent to the prison; and I ended up with Callisto. Let's just say talking to her made me realize a few things. Mainly that I shouldn't be blaming you for a decision that I made." She added the last part on quietly before bowing her head and staring at the covers that were pulled over her legs. "It was my fault, not yours."

"Gabrielle, you couldn't have known that Perdicas was like that," Xena assured her once she was sure the bard was done speaking. "You can't blame yourself for something like that."

"You didn't know either, Xena, but you still blame yourself for leaving me with him," Gabrielle pointed out quietly. Xena stared at the bard, realizing that she made a good point.

"I'll make you a deal, Gabrielle," the warrior princess said before reaching over and gently making the bard look at her. She didn't miss the flinch that followed. "As soon as you stop blaming yourself for what happened, I'll stop blaming myself for not finding you sooner," she suggested. Gabrielle answered her with a small, unsure smile and Xena returned it. "Now, how about I go get Lila for you? She's been waiting to talk to you for awhile now."

"I think I'd like that a lot, Xena," Gabrielle said. Xena nodded before walking out of the room and quickly telling Lila that her sister was awake. The dark-haired young woman was unable to contain her squeal of joy before hurrying into the spare room to finally reunite with her sister.

The reunion between friends and family, along with the introductions of a few new faces, lasted for the rest of the night and into the next day. It wasn't long before they were borrowing a wagon from Lila and Leo, though. She had decided not to visit her parents and Xena had a good idea why. She doubted that Gabrielle wanted to be the one to tell them that they had picked out an abusive man to be her husband. Besides, once Xena had told Gabrielle that Nexa had made it to the inn, the bard was eager to reach Amphipolis and see her daughter again. Xena was not one to make her wait. They reached Amphipolis two days after leaving Potidaea, splitting up from Hercules and Iolaus along the way. The closer they got to the city, though, the more Gabrielle worried that her daughter wouldn't want to see her.

"Gabrielle, will you stop fidgeting? Everything is going to be fine," Xena said as she

kept her eyes ahead of her. Amarice and Armon had already rode up ahead, Argo following after them so that she could be stabled with the other horses.

"Are you sure? I just... what if she doesn't like me?"

"Oh, she'll like you. You're all she could talk about when we first brought her home," Xena assured the bard as they pulled closer to the tavern.

"Xena, I'm not sure I can do this," Gabrielle admitted before letting out a quiet, humorless laugh. "I can't believe this. I've been waiting for this moment for so long, and now I'm beginning to chicken out."

"You're not going to chicken out, Gabrielle. Not only are you stronger than that, but I'm not going to let you. You and your daughter deserve to be with each other again," the warrior princess told her, placing a reassuring hand on Gabrielle's. She pulled away when she felt the bard flinch.

"I'm sorry," the blonde apologized, knowing that Xena had pulled away because of her reaction.

"It's okay, Gabrielle. I understand." Xena pulled the wagon to a stop before jumping onto the ground. She stared at the bard, who was still sitting on the wagon. "Don't make me come up there and get you, Gabrielle," she said. Able to tell the difference between a threat and a promise, the blonde woman quickly found herself standing on the ground next to the wagon.

"Xena, are you sure-" Before the bard could finish her sentence, a blonde boy and a smaller girl walked out of the tavern.

"Mama!" The sound of her daughter's voice pulled Gabrielle's attention away from Xena and towards the inn. It wasn't long before she found her legs being wrapped in a hug from her daughter. The bard couldn't believe it.

She was no longer trapped in the prison that Perdicas had made in their home. She was no longer locked up in the prison that made her destroy a piece of her soul every night. And, she was with her daughter. It was too good to be true.

"Please don't let this be a trick," she said as she picked her daughter up and hugged her close to her chest. The little girl laughed before pulling back and grabbing her mother's nose.

"I'm not a trick, Mama. I'm real," she said. "And so is Solan and Xena! Am'wice is too, but I dunno where she is." After mentioning Amarice, the blonde girl began looking over Gabrielle's shoulder, trying to find the Amazon. She was taken by surprise when her mother pulled her close again. "Hey!"

"Oh Nexa... I missed you so much," Gabrielle whispered into the dark blonde hair, fighting back the tears that were beginning to form in her eyes. "I will never, ever leave you like that again. I promise. I'm sorry I was gone so long and I'm sorry I missed your birthday. Please don't hate me."

"I missed you too, Mama. Don't be sad. I don't hate you," Nexa assured her mother before wrapping her arms around her neck and giving her a hug of her own. "Jade helped me celebrate my biwthday, and Auntie Aphwodite gave me this." Nexa then

pulled out the pendant that she had received on her birthday. "See? You and Xena were with me on my birthday. Solan and Am'wice were, too. You didn't miss it." The tears that Gabrielle had been trying hard to hold back finally escaped, and the bard was unable to hold back a sob. "Oh. Don't cry, Mama. I didn't mean to make you sad."

"I'm not sad, sweetie. They're happy tears," she assured her daughter as she sniffled.

"Oh. Well, that's good," Nexa said before resting her head on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Mama, will you tell me a story?" she suddenly asked, looking up at her mother with hopeful blue-green eyes. Gabrielle gave her a watery smile before nodding her head.

"Any time you ask, my little warrior," she said, before launching into the tale of Xena and her quest to free death from the hands of a man afraid to die. Xena smiled as she followed them to the inn, wrapping her arm around her own son's shoulders when she got to him. As they entered the tavern, Xena was still smiling. Whether they were family by blood or love, she finally had her large family together again. And even though there were still many questions to be answered, she knew that they would be able to find the answers together. Looking at Gabrielle as she continued her story of Celesta, she found that she liked the sound of that. Together.

## **Epilogue**

Outside the quiet tavern in Amphipolis, rain poured down heavily as Zeus' thunderbolts flashed in the cloudy night sky, illuminating the small city that was covered in darkness. Those that were still unfortunate enough to remain outside at that late hour, such as the thieves and homeless, were drenched to the bone by the downpour of rain. The loud, rolling thunder, accompanied by the howling of the wind, made the horses in the stables prance around uneasily, spooked by the frightening noises. Despite the racket coming from outside, however, it was not the storm that was keeping the warrior princess up so late. It was the sick child in the bed before her, along with a nervous, pacing bard.

"Gabrielle, will you stop that? Nexa is going to be fine. The worst is over now," Xena assured her friend, not taking her eyes off the small four year old wrapped in the blankets.

"But Xena, what if-"

"There are no 'what ifs', Gabrielle. She's going to be alright," Xena interrupted her friend's objection. "Her fever has broken and she's already starting to breathe easier. She'll be out of bed driving Amarice insane again in a couple of days." Although she could still see the worry etched on Gabrielle's face, Xena was relieved when the bard stopped pacing and decided to take a seat beside her, next to Nexa's bed.

"I'm sorry. I've just never... I've never seen her sick before," the smaller woman admitted, her gaze directed at the floor beneath them. Xena could feel the sadness, tinged with worry and regret, radiating off her friend, but she was unsure of what she should do. It used to be Gabrielle that would comfort her when she needed it; not the other way around. "I don't know what to do..."

"Hey, it's alright. You're her mother; you're supposed to worry about her," Xena told

her, not prepared for the burst of self-hatred that it brought forth from the bard.

"Some mother I am," Gabrielle scoffed, trying hard to hold back the tears forming behind her eyes. "I never should have taken my eyes off her. Maybe then she wouldn't have gone running into that stupid lake," she chastised herself before quickly getting to her feet.

"What do you think you're doing?" Xena asked, although she didn't rise from the ground. She had a good idea of what Gabrielle was going to do.

"I just need to think about... things. Would you mind watching over her for me?"

"I was able to watch over her while you were gone. I think I can handle her a little bit longer." She had meant it as a joke, but Gabrielle didn't have to use words for Xena to know that that wasn't the right thing to say. She immediately started to apologize. "Gabrielle, that didn't come out how I wanted it to."

"Forget it, Xena. You're right," the blonde interrupted her before leaving the room. Xena listened to the footsteps as the bard descended the staircase before she heard the door open and close. The warrior princess sighed, unsure of what to do. She was so unused to this closed off version of her bard, and they hadn't been together long enough for her to grow accustomed to her.

"At least we were making progress when you were healthy, Little One," she said to the sleeping Nexa as she reached over and stroked the child's sweaty bangs. "Why can't I get through to her now?" Xena began ponder this question over and over again until an hour went by and Gabrielle still hadn't come back.

"Do you think she's had enough alone time?" she asked the peacefully sleeping child. As if she had heard the question, Nexa made a small noise. "Me too," Xena said with a small smile before placing a gentle kiss on the child's forehead. After deciding that she should go find Gabrielle, Xena made her way down the hall and asked Solan if he would watch over the sick child. He quickly agreed and took his mother's place beside Nexa's bed. With Gabrielle's daughter taken care of, Xena grabbed a cloak and headed downstairs before going out the door to find Gabrielle.

It proved to be much harder than she anticipated, given the stormy conditions. The wind howled in her ears, making it difficult for her to hear any unusual noises, and the rain had ruined any chances of her following the bard's trail easily. So, she started her search using the guess and check method. Mainly guessing places that she thought the bard would go and checking to see if she was there.

When it became clear that Gabrielle wasn't in the stables, at any of the other taverns of Amphipolis, or even back at Cyrene's, Xena was beginning to give up hope of finding her friend that night. The rain wasn't making it any easier to lift her spirits, even with the cloak protecting her from some of the cold droplets. Determined not to give up, however, Xena grit her teeth and started searching again, this time leaving the confines of the city and heading for the line of trees that helped protect it. Even with the howling wind and heavy rain, it didn't take long for her to figure out where Gabrielle was.

"It's a good thing that tree's unarmed, or you might get into some real trouble." Xena commented sarcastically as she watched the other woman strike the tree with her sais.

She smirked when she saw Gabrielle jump slightly, caught off guard by her voice.

"Xena, I fought in an illegal prison ring and sparred with Callisto everyday for six months. I think I can handle a tree," her friend told her once she regained her composure.

"Judging by the marks, it seems you've already taken care of it." The warrior princess walked over to the bard and indicated the many cuts that she had placed in the wood of the tree. "Perhaps it's time you came back to the inn. It's much drier there," she suggested, but the look in Gabrielle's eyes told her that she was still blaming herself for what happened with Nexa. She sighed before trying to assure her friend that it wasn't her fault. "Gabrielle, she's a child. Children hardly ever listen to their parents."

"And is it a wonder that she doesn't listen to me? I abandoned her, and we've been separated for so long that I can barely talk to her," Gabrielle said bitterly, her voice cracking at the last part. "I'm even afraid to touch her because I think I might hurt her." The tears she had been holding back began to silently cascade down her cheeks, mixing with the many drops of rain that could be found there.

"Gabrielle, I've seen you around your daughter. You would never do anything to hurt her. You have more self-control than you give yourself credit for," Xena told her. "You also didn't abandon her. What happened wasn't your fault," the warrior princess reminded her. "Besides, you did everything you could to get back to her. There was nothing else you could have done."

"Xena, you don't understand," Gabrielle objected as she wiped at the tears falling down her face.

"Then explain it to me," Xena replied, looking over at her distressed friend. She truly did want to understand what was troubling Gabrielle, and in order to do that, she needed to know what the bard was feeling. Unfortunately, this wasn't the same innocent, open bard that she had met in Potidaea and traveled with so many years ago.

"I... don't know how," Gabrielle admitted sheepishly. Xena heard a mirthless chuckle followed by a sigh come from her friend. "Imagine that. A bard that doesn't know how to explain something."

"Give it time. You'll find the words again when you're ready." Xena took Gabrielle's hand and squeezed it gently, relieved when Gabrielle didn't pull away from her. *'At least she's finally able to be touched again,'* Xena thought as she remembered when they had first brought Gabrielle back. The former Amazon had been jumpy and flinched whenever anybody besides Nexa touched her.

"What if I'm never ready?" Gabrielle whispered, drawing Xena out of her thoughts. The warrior looked over at her friend once more, who was staring longingly back at Amphipolis where her daughter was.

"Then I'll find another way to help you," she told her with a rare smile. Gabrielle stared at her for a moment before looking down at the ground, a small smile of her own tugging at her lips as she whispered something that was drowned out by the thunder.

"Huh?"

"I said, 'Since when did you become so good at making people feel better?'" Gabrielle repeated loudly, looking back up at Xena.

"What can I say? I have many skills." The familiar joke between the two of them made Gabrielle smile for real before taking a step towards the warrior princess, dropping her sais to the ground before wrapping her arms around Xena's middle. Not expecting the embrace, it was a few moments before Xena awkwardly hugged Gabrielle back. She noticed the restraint it took for Gabrielle to stop herself from flinching, and it almost made her pull away. The smaller woman gently made Xena stay where she was, though, before resting her head on her chest. Xena relaxed as well, once she was sure that Gabrielle was fine, and allowed herself to tuck Gabrielle's head under her chin.

They stayed like that as the storm raged around them. At that moment, they could care less about the rain pouring down. In their minds, it was like a waterfall that was washing away the wrongs they had committed in the past.

Xena wasn't sure how long they stood together like that when she felt Gabrielle shift beneath her. When she looked down to see what was wrong, she found herself falling into intense green eyes; the same eyes that she had fallen in love with so long ago. The flash of lightning that lit up the area and the thunder that followed only served to increase the intense feelings that were running through her. Before she knew what she was doing, Xena was lowering head and going in to finally kiss her bard. That is, until said bard sneezed in her face.

"Sorry," Gabrielle apologized as she took a step back, sniffing a bit as she rubbed her nose. Xena merely chuckled as she shook her head.

"I knew we should have gone back to the tavern. Come on, before you get even sicker."

"I'm not sick!" the blonde objected. Despite her protests, though, she grabbed her sais and followed after her dark haired friend, who had already started back for Amphipolis.

Once they were back at the tavern, Cyrene made both Xena and Gabrielle change and take a seat in front of the fire. They could hear her muttering something under her breath about warriors and their sidekicks as she handed them both blankets and walked away. Neither hesitated to wrap the warm covers around themselves before staring into the flames of the fire in the hearth. The two companions were silent, both contemplating what had almost happened in the woods. As time slowly passed by, however, the warrior and bard gradually made their way closer to the other, unaware of what they were doing until they finally bumped into each other.

"Uh... hi," Gabrielle stammered nervously as she wrapped the blanket tighter around her. She could feel the goose bumps prickling her skin, and she was sure that it wasn't from the cold.

"Hi," Xena said back, raising an eyebrow. Gabrielle mentally chastised herself for sounding so dumb. "Did you want something?"

"Well, I was just thinking that it would be much warmer if we uh... shared blankets," the bard suggested, giving Xena a hopeful look. It almost made Xena laugh, but she

simply smiled again and lifted her arm up so that Gabrielle could fit under her blanket. As she wrapped her arm around the bard once more, Xena was taken back to a time before Perdicas, and it felt as if everything was right in the world again.

She gently placed a kiss on Gabrielle's forehead, and the smaller woman somehow managed to snuggle closer before resting her head on Xena's shoulder. Staring into the fire, the warrior princess thought back to the years that she had gone without the blonde in her life and everything they had gone through to find each other again. Now that she was covered by two blankets and sitting in front of a warm fire with Gabrielle next to her, Xena had to admit that everything *was* right in the world; her world, at least. Then she heard Gabrielle sneeze again, followed by a snuffle.

'Well... *almost everything*,' she thought before resting her cheek on Gabrielle's head, a smile on her face as her eyes closed and she drifted off to sleep.

The End