

~ Equal To The Gods ~

by LadyKate

DISCLAIMER: Xena, Ares, Gabrielle, Eve, Virgil, Varia, Cyane, Gascar, and other characters who have appeared on the show XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS are the property of Renaissance Pictures-MCA/Universal Studios. This is a not-for-profit work of fan fiction, and no copyright infringement is intended.

Unlike my other Xena fanfics, *Equal to the Gods* depicts Xena and Gabrielle as lovers. On the show, I can see their relationship either way (though I generally tend to see them as friends). This story shows Xena as being in love with both Gabrielle and Ares, and has scenes depicting both female/female and male/female sexual relations. It also depicts a non-monogamous relationship. If any of this is offensive to you, please find another story to read.

The story takes place in Season 6, starting with OLD ARES HAD A FARM. It adapts and alters plot elements from several other Season 6 episodes, including PATH OF VENGEANCE and WHEN FATES COLLIDE. Readers may also spot a joke at the expense of A FRIEND IN NEED, which never happened according to the *Equal to the Gods* version of the canon.

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These acknowledgments would not be complete without a mention of three works of fan fiction that provided some of the inspiration for this story: *Family* by Mark Annetts; *When the Night...* by Grit Jahning; and the exquisite *Skin Tight* by Juxian Tang.

There are many versions of the two Sappho poems quoted in *Equal to the Gods*. The ones used here were written especially for this story by Tango (adapted from a prose translation).

Please send feedback to LadyKate63@cs.com

*"Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a heaven in hell's despair."*

*So sung a little clod of clay,
Trodden with the cattle's feet;
But a pebble of the brook
Warbled out these meters meet:*

*"Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a hell in heaven's despite."*

-- William Blake, "The Clod and the Pebble"

CHAPTER 1

Leaning back against a bale of hay, Ares reflected with mild surprise that he was in a pretty good mood.

Of course, it was ludicrous for a god -- all right, a former god, but *especially* the former God of War -- to be even remotely content under the circumstances. Here he was on a dilapidated old farm, hiding from a bunch of homicidal warlords who'd put a bounty on his now-mortal head, wearing what looked like some bedraggled peasant's hand-me-downs. Various parts of him were still aching from the tumble he'd taken earlier trying to fix the roof, and from getting roughed up by one of the bounty hunters while posing as a farmer to fool them. And yet as he sat in the sunlit barn, stroking the shaggy fur of the mutt who had befriended him and watching the love of his life milk a cow, he was -- well, he was actually enjoying himself.

He did hope that before this rustic interlude was over, Xena's irritating little friend would go off somewhere and give them some time alone. He had another chance with her, he could feel it, no matter what she'd told him before about a one-in-a-billion shot. She cared about him, or else she wouldn't have taken him to her grandparents' farm after learning that the warlords were after him. Admittedly, it was humiliating to hide instead of fighting them at her side, as he had wanted. But things had been so good between them these past couple of days -- the comfortable closeness -- the playful bickering -- the way she talked about how great it was that they could all sit together in front of the fire ...

Xena's voice spilled into his reverie. "Double squeeze takes too long."

"Nah, you get more milk that way. It's easier on the cow." Gabrielle giggled as Xena sent a little jet of milk in her direction.

Ares shook his head and laughed. "The Warrior Princess and the Battling Bard, discussing the correct technique for milking a cow. Absurd -- and yet at the same

time..." -- he paused to let them think he was about to say something sappy -- "...ridiculous."

Xena shot him a wry look, pointing a finger at him. "It's important."

He chuckled, watching as she returned to her task. The brown country-girl dress she was wearing was just as preposterous as the rest of this setup -- but damn, she looked good in it, the light fabric clinging to the curves of her body, her relaxed posture only hinting at the graceful strength of her limbs...

There was a noise outside, and Horace stirred, pricking up his ears. Then, a squeaky though identifiably male sing-song called out, "Hello? Anyone there?"

"In here!" said Gabrielle.

A gray-bearded man wearing a turban and long motley robes pranced into the barn.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said with an unctuous little bow, "but I was wondering if anyone had seen my dog."

"Your dog," Ares repeated, with a sudden, embarrassing flutter of anxiety in his chest. Before he could continue, Horace yelped and jumped to his feet.

"Tha- tha- that's him!" The man's wrinkly face spread in a broad grin. "That's him! It's really him! It's Milo!"

"This is your dog?" Xena asked.

"Ye-es," the man drawled. "I was passing through here a couple of weeks ago -- I'm a peddler, you understand -- and he ran off during a thunderstorm. Milo, you bad boy -- I've looked for you everywhere! Did you find him here?"

"Yeah," Gabrielle said. "He was running around the grounds."

"And stealing us blind," Xena chimed in.

"Oh, oh -- " the peddler chuckled apologetically -- "that's my Milo all right. He loves to take things and bury them..."

"You ought to keep a better eye on your damn dog," Ares snapped. *Oh no... he was not getting upset over this!*

"Sorry, so sorry, sir. I hope he wasn't too much trouble. Well, this is definitely my lucky day... Here, boy!"

The dog turned to Ares and looked at him with those funny eyes of his, one blue and one gray, and then nuzzled him and licked his face. Ares blinked. *Great -- anytime now he was going to start bawling like a kid who'd lost a toy.* He lifted his hand and patted Horace on the head.

"Maybe he wants to stay here," Gabrielle said.

"Here you go!" The old man was waving a bone he had produced from his pocket.
"Come to Daddy, Milo!"

The fickle animal bounded toward his master, but then froze in place and turned back to look at Ares, tail wagging uncertainly, confusion written all over his spotted muzzle. After taking a few steps toward Ares, he fidgeted, whimpered and trudged toward the old man, only to stop again and turn his head, barking a couple of times as if pleading for help. The peddler resolved the dog's plight by walking over and picking him up.

"Thank you for taking care of him!" he said, beaming. "I just can't tell you how glad I am to have him back. Come on, pooch!"

The dog gave another plaintive yelp as the old man waddled away from the barn. Ares rose to his feet, staring after them. Xena came up and gave him a sympathetic squeeze on the shoulder, and he realized that his distress was plain on his face.

"Damn," he muttered.

"Hey," Xena said. "Sorry about that."

"I'm going to change," Ares said abruptly and headed for the house.

Mortality sucks, he thought savagely as he pulled off the peasant togs and kicked them into a corner. Physical pain and discomfort were bad enough; he had been prepared to deal with that, from his previous brief experiences as a mortal. Being at the mercy of his emotions like this was far worse. It was one thing to get agitated over Xena -- she'd had that effect on him even as a god, though not nearly to the same degree -- but some stupid animal? All right, so he'd started to like having the mutt around and to enjoy its overeager affection. So he'd gotten a ridiculously warm and fuzzy feeling when the dog tried to defend him during the confrontation with Gascar's men. Still, it wasn't as if he had lost anything important...

Back in his leather pants, Ares came out into the main room of the house. A single sunbeam that cut through the shadows, with golden specks of dust shimmering in its soft haze, gave just enough light to show what a mess the place was, and made the rest of the room seem even murkier. Xena stood by the rickety table, pouring milk from the bucket into a tall clay jar. The women stopped their conversation and looked at him.

"What?"

"Gabrielle is going to try to get your furry friend back," Xena said.

"You mean, go after the old codger, kick the crap out of him and grab Horace? I approve."

"No," Gabrielle said, giving him a tolerant little grin. "I'm going to talk to him. Try telling him that maybe Horace will be better off staying here."

"Hmph." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "I guess those people skills of yours may be good for something."

"Thank you, Gabrielle," Xena said rather pointedly, pressing Gabrielle's hand. The bard smiled back at her and went outside.

Things were definitely looking up, Ares thought as he listened to the fading hoofbeat. Then he realized that he was alone with *her*, and he hadn't the slightest idea what to say.

"You want some?" Xena asked.

He flinched. "Huh?"

"Milk." He thought she actually blushed a bit but it was hard to tell in the semi-dark room. "You want some milk?"

"Yeah, sure."

She poured the white, frothy liquid into a mug and handed it to him. Ares took a sip and gave her a startled look. Xena lifted an eyebrow.

"Don't tell me you've never had milk before."

"It's ... warm."

"Well, of course. It's fresh from the source."

He quirked his lips and sniffed, wincing a little, but finally decided to drink it. It was creamy, with a sweetish taste. He drained the mug and put it down.

Xena looked at him with a faint smile. "You have..."

"What?"

She reached out and ran her fingers over his mustache, brushing his lips. Suddenly struggling for breath, Ares wondered dizzily what she would do if he kissed her fingers. She pulled her hand away, a little too abruptly.

"There... it's off."

He couldn't think of anything coherent to say, or anything to do except stare at her, breathing in the faint scent of her sweat. Funny how in this half-darkness, her eyes seemed light brown instead of the usual piercing blue... Her mouth opened slightly; then she clamped it shut, her jaw rigid. His ears were ringing, and he felt as if he'd been hit by a gust of icy wind followed by a blast of hot air.

Xena turned away and put a lid on the milk jar, then moved about some mugs and bowls on the table. After a pause that seemed like it would never end, she said, "Don't be upset. If Gabrielle doesn't get Horace back, we'll get you another dog."

"I don't want another dog. I want Horace."

She turned back toward him and smiled again -- and then, without really thinking, he took her hand, looking straight at her, and said, "I don't want another woman, either."

"You only want Horace?" she joked feebly, but her eyes were soft and almost fearful. Holding his breath, he moved a little closer. Xena tilted her head, her eyes half-lidded now, and they both leaned forward, almost imperceptibly, until their lips touched.

Slowly, they deepened the kiss; Ares took Xena in his arms and felt her arms lock around him. Her body was warm and supple, her full breasts pushing up against him, her nipples hard under the thin fabric. Ares' heart was nearly jumping out of his chest, and his arousal was both intensely pleasurable and almost painful, trapped as he was in the tight leather. For once, this kiss was both tender and passionate, and as her tongue caressed his lips and swirled inside his mouth he thought dimly that one could die from such bliss.

When he opened his eyes, her face was flushed, her lips swollen. He bent down and kissed her neck, savoring the tender skin, feeling the beat of her pulse underneath. She moaned softly and moved her hands down, stroking his back.

Ares lifted his head and whispered raggedly, "So -- how long do you think we have before your little sidekick walks through that door?"

Before he'd finished saying it, he knew it had been the wrong thing to say. Xena's body tensed immediately, and then she was pushing him away and wrenching herself out of his arms.

"I can't do this," she murmured breathlessly.

He stepped back and gaped at her, bewildered.

"What's the matter?"

"I can't..." She looked down. "I can't ... this is wrong."

"Wrong?" He was getting angry; she couldn't be playing games with him, not now, not anymore. "Why?"

Xena finally raised her eyes and gave him an odd, guilty look.

"I can't do this -- to Gabrielle."

"*Gabrielle?*" He squinted at her. *Unbelievable. Of all the excuses...* "What in Tartarus does this have to do with Gabrielle? What, she thinks I'm so hideously evil that she can't stand the thought of your being with me? And this is after I -- "

"Ares." Xena shook her head. She looked like she was bracing herself for something, and all of a sudden he was afraid. "Gabrielle and I -- " She tarried for another moment and took the plunge. "Has it ever occurred to you that Gabrielle and I were -- more than friends?"

"More than -- friends," he repeated, stupefied. It was just a joke, she was just teasing, he told himself even as he knew with perfect clarity that it was true. His mouth was very dry, and the room now seemed a lot darker than before. He leaned heavily back against the table. There was a loud thud; something wet and thick covered his hand, and he realized he'd knocked over the milk jar.

"Damn," Xena muttered. She quickly set the jar upright to salvage whatever was left and grabbed a rag to mop up the milk.

"You and Gabrielle..." Ares tried to collect his thoughts. "You mean, you -- you prefer girls."

She stopped mopping. "It's not about preferring girls... You know it's not about -- not wanting you. It's about ... me and Gabrielle, that's all."

"Oh, it's all about you and Gabrielle." For a moment everything else he felt was pushed back by a surge of anger. "And that's why you were kissing me just now -- "

She flinched slightly and stiffened. Then she started mopping again.

"So how long has this been going on?"

Xena said nothing, and he repeated, "For how long?"

"Since ... " She sighed. "Since about three years after we first met."

"And it never occurred to you to tell me about this?"

"Like when?" Her voice suddenly had a hard edge.

"Oh I don't know." He didn't want to sound bitter and sarcastic, but something inside him was goading him on. "Like when I told you I was willing to give up my godhood and take on all the other gods to protect you and your kid -- if I could spend the rest of my life with you. That might have been your cue to say, 'You're wasting your time, Ares, I already have a girlfriend.'"

Throwing aside the soaked rag, Xena whipped around. Her eyes were narrow and bright.

"You mean, when you were using my baby's life as a bargaining chip to get me into bed? You think I owed you an explanation then?"

He felt the blood pounding in his temples. If she had punched him in the face, it would have hurt less.

"It wasn't like that," he said, his voice breaking. "I loved you -- you know I did..."

Her glare dissolved into a sympathetic, rather pained look. "Ares... what's past is past -- I don't want to rehash that. You know you didn't give me a lot of reasons to trust you, back then." She paused. "And besides -- I always thought that maybe you knew

and didn't care."

"You thought I *knew*?"

"Well -- after all, you *were* a god."

"Yeah, rub it in, why don't you," he snapped. "Really, Ares, for a god, you were blind as a bat!"

"I didn't mean it that way."

Ares stared silently at his boots, breathing hard.

After a while, she said, "I always told you we couldn't be together..."

"Dammit. All this time, I thought that if I could just prove myself -- prove that I loved you, that I wasn't bad for you..." His throat clenched painfully and he trailed off.

"I'm sorry," she said, putting a hand on his arm. He shuddered and moved away.

"Don't touch me."

There was another silence. Then he said, "And I saved her for you. If that doesn't make me the world's biggest chump..."

"Maybe it makes you very noble," Xena said quietly.

He gave a short, nasty laugh. "*Noble*?"

"Once, Gab- -" she stumbled a bit -- "I helped some peasants defend themselves from a gang of thugs who were preying on the local villages. There was one man, Timeas... he had been engaged to his childhood sweetheart, except she fell in love with another man -- the new village schoolteacher -- and ended up marrying him. One night, about a month before we got there, the bandits attacked and torched some houses, and the school too. The teacher was inside -- he'd gone in to copy some scrolls and fallen asleep at his desk. No one knew he was there, and by the time they heard him screaming, everyone thought it was too dangerous to go in. And Timeas went in and rescued him." She paused and added, almost wistfully, "We fought side by side against the bandits later, Timeas and I. He was one of the best men I've ever met."

Maybe she was right, Ares thought; at least he'd made her happy by giving Gabrielle back to her. Then he was furious, at her and at himself. She had led him on and used him -- and now she was trying to pacify him with a feelgood story, and he was lapping it up.

"So what happened to this paragon of virtue?" he asked caustically.

Xena's eyes flickered. "I -- I don't know."

He gave her a probing look.

"You do know, don't you? Only it messes up the moral of your story. What, he ran off with the girl later on?"

"No," Xena said slowly. "He ... he left the village and went to a nearby town to start a new life."

"And then what?"

She avoided his eyes. "He started drinking... He got worse and worse, until he ended up begging in the streets. I heard he died a few years later."

"So your hero drank himself to death. Not a bad idea."

He walked briskly into the back room where he had left his things, and put on his vest. Then he remembered that he had no money. His ring; that should do.

When he came out, Xena stood by the door, a worried look on her face.

"Where are you going?"

"To start a new life. In the first tavern I can find."

"Ares ..." She reached out toward him.

"No."

"Ares, listen to me." She put her hands on his shoulders and he wanted to push her away, but her touch was so warm, so gentle. "Please ... I don't want to see you hurt."

"It's a little too late for that," he said hoarsely.

"Please -- after everything we've been through, can't you just -- be glad knowing that we're friends now -- that I care about you?"

Her eyes were tender and a little moist, and Ares knew his anger was slipping away. He wanted so badly to kiss her again.

He swallowed. "Xena..."

Just then, footsteps creaked on the porch. Xena stepped back abruptly. The front door swung open and Gabrielle announced, "I'm back!"

She came in and gave him an apologetic smile. "Ares ... sorry, but I wasn't able to get Horace back -- the man wouldn't even hear of parting with him. Now, don't look so glum," she added brightly, "we'll get -- "

"*You*," Ares said, almost choking with rage. A memory came over him of how the two of them had played him in Amphipolis years ago -- how Xena had promised herself to him if he protected her child from Athena, and Gabrielle put on a show of distress to convince him that the offer was for real -- and how the little bitch stood there and smirked when, after helping Xena, he realized he'd been tricked. It had been annoying

enough then; now, the thought that all that time, she actually had what he so desperately desired nearly drove him mad.

She blinked at him, puzzled. "What?"

"I bet you got off on knowing how much I wanted her -- didn't you," he snarled. "I should have slapped that smug little grin right off your face."

Gabrielle's stunned, open-mouthed look might have given Ares a small measure of satisfaction, but he felt too wretched even for that. He swept past her, deliberately jostling her, and walked out.

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Recovering somewhat from the shock, Gabrielle started to ask, "What was -- ?" but was cut short by the alarmed neighing of her horse, left tied by the porch. That was followed by a rapidly receding clatter of hooves.

"Oh, great!"

She dashed outside, with Xena behind her, just in time to see Ares galloping away.

Xena put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle glanced at her warily. "What's going on?"

"I'm going after him." Xena's face had the intense yet emotionless look of total focus that Gabrielle knew so well. She stepped off the porch but Gabrielle gripped her arm.

"Wait, wait. What happened?"

"I'll tell you later."

Gabrielle's bewilderment was giving way to a vague dread.

"No," she said quietly, making Xena turn around with a start. "Tell me now."

Xena stared at her silently, biting her lip. Gabrielle thought back to what Ares had said; it could only mean one thing.

"You told him about us."

"Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"I had to, Gabrielle. I couldn't keep stringing him along."

Gabrielle frowned slightly. "And how did your conversation happen to take that turn?"

Xena looked down, and just then Gabrielle realized that something odd had caught her eye when she came into the house, before she was distracted by Ares' outburst. She peered inside through the half-open door. There were white streaks on the floor and the tabletop, and a sopping wet rag on the edge of the table that dripped a grayish liquid.

She looked at Xena again, and wondered how she could have missed it before -- the shiny puffiness of her lips, the reddening spot on her neck. Something inside Gabrielle's chest coiled into a knot, momentarily squeezing the breath out of her.

"Of course. I leave you alone with Ares for half an hour and you're already knocking over milk jars!"

Xena flinched. "Look, nothing really happened..."

"Really. Well, I'd hate to see your idea of *something*." The words were burning Gabrielle's throat; she knew she was being nasty and vicious yet she still wanted to say those things, to punish both Xena and herself. After everything they'd been through together -- to think that Xena would risk throwing it all away because she'd taken a fancy to Ares! Then again, Gabrielle thought, she should have known ... maybe she *had* known. Xena had always wanted Ares, and now that he was mortal, now that she didn't have to be afraid that he'd pull her into the darkness...

She shook her head bitterly.

"I should have known."

"Gabrielle -- dammit, Ares just rode off alone -- unarmed." Xena's voice dropped to a hiss. "There's an army out there trying to kill him. This really isn't the time for a jealous spat!"

Gabrielle knew she should be furious, but she felt too numb for that -- too numb even to find any comfort in Xena's horrified look.

"Oh, Gabrielle -- " Xena reached out to touch her but Gabrielle shrank back. "I didn't mean that, I didn't mean it that way ... Please trust me -- nothing happened, I stopped it -- I stopped it because of you..."

"Oh, because of me," Gabrielle said quietly. She couldn't let it go, not this easily. "I'm sorry I'm keeping you from what you really want."

"No -- you know it's not true..." Tears were welling in Xena's eyes. "All I want is to spend the rest of my life with you... I swear, nothing is going to change that."

Gabrielle didn't resist when Xena hugged her and stroked her hair and her neck -- but she stiffened her body, not wanting just yet to give in to the hold of those strong arms, to the touch of those hands that had enough tenderness in them to make her feel loved no matter what. At last she relaxed, shivering a bit, and hid her face in Xena's shoulder.

Her soft breath touching Gabrielle's hair, Xena whispered, "I would never betray you. You believe me, don't you?"

Did she? What they had, Gabrielle told herself, was so much greater and deeper than any attraction Xena might feel toward Ares. The thought of Xena in Ares' arms, kissing him, making those low throaty sounds she made when she was excited, still clawed at Gabrielle from inside; but how could she doubt that they would always be together? *Of course I believe you.* She nodded, pressing her face deeper into Xena's shoulder.

Xena leaned over and kissed her cheek and let her lips slide down, barely brushing the skin, until she touched Gabrielle's mouth. Her eyes closed now, Gabrielle parted her lips, tentatively at first, then responding completely. Right now, it was just the two of them; there was no Ares, no one else in the whole world.

Pulling back, Xena looked at her with a faint, tender smile. Then she said almost pleadingly, "I have to go find him. He's going to get in trouble out there -- Gabrielle, we promised to help him -- "

I can deal with it. Gabrielle managed a mischievous half-grin.

"Go. Just try not to be *too* helpful."

"*Gabrielle!*"

"I'm joking." She reached up and quickly pressed her lips to Xena's. "I trust you. Be careful, okay?" Catching Xena's look, Gabrielle smiled wanly and shook her head. "I don't mean *that* way. Go on."

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By the time Xena got to the main road, finding Ares' tracks was hopeless; it seemed like half the people in the province had picked that particular time to pass through. As she rode toward the nearest local tavern, her mind was focused completely on the practical task before her: find Ares and get him back to the farm. Everything else could wait -- had to wait.

Ares wasn't in that tavern, or in the one she checked out after that. She was *not* going to let herself panic and lose concentration. Everything was going to be okay.

Dusk was already falling when she rode up to yet another tavern, The One-Eyed Ox. She heard raucous laughter and singing coming from inside, and at the same moment spotted Gabrielle's mare, Clio, among the horses tethered outside. She only stopped breathing for a moment.

Giving Argo a quick pat on the neck, Xena dismounted. She was still in her country frock -- there had been no point in changing into her leathers, and if anything, it was best not to attract extra attention under the circumstances -- but she had taken her sword, just in case. Briefly, she pondered whether to take the weapon inside. A farm

girl with a really big sword would certainly attract attention, both to herself and to Ares; besides, it didn't sound like Ares was in danger from anything more lethal than cheap booze.

She left the sword hooked to Argo's saddle and strode into the murkily lit tavern. The air inside was heavy with the reek of wine fumes, rancid oil and unwashed human bodies, with an added whiff of vomit which a serving girl crouched on the floor was in the process of cleaning up.

"Hey, lady," the barkeep called out. "What'll it be?"

"Nothing, thanks."

"Just so you know, all the drinks are free."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "What is it, ladies' night?"

"Ladies', gentlemen's, you name it," the man chortled, baring a set of crooked yellow teeth. "Some clown's buying for everyone tonight."

"Really," Xena said icily. She had the bad feeling that she knew exactly who the "clown" was. "How did *that* happen?"

"Fella walks in and hands me this ring and asks how much it'll buy." The barkeep gave her a broad "can't believe my luck" grin. "And I go, that should be enough to buy drinks for everyone in the place. So he goes, then I'm buying." He shook his head and laughed. "So, you havin' anything?"

Xena gave him a scorching look and turned away, scanning the establishment. A particularly noisy bunch, belting out a song horribly out of tune and out of unison, had gathered in one corner.

She saw him -- his hair messy and slick with sweat, his vest open, leaning on the stained, wet table with a large chipped wine jug and several half-empty cups on it. He was apparently trying to sing along with the rest of the crowd. Plastered against him was a redhead in serious peril of falling out of her dress.

Resolutely ignoring the spasm that clenched around her heart, Xena marched up to Ares.

"*Androcles*." She stressed the name they had agreed on using in front of strangers. "There you are."

The singing stopped, two or three stragglers still carrying on for a few hoarse notes. Ares looked up at her, his eyes glassy and bloodshot.

"Xe - na." He hiccupped loudly. "What an uness -- unex -- " He shook his head and gave up. "What a -- surprise."

"Let's go home," she said.

"Home?" Ares laughed shrilly. "I don't have a home."

"Sure you do." She tried to touch his arm but he pushed her hand away.

"See, Xena, I don't need you anymore." His eyes were alive again, alive and wounded. "Cause I got lots -- lotsa new f... friends." In a sweeping gesture, he indicated his fellow revelers. "And I have a girl, too," he added, drawing an arm around the redhead's waist. "C'mere, baby."

The girl obligingly perched herself on Ares' knee and glued herself to his mouth, to cheers and claps from the other patrons.

"Way to go, Chloe," called out a fat middle-aged woman.

Xena pressed her lips into a rigid line. Dammit -- she had to get him out of there.

Ares turned to her with a bitter sneer.

"See, she's not like you," he said. "She's nice. And she likes me."

The only way she could get them both through this was to steel herself, not to let anything he said reach a part of her where it could hurt.

"You're the best, honey," Chloe giggled.

Xena's eyes fell on the bauble that shone dimly between the girl's breasts. It was Ares' dagger pendant. *That* was too much.

"What are you doing with that?"

The girl looked offended. "Hey -- he gave it to me!"

"Thass right... I did." Ares nodded, looking for a moment like he was falling asleep; then he snapped his head up. "She asked me nicely and I let her have it." He planted a wet kiss on Chloe's plump freckled shoulder. "You can have anything you want, baby ... ess... except my heart. See, I already gave it to her -- " he waved at Xena -- "and she chewed it up and spat it out."

It was getting to her, no matter how she tried.

"These people taught me a great song," he said. "You wanna hear?"

"No," Xena said, but he was already singing hoarsely:

"I fell in love with a beautiful girl
As cold and cruel as Death.
She said: To prove your love is true,
Cut your heart out of your breast.

And I -- "

He faltered, hiccupped again and broke into a fit of coughing. Xena heard snickering, and felt a surge of rage at the thought that a bunch of lowlifes in a cheap tavern were laughing at him. It wasn't that she had ever had much respect for the status of the gods -- but to see him like this ...

"That's enough," she said, her voice steady. She wasn't looking at Ares; right now, she had to get his damn pendant back. "Are you going to give that thing back like a good girl, or do I have to make you give it back?"

"Who are you?" the girl squealed. "His wife?"

"How did you guess?" *It was just a good cover story; nothing personal.*

Chloe gave her a nervous look, starting to vacillate.

"She's not my wife," Ares said. He rubbed his temples, winced and blinked rapidly, as if trying to clear the fog. "She could've been. She coulda had ... she coulda had everything -- and you oughta see what she chose instead -- "

Focus. She couldn't let it get to her, she couldn't.

Xena held out her hand, glaring at the girl.

"Well?"

"Hey, Chloe!" the barkeep yelled. "Give it back, will ya? I don't want no trouble in here."

Pouting, the girl took off the pendant and threw it down; it landed in a thin pool of wine next to an obscenity someone had carved crookedly into the table's surface. Xena picked it up and turned to Ares.

"Come on, honey. I'm taking you home."

"Aren't you... aren't you lissening to me?" His voice rose. "I don't fucking *need* you anymore! I was havin' fun here... till you showed up, okay?" His eyes glistened angrily. "No, no -- wait ... I do need you for one thing. All my friends here... they didn't believe me when I told 'em who I was ... I mean, who I am... used to be.... you know what I mean. You tell 'em." He turned to the crowd. "See, *she* knows."

The chill went right down to the pit of Xena's stomach. As much as she hated to humiliate him, the hideous danger he was in overshadowed everything else.

"So which god is it today?" she said, managing to sound glib and scornful. "Apollo? Hermes? Maybe Zeus himself? You and your drunken fantasies..."

There was more snickering around the table.

"Liar!" His angry shout had a plaintive edge. "Don't listen to her... I'm Ares, God of

War... I mean I was... until she was done with me..."

"Sure, and I'm Aphrodite." She came closer. "Come along, *God of War*. Let's go."

"I'm not going anywhere with you..." Ares grimaced. "You hate me. Leave me alone."

"I don't hate you," Xena said, leaning toward him. Then she kissed him. There wasn't anything pleasant about this kiss, with the cheap wine on his breath and the sour taste in his mouth, and yet something tugged at her heart as he closed his eyes and moaned softly. She pulled away. When he opened his eyes again, all the resistance in them was gone.

"Let's go," she said again, stroking his cheek, ignoring scattered catcalls and guffaws in the audience.

"Okay," he said meekly and got up, leaning on her arm.

As they walked to the door, with Ares shuffling his feet and slumping on her shoulder, a hush fell over the tavern, except for one person cackling somewhere in a corner. Xena had the dreamlike feeling that they were making an escape, and all those people were waiting to pounce on them but couldn't move, frozen under some kind of spell. She thought of trying to get Ares' ring back from the barkeep, but there was no way she could pay for all those drinks. Besides, she just wanted to get out as soon as possible.

* ~ * ~ *

The daylight was gone when they came out, the cool air buzzing with insects drawn to the dim light of the tavern windows. No one followed them; moments after their exit, the shouting and singing inside picked up again. Just off the porch, Ares' legs buckled, and he sagged heavily on Xena's arm and sank to his knees on a patch of sparse, much-trampled grass. Xena tried to help him up, but he lurched forward and she heard the sounds of retching.

Looking around, she saw the well, luckily only a few steps away. She lowered the bucket and drew it up as quickly as she could, gritting her teeth as the handle creaked and groaned at every turn. Filling the dipper with ice-cold water, she brought it to Ares and held it for him while he drank greedily and splashed the water on his face. He grunted and gasped for breath and tried to get up, leaning on her arm. "I've got you," she said, gripping his forearms, "I've got you" -- but his legs gave out and he sank down again. She sighed and went over to get the bucket.

"Sorry," she whispered, almost to herself, and poured the rest of the water over his head.

Ares coughed and spluttered and cursed, and then looked up at her, blinking in confusion, his mouth open. Her heart clenched again; she was glad no one could see them, and hoped that he wouldn't remember too much of this.

This time, Xena was able to haul him to his feet and steer him toward the horses. There was no way he was going to ride on his own. It took her a good deal of effort to

get him up on Argo before climbing in the saddle behind him. Argo snorted and tossed her head in displeasure.

"Sorry 'bout that, girl," she said, stroking the mare's side.

Ares leaned back against her, shivering, the cold water trickling down his neck and under his vest.

"I'm..." -- his voice broke for a moment, his teeth chattering -- "I'm always causing you trouble..."

"Shh..." She rubbed his upper arms and then hugged him, trying to get him warm. "It's okay..."

She had to give Argo a few prods with her heels before the mare trudged off. Gradually, Ares stopped trembling and his breathing grew regular, and moments later he was fast asleep.

As they rode home at a slow trot, with the obedient Clio bringing up the rear, Xena knew that the danger wasn't over; they could run into Gascar's army, for all she knew. Nonetheless, she began to relax, enough to chuckle when Ares woke up, glanced behind him and muttered, "Hey... there's a horse following us!" Her muscles were getting sore and numb from riding double and holding him up, and yet -- and yet, despite the discomfort, having him in her arms made her mind drift back to their embrace that afternoon.

Best not to go there. That was something to be stored in a box marked "Do Not Open," along with certain other moments in their history ... like the time she pretended to seduce him to get his help against Athena and found herself melting into his kisses for real.

Other memories came to her. Ares was sitting on a tree stump, alone and mortal, having just recovered from possession by the Furies, and she came to say good-bye. She couldn't resist touching his battered face -- *yes, she had to fight him when he was mad, but did she have to hit so hard?* -- as if she was doing him any good by poking at those cuts and scratches. She couldn't resist kissing him, not when he held her hands so gently and spoke to her with a quiet hopefulness so unlike the arrogance of the God of War -- and then, after that brief kiss, there was such warmth in his smile and in his eyes. His eyes... she could still see the look in his eyes when she came up to thank him after he had given up his immortality to save her and Gabrielle and Eve: utterly defenseless, fearful at first and then brimming with tenderness. And there was another memory that floated up from much, much earlier -- the first time Ares had lost his godhood, the moment when he regained it with her help and she watched the scruffy but likable mortal disappear into the cold cruel beauty of the god.

It was past midnight when they returned to the farm. There was light in the main room; Xena wondered if Gabrielle was still up, and realized that she felt uneasy at the thought of facing her. She shook Ares gently until he stirred and grumbled an unintelligible complaint.

"We're home," she said. "Hang on..."

None too gracefully, she clambered off Argo, trying to stretch as she maneuvered Ares to the ground. She led him to the house, hobbling a little from the stiffness in her legs, and reflected wryly that it probably looked like they had *both* enjoyed too much of a good time. *Don't we make a pretty picture.*

Rather to Xena's relief, Gabrielle was nowhere in sight. She walked Ares to the room he now occupied -- her grandparents' old bedroom -- and carefully let him down on the bed. By the time she started to undress him, he was out again; she found herself feeling grateful for that, and for the darkness.

She fluffed the pillow and lifted Ares up to it, smoothing his still-damp hair, and then pulled up the blanket. He stirred, lifting his head -- she thought she could see his eyelids flutter open -- and grasped her hand, murmuring, "Xena..." She held her breath, not sure if he was asleep or not. Ares' head dropped back on the pillow but he was still holding on to her hand as she stood over him. Xena put her other hand on top of his and ran her thumb over his knuckles, feeling the soft bumps of his veins.

She squatted down by the bed, and stayed there for a while. She wished she didn't have to go.

Finally, with a sigh, Xena extricated her hand from Ares' grasp. Picking up his leathers, she slung them over the windowsill to air them out. Then she walked out of the room, trying rather pointlessly to make no noise.

Exhausted as she was, Xena remembered with grim resignation that she still had to take care of the horses. Lamp in hand, she went outside, only to see that the horses were not by the porch. She found them in the barn, unsaddled and brushed down, feeding contentedly. So Gabrielle wasn't asleep after all.

As she stood in the middle of the barn, the air around her filled with the warm smell of hay and animals, everything that had happened that day caught up with her at last: the shock and quiet anguish in Gabrielle's face, those awful words Ares had thrown at her in the tavern. It was as if she'd taken a brutal beating that had lasted for hours, and had only now let herself feel the pain in every part of her body. She made her way to the house, like an animal crawling toward a hole where it could curl up and lick its wounds.

Back in her old childhood room, Xena took off her dress and her undergarment and climbed under the covers. She wrapped her arms around Gabrielle, who lay facing away from her, and drew her close, burying her face in the crook of Gabrielle's neck.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah," Xena said in a steady voice. "He'll just wake up with a really bad hangover." *Maybe she could even get herself to believe it.*

Gabrielle turned around, and they just held each other for a while, until she sought Xena's lips in a gentle kiss that gradually grew more insistent. Their breasts pressed

together, Xena heard Gabrielle's breathing quicken and turn to small, almost whimpering moans as her hips shuddered. Xena wanted to feel it too -- but she was still too battered, too bruised inside. Easing Gabrielle on her back, she said, "Lie still..."

Her kisses trailed down Gabrielle's neck to her chest, lingering on each nipple, and then to her flat stomach as Gabrielle gasped and squirmed in anticipation. Brushing her lips over the soft, cool skin of Gabrielle's inner thighs, Xena heard her breathe, "I love you ..." and felt a sharp jab of guilt at the thought that not half an hour ago, she had wanted to stay with Ares.

She lifted her head, reaching out to clasp Gabrielle's hand.

"I love you too..."

Then she bent down and kissed her, making Gabrielle convulse and arch into her mouth. She licked and nibbled delicately, hoping half-consciously that the pleasure she could give her love would make up for the pain she'd caused her before. Gabrielle's grip tightened on her hand. Xena slowed down, barely moving her tongue while Gabrielle trembled and almost cried in exquisite frustration; then she sped up again, finding the rhythm that she knew pleased Gabrielle the most. Her own excitement stirred as Gabrielle's frantic little cries rose higher and her body shook uncontrollably.

When her spasms had passed, Xena laid her cheek on Gabrielle's stomach, still holding her hand, listening as her breaths slowly returned to normal. Then she pulled herself up and slipped an arm under Gabrielle's shoulders, cradling her, touching her face, stroking her hair.

Still panting a little, Gabrielle turned her head and murmured again, "I love you, Xena..." As their lips met once more, Gabrielle's hand touched Xena's breast, squeezing lightly, circling the nipple, and then moved lower -- and Xena knew, with quiet dismay, that she did not want this. Despite her body's response to bringing Gabrielle to a climax, she felt only a bone-deep weariness at the thought of being pleased herself.

Her fingers closed around Gabrielle's wrist.

"You don't have to, Gabrielle ... I'm so tired ... let's just go to sleep..."

Gabrielle's body tensed at once, and in the moonlight that now streamed in through the window, Xena saw her stricken look before her face went blank.

"Oh ... okay," Gabrielle said in a small voice.

She slid out of Xena's arms and turned away, pulling up the covers. Xena reached out toward her, but her hand froze, lingering a finger's breadth from Gabrielle's tousled hair. She pulled her hand back and lay still, biting her lip.

What was she doing? Gabrielle had given her everything. She had been so lost when they first met, when she had just given up her old life as a warlord, and this simple

village girl had believed in her when no one else did, when even she didn't believe in herself -- had offered her friendship, made her young when her soul had grown old far beyond her years. For some reason, she remembered Gabrielle's excitement at catching her first fish, and her silly chatter about how all living things, even humans, lived in the sea once upon a time.

And later, when their friendship became more than that... there was very little Xena hadn't done by then, with men or women, and yet Gabrielle had somehow let her feel new, as if both of them had just discovered the wonder of making love.

Gabrielle was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and all she had ever done was pull Gabrielle into violence and darkness, simply because of who she was, what kind of life she lived. This had been on her mind a lot lately; especially since their recent trip to North Africa, when Gabrielle killed a young man, a kid really, thinking he was about to attack them. With a bittersweet pang, she remembered how much Gabrielle had wanted to be a warrior just like her when they first met -- except that she hated the idea of taking human life. Gabrielle had become a fighter quickly enough, both of them desperately hoping that she could remain a fighter who didn't kill. Sooner or later it was bound to fail; looking back, Xena could see it clearly -- she of all people should have known better, with all the war and violence she had seen by then. Now Gabrielle was a skilled warrior, a full fighting partner and it was best not to think about what it was doing to her soul.

And now, to top it off, she was going to break Gabrielle's heart ... just as she had broken Ares' heart. *Chewed it up and spat it out.*

The thought that she was comparing Gabrielle to Ares gave her a jolt. *Ares?* The same Ares who had spent years trying to lure her back to war and conquest and evil, and might well have succeeded if Gabrielle hadn't been there for her ... who had done such cruel things to her and to Gabrielle? Maybe ... or maybe not. *This* Ares was a mortal man who, after all that, had given up the world for her ... at least he and Gabrielle had that in common. Given up? No, she had taken everything from them, robbed Ares of his immortality and Gabrielle of more things than she could allow herself to think about ... They both loved her so much -- and now she was going to destroy one of them... hell, probably both. *And this is supposed to be the new me, the new Xena who's left her evil ways behind. Great going there, Xena.*

She was going to destroy them both and she'd be left all alone ... except for Eve, only she had never been a real mother to Eve, either... She had wanted to serve the Greater Good, and she'd been no good to anyone she cared about -- her mother, her children, Gabrielle... Ares...

She crept closer to Gabrielle and put a hand on her back, and almost timidly snuggled up to her. Gabrielle remained still and rigid; after a while her shoulder twitched ever so slightly. Swallowing the hard lump in her throat, Xena moved away and closed her eyes, hoping that sleep would come. She wondered what they'd have to say to each other tomorrow ... she and Gabrielle ... she and Ares.

CHAPTER 2

When she woke up, Gabrielle was still sleeping. Curled up on her side, breathing smoothly, her fingers clutching at the bedcovers, she looked almost waif-like. Xena leaned over and softly, careful not to wake her, kissed her bare shoulder.

Soundlessly, her mouth formed the words, *I would never leave you.*

Feeling more groggy than rested after a few hours of fitful sleep, Xena climbed out of bed, slipped on her dress and went to the kitchen. She made a fire and hauled a bucket of water up on the stove to warm it up for her bath.

It occurred to her that perhaps she should make breakfast. Gabrielle was nearly always the one who cooked, and Xena had no illusions about her own skills -- but she could try, couldn't she? Something nice, something her grandmother used to make right here in this kitchen... Gabrielle had picked some apples the day before (so long ago!)... a baked apple casserole had to be easy enough.

It wasn't as if she really had a decision or a choice to make, Xena told herself as she chopped the apples. There was no denying her feelings for Ares. Her physical desire for him was something she had always regarded as part of her attraction to the dark power of War, yet it still left her feverish and dizzy now when he was just a man. She cared for him; the affectionate, protective concern that she had felt even the first time she'd met Ares as a mortal was now mixed with gratitude for his sacrifice. He got to her all right. But Gabrielle -- living without Gabrielle was unthinkable, like a world in which the sun didn't come up in the morning.

Putting the knife down, Xena bit her lip, her eyes clouding a little. She wanted to run to the bedroom and take Gabrielle in her arms, hold her, kiss her awake, tell her everything would be okay. She wasn't sure what held her back: the thought that she should let Gabrielle sleep, or the fear that Gabrielle would recoil from her touch.

When she was pouring milk into a bowl, a memory of brushing her fingers across Ares' upper lip invaded her mind, making her pause and close her eyes. *Enough of that.* She whipped up a mix of milk, egg and honey, poured it over the chopped apples and stuck the pan in the oven. She was *not* going to burn this.

The water was good enough for the bath. Xena carried the bucket to the small room behind the kitchen and splashed the water into the wooden tub, battered but scrubbed reasonably clean by Gabrielle the day they'd arrived on the farm.

She lay back in the lukewarm water, staring at the moldy wall. She hadn't done Ares any wrong, not really. Giving up his immortality had been his own choice. Besides, as much as he grumbled about the mortal state, the humanity he had gained might well be worth the godhood he'd lost. He seemed -- happier, somehow. At least until... Well, maybe it was for the best that he knew. Maybe he'd learn to accept it, once he got over the shock, and they could still be friends. Ares would be all right; he always was, in the end. In any case, her first responsibility was to Gabrielle. She had to remember that.

As Xena towed off, it occurred to her that Ares would be in pretty bad shape when he woke up. She hauled in more water to warm up -- a bath would help -- and set about making a willow-bark brew that was good for headaches.

She checked periodically on the casserole. When she got it out of the oven, it looked hard and dry around the edges and soggy and lumpy in the middle. A little hesitantly, Xena scooped up a spoonful. It was too sweet, and a gritty bit of eggshell was caught under her teeth as she chewed. She stared at the result of her effort and wondered if she should throw it away. It felt like such a stupid gesture.

While Xena was still wondering what to do, she heard shuffling footsteps, and Gabrielle came into the kitchen.

"Good morning," she said in that distant, neutral tone Xena dreaded to hear. Her eyes fell on the frying pan. "What's that?"

"I -- I made breakfast." Xena was staring at her feet.

Gabrielle expressed no surprise, made no joke, didn't say anything at all. Without sitting down, she ate a helping of casserole and drank some cider. Then she said, in the same toneless voice, "I'll be out in the barn doing some work."

When Gabrielle was at the door, Xena worked up the courage to look up and say, "Gabrielle..."

She didn't turn back. "What?"

Xena sighed. "I'll see you."

She busied herself around the kitchen. Ares made his appearance about half an hour later, wearing those dark blue linen pants he'd had on the night the three of them shared a bed. His face haggard, he somehow seemed less muscular, more gaunt than the day before.

"Hey," Xena said softly. He avoided her eyes.

"I've warmed some water for you if you want to take a bath. The soap's on that stool by the tub."

He nodded.

"You can drink that if you have a headache ... just eat something first." Xena gestured toward the cup with the willow-bark mixture, then toward the table where she'd laid out a couple of apples and some bread and cheese, along with the remnants of the ill-fated casserole.

"Yeah," he muttered.

"I'll be outside."

Xena sat on the porch and cleaned her boots and skirt, scrubbing until the leather was

shiny. The sky above was a deep, cloudless blue; the day was getting hot. She could hear Ares moving around in the house and the water splashing. Gabrielle came out of the barn and walked over to the chicken pen, glancing only once in Xena's direction; she fed the chickens and went back to the barn, her dress fluttering in the breeze.

The door creaked open behind her, and Ares' voice said, "Xena?"

She turned around. He was in his leathers now, though without his swordbelt; his hair neatly combed, he looked his old self, except that something was gone from his face. It was as if he would never smile again.

"Come in here a minute," he said. "I need to talk to you."

Xena rose and followed him into the house. As they stood facing each other, she braced herself for whatever was coming next. The anticipation was a cold, heavy lump in her chest.

"I'm leaving," Ares said.

"What?" she whispered.

"I can't stay here anymore."

"It's still dangerous -- Gascar's men may still be out there -- "

"I'll be fine."

"Ares -- " Her apprehension surged to stark terror. "You haven't decided to -- to take them on and go out in a blaze of glory, have you?"

"A blaze of glory..." Seeing him smile was even worse. "You ought to be the writer." Meeting her worried look, Ares shook his head. "I haven't, Xena. Not my style."

"You don't have to go," she said. "Gabrielle and I could leave, you can stay here as long as you -- "

"No," he said quietly. "I should -- get out of your life." He paused, as if waiting for a reply, and then added, "Make a clean break."

It didn't come as a complete shock. She stared at him, feeling numb.

"I'm going to leave Greece," he said.

"Leave Greece..."

"Yeah." He swallowed a little. "I think I'll head East."

"East..." Xena felt like the nymph in the legend, condemned by the gods to speak nothing except for repeating another's last words.

"There's a place beyond Ch'in -- Jappa -- "

"The Land of the Rising Sun..." Xena nodded. For some reason it gave her goosebumps; she had heard stories of Jappa during the time she'd spent in Ch'in, but somehow it never seemed like a real place, more like a ghost island. "They say it's a land of fierce warriors."

"Sounds like my kind of place." Ares paused. "Maybe it *is* my chance to start a new life. Preferably not in a wine jug." He smiled again, making her wish he wouldn't.

She had no right to try to stop him.

"Yeah, maybe it's best for you," she said. "No one will be after you over there -- they probably haven't even heard of Ares, God of War."

"Right. Who knew that could be a *good* thing."

"Maybe you'll find another girl." *Gods ... what an awful thing to say -- and she'd meant it as light banter.*

"Yeah." He looked at her, the corner of his mouth twitching up. "Or another dog."

Damn. Why did it have to feel like a piece of her heart was being ripped out?

"So -- when are you leaving?"

Ares shrugged. "The sooner the better."

She squelched the pang. "At least stay a couple more nights. Until we know Gascar's army has left the valley."

He gave her a curious look, a faint warmth coming back into his eyes.

"All right," he said.

In the silence that fell between them, Xena could hear water dripping somewhere in the house.

"Ares ..." She was close enough to reach out and take his hand, but it was probably better not to. "I hope you have a good life."

"You too," he said.

The silence was much longer this time. Finally, she nodded again, in response either to his last comment or to some unspoken words of his -- or of her own -- then turned and took a step toward the door.

"Xena..."

She turned -- a little too eagerly, perhaps.

"Tell me," he said, with an obvious effort. "You and Gabrielle -- how did you... I

mean, how did it -- "

She couldn't; it would only hurt him more.

"It just happened one day -- one night -- it wasn't any kind of special occasion..."

"Don't lie to me." The flash of anger in his voice made him sound more like Ares again; it was easier to deal with. "Tell me."

Xena took a deep breath.

Hope was reborn -- Dahak's daughter had returned to usher in her demon father's reign? - and Ares had switched sides and joined Hope and Dahak, making a deal with the Fates to cut Xena's life thread if she killed Hope. That night, Ares came to see her and invited her to join Dahak too, and her revulsion at his treachery gave way to bitter sadness when she realized that it wasn't the quest for ultimate power that drove the God of War, but abject fear for his own life. He was still trying to mask it with his usual bravado, telling her that even if she managed to kill Hope, she would die anyway. He stared at her and added, "So for me, it's" -- he paused, an oddly human, almost vulnerable look his eyes -- "win-win."

Then he was gone, and it was just her and Gabrielle at the campsite, well aware that it was probably their last night together, perhaps the last night of the world as they knew it. It didn't occur to her at the time that Gabrielle, too, was preparing to die -- to sacrifice herself to save Xena and destroy Hope; stupidly, she didn't even realize that Ares was goading Gabrielle to do just that. They sat by the campfire, saying little, glancing almost furtively at each other in the blue moonlight. Xena felt the tears rising as she thought of all the goodness and love the girl from Potadeia had brought into her life, and of all the ways in which they had hurt each other. The prospect of dying didn't frighten her -- she had long learned to accept it as an occupational hazard. She was just sorry there wouldn't be time to make it up to Gabrielle.

At last Xena touched Gabrielle's hand and muttered, "Let's get some rest." They hugged fiercely and exchanged a tender kiss on the cheek, and as they pulled apart, still holding hands, Xena was left with the odd feeling that there had to be something more. They got into their bedrolls, but neither of them could sleep. After a while, Gabrielle crawled over to Xena's side and snuggled up to her, and they lay silently in each other's arms, stroking each other's hair. Then Gabrielle kissed her again, and her soft, warm lips traveled over Xena's cheek and a little lower, finally finding Xena's lips.

A moment later Gabrielle drew away, perhaps startled by her own audacity, and it was Xena who gently pulled Gabrielle's head toward her once more, wondering if she herself had wanted to do this for a long time. But they were all out of time now. They kissed again, slowly at first, then with desperate urgency, and everything they could share was in that kiss -- all the tenderness, all the passion, all the things that they no longer had a lifetime to give. It felt so right that they should kiss like this, that they should let their hands and lips roam over each other's bodies, that they should give each other pleasure -- that they should experience each other completely, be together in every way they could, before they lost each other forever.

They needed no words; it just happened. Still, there was an instant when Xena wavered: Gabrielle was so innocent, so inexperienced... She raised herself on an elbow, gazing down on Gabrielle's face -- her eyes bright and wide, her lips parted and swollen a little -- and said, "You don't have to do anything you don't want to." Gabrielle blinked and her lips twitched, as if she was going to cry. She reached up to stroke Xena's face, then took Xena's hand and guided it back to her bare breast and whispered, "Xena ... I want to do everything with you."

She mustered the courage to look straight at Ares.

"It was when Hope returned," she said. "After you came to -- say good-bye."

He flinched and lowered his eyes.

"Ares..." This time, she did reach out and put her hand on his arm. "It's all in the past."

When he looked up, his face was calm but pale, a fine mist of sweat on his forehead. A sudden thought burst into her mind: *What if Ares hadn't betrayed her then ... ?*

It frightened her, to be thinking that. She wouldn't have traded her life with Gabrielle for anything. She just couldn't help wondering if something, at some point, could have happened differently so that she wouldn't have to lose Ares now.

* ~ * ~ *

Everything was okay, Gabrielle thought as she poured oil over the neatly sliced vegetables and started cutting up the chicken.

Earlier, Xena had come to tell her that Ares was leaving the farm, in a tone as ordinary as if she were delivering any other bit of news. Then she had paused, her eyelashes quivering very slightly, and added that he was going off to some gods-forsaken island on the edge of the world.

Gabrielle knew Xena well enough to see that she was upset; then again, she knew enough not to overreact to this. So Xena had a soft spot for Ares. Xena had always had a weakness for bad boys; Gabrielle didn't have to like it but she accepted it, just as she accepted the fact that Xena took pleasure in fighting ... or that Xena could feel a purely physical desire for someone she didn't love. It wasn't all that long ago (well, at least it didn't *seem* like long ago) that she'd nearly driven herself crazy over Xena's crush on Antony ... and in the end, it hadn't meant a thing. Sure, it was different with Ares -- he had been in Xena's life for so long -- but not so different that he ever had a chance to get between them.

The quick rush of relief, and perhaps even joy, that Gabrielle had felt at the news of Ares' departure had quickly given way to a twinge of remorse. Taking Xena's hands in hers, she had said, "I know you're worried about him... he'll be all right" -- desperately hoping that she meant it, and that it was true -- and Xena had squeezed her hands and nodded with a quiet "Thanks."

After that, the tension between them had dissolved, at least enough for a few good-natured gibes, welcome and familiar. "Maybe when we retire from the warrior

business, we can open a tavern and you can be the cook," Gabrielle had said when they were done putting away the dishes, and Xena had smiled back, "Sure, if we want to run a *really* quiet place." But she could still see a trace of sadness in Xena's eyes.

They had spent much of the afternoon attending to practical matters, like doing something about all those farm animals they'd taken the trouble to buy. The prospect of stewing in the sun on the market square for hours, trying to sell a cow, a calf and a pig, had very limited appeal. Fortunately, just as Gabrielle and Xena had finished herding the animals into the cart, rescue came in the unlikely form of their chatty neighbor Greba, who offered to take "the poor dears" off their hands at what was surely a reasonable price for a lonely young widow. Judging by her visible disappointment at the news that their "master" (Gabrielle couldn't help rolling her eyes) wasn't staying on the farm, the young widow wouldn't have minded taking Ares off their hands, either.

Ares had mostly kept out of sight. Under other circumstances, Gabrielle would have been sorry to see him go. For all his sniping at her, the former War God had turned out to be surprisingly likable as a mortal. Hard to believe, but she would miss him. Besides, she felt for him; how could she not? He had literally had the world at his feet, and powers that the human mind could only begin to grasp, and he had lost it all to save Xena, and Eve -- and her. And now he was left with nothing ... and she had lost so much, yet she still had everything.

She wished it didn't have to be like this. But it had to, of course. If she and Xena weren't together, Ares still wouldn't be right for Xena: their connection had always been a part of her dark side, and even as a mortal, he'd probably end up bringing out the worst in her. Maybe it was all for the best. Ares would really find a new life instead of pining for Xena -- and Xena wouldn't be tempted to make a mistake she'd always regret.

Tomorrow, she and Xena would go do some scouting, make sure that Gascar's men were heading out of the valley, following the false lead Ares had given them in his peasant disguise. If the way was clear, they could leave, Ares going one way, she and Xena another. Meanwhile, they could at least try to have a nice dinner together. Gabrielle was almost done cutting the chicken for the stew; Xena, judging by the sharp thuds coming from outside, was chopping the firewood. All these chores had a melancholy feel now, rather like preparing for the funeral of someone not yet dead. But that was much too morbid. Life would go on.

Gabrielle put the chicken pieces in the pot with the vegetables, added vinegar and some crushed bay leaves, and headed out to get wood for the stove. Stepping out on the porch, she paused to take in the beauty of the evening -- the trees shimmering in the mild breeze, the fields bathed in the gentle gold of the late sun. With some surprise, she saw that it was not Xena but Ares chopping the wood; the desire to get his mind off his woes had apparently gotten the best of his aversion to the tools of common labor.

Then, Gabrielle turned and saw Xena.

She stood leaning against a pole, watching Ares. Her eyes glittered with tears yet she was smiling, like sunshine peeking through a light rain, a smile all tenderness and

regret and wistful longing. She was so beautiful at that moment -- how could any mortal be so beautiful? -- and yet Gabrielle suddenly knew what it must have felt like to look at the Gorgon and turn instantly to stone.

Finally noticing Gabrielle, Xena blinked, as if snapping out of a trance. She seemed frightened and, somehow, helpless.

When Gabrielle could speak again, her voice was quiet and hollow.

"You *are* in love with him."

* ~ * ~ *

Gabrielle walked slowly into the house. Her legs felt as if they were stuffed with rags. Bumping into a chair and a couple of door jambs along the way, she wandered to the bedroom and slumped down on the edge of the bed. She didn't move when Xena sat down behind her and laid a hand on her back.

"Gabrielle..." There was a plea in Xena's voice. "Oh, Gabrielle..."

"You love him," she said, her head turned away.

"I love *you*. I'll always love you. You're -- "

She turned around abruptly, dry-eyed, to face Xena.

"Then tell me you're not in love with Ares."

"I -- I'm -- " Xena gave her a pained, apologetic look which was more than enough of an answer, and lowered her eyes.

"It doesn't mean that I love you any less," she said. "You know what you mean to me. It doesn't change how I feel about you..."

"Well, it changes a lot for *me*."

"Gabrielle... he's going away. I'll never see him again."

"Yes, you will -- every time you close your eyes." Gabrielle paused. "Tell me you're not going to think about him every day."

Xena was silent for a while. Then she said very quietly, "What do you want me to do?"

Gabrielle got up and paced around the room.

She could leave. Take her place with the Amazons, or become a champion of the Elijans -- or hang up her sais and become a full-time bard ... maybe even go north and find Beowulf... and live without half of her soul. Out of the question. It wasn't as if Xena didn't love her anymore. After all, Xena was prepared to let Ares go away, to stay with her forever.

They could just go on; their bond had survived worse things. They would go on, and she would never know for sure that at any particular moment, Xena wasn't thinking of Ares, wondering what he was doing, whether he was all right, whether he was with another woman.

She had a thought ... a crazy, impossible thought. She was hanging over an abyss, holding on to its edge with weakening fingers, and a voice in her head was telling her to let go.

She walked back to Xena and stood over her, her hands resting on Xena's shoulders. Xena looked up at her -- anxiously, expectantly. After a few moments, Gabrielle took Xena's face in her hands, and lingered a little before leaning down to kiss her. She pulled away and looked at Xena again, and ran her thumb over the glittering trace of a tear on Xena's cheekbone.

Let go.

The words died in her throat when she tried to speak, but she found her voice on the second try.

"Do what you want to do."

Xena flinched back, her eyes wide. Had this been about anything else, Gabrielle would have been amused: The little girl from Potadeia had managed to shock the Warrior Princess.

"What do you mean?"

She knew she was blushing. "Go to him."

"Oh gods, Gabrielle, I can't..." Xena seized her hand. "I couldn't...."

Gabrielle sighed and touched Xena's face again. "Xena, if you let him leave now, you'll always wonder about what might have been, and then -- "

Xena shook her head, squeezing her hand harder. "*No*. Stop it."

" -- and then I'll never have all of you."

Xena drew Gabrielle down into her lap, holding her in a tight hug, cheek to cheek, and Gabrielle felt the heat of her whisper. "You don't know what you're saying -- this is crazy..."

The tears came at last, streaming down Gabrielle's face.

"Xena, let's not talk about it anymore, okay? Do what you think is right for you. I don't want to know about it ... I just wanted to tell you that I -- that you -- "

"That I have your blessing?" Xena said bitterly.

"That -- that you won't be betraying me."

Gabrielle drew back, and Xena's face crumbled at the sight of her tears.

"Gabrielle..."

"I'll be okay..."

She rested her head on Xena's shoulder, and they sat like that for a while, until Gabrielle looked up and said a little hoarsely, "I'm not going to lose you without a fight."

"You're not going to lose me. You could *never* lose me." Xena fell silent, a wistful look coming into her eyes. "Gabrielle -- remember the first time we were together..."

"Yes?" Maybe she was a fool, but it felt good, somehow, to know that Xena had been thinking about it.

"Remember what I said to you the next morning?"

Gabrielle nodded, her eyes filling with tears again.

"You said I gave your life meaning and joy..."

"And that you were the best thing that ever happened to me -- that you'd be a part of me forever. I meant it then, Gabrielle. I still do."

They hugged again. Then, Xena lifted a hand and tilted Gabrielle's head, and her voice was suddenly husky as she said, "Come here..." Gabrielle closed her eyes and waited, and waited, and finally felt Xena's mouth on hers and the slow, tantalizing caress of her tongue.

Together, they leaned back until they were lying down, still locked in that kiss. When gentle hands tugged at her skirt, Gabrielle wondered for an instant if Xena was only doing this for her, to reassure her that she was still wanted, still loved. Then she heard the low sound in Xena's throat, and it made her forget all doubt, forget everything.

* ~ * ~ *

Ares threw the axe aside and sat down on the log, panting. It was hard work, and he had probably chopped a lot more wood than was needed; but at least it was a distraction ... not to mention a chance to hit something.

Oh, he'd had it all worked out back then, during the Hope and Dahak mess. He had been utterly terrified of Dahak, there was no point in denying it. When that pillar of fire shot up behind him on the beach, he knew that he was dealing with something unknowable and unspeakable, a power with no corporeal form, no language, no qualities at all except pure malevolence. He was the God of War; he knew when the game was up, and his job was to survive. So he was going to be smart. Pretend to play along with the Dark One. Stop Xena from killing Hope without having to kill Xena. Make sure the pesky sidekick was properly motivated to do the deed. Win-win. He

wincing at the words.

Well, it had worked out, all right. *She* had ended up with Xena, and he had ended up doing stud service for Hope, a mating that had made him understand the mortal emotion of shame. Maybe they both got what they deserved. Now, he could spend the remainder of his life wondering what could have been if he had not betrayed Xena then, if he'd stayed at her side. How dumb was that -- to regret not risking his neck for something he hadn't even known he wanted, back then.

Enough with the self-pity. He got up, picked up a few logs and walked to the house. He was about to go up on the porch when a noise coming from one of the windows made him stop in his tracks.

It was Xena ... crying?

His heart lurched wildly. Maybe she did love him after all, enough to cry over losing him. Maybe there was still a chance. If the accursed blonde wasn't around, he could go to Xena now and --

As he put down the logs and stood up, Ares realized that the sound he had heard wasn't crying at all, and that the blonde was *definitely* around.

Tartarus -- to think that Xena would be carrying on with someone who emitted such pathetic squeaks.

He stood open-jawed, frozen to the spot. There was a time when the thought of Xena and her little friend going at it like cats in heat might have been titillating. Now, it sickened him so much that he fought a powerful impulse to hurl a log through the window, just to make those sounds stop.

Couldn't even wait until he left.

He could leave right now, Gascar or no Gascar. But all his stuff was in the damn house -- the sword, the vest, the gauntlets -- and there was no way he was going in there now.

Finally regaining control of his feet, he walked to the barn and paced around for a while, occasionally kicking at a pole. It didn't help much.

He sat down in the warm hay, leaning back against the wall.

Maybe they'd fall asleep when they were done. Maybe then, he could go inside the house and get his sword.

And kill them.

No, dammit, he could never kill *her*. Not again. He had already looked at her dead face twice; once thinking that she had died because he had been too selfish to save her, once thinking that he had killed her in a fit of madness. More than enough.

But the other one...

Once, he wasn't sure how many human lifetimes ago, he had bedded the wife of one of his generals in the form of her actual mortal paramour, and the general had caught them after the act, fast asleep -- or so it looked. The affronted husband had held his sword over Ares, taking very precise aim, apparently determined, like a true gentleman, to cut off his head without leaving even a scratch on the lady. It had been such a hoot when the sword went harmlessly through his neck and he rose from the bed in all his fully clothed godly splendor, causing the poor sap to collapse in a dead faint and the woman to wake up screaming ... though it didn't seem nearly as amusing now.

He could do that. Why not? He had bought Blondie's worthless little life with most of his own; he'd only be taking back what she owed him. He could picture it now: walking stealthily into the room and up to the bed, lifting his sword and aiming carefully, making sure Xena wasn't hurt --

Except that he'd never do it, not only because Xena would most certainly kill him afterwards but because he knew it would kill her, too ... and maybe not just because of that, either. A vivid memory forced itself into his mind: the girl standing on the porch of the farmhouse when they had just gotten there, beckoning to him and saying, "Come on!" with that silly wrinkle-nosed grin of hers. As violently as he loathed her now, the thought of her severed head lying in a pool of blood bothered him, somehow.

He thumped the back of his head against the wall a few times.

Stupid -- stupid -- stupid.

Ares wasn't sure how long he sat there, wondering how he'd managed to get himself into such a rotten mess. It was almost dark when he heard a faint rustle and opened his eyes.

It was her.

"Dinner's ready."

"I'm not hungry," he snapped, realizing just then that he was.

Xena lingered for a moment and left without another word. *Obviously just as happy to let him starve.*

Then she came back, carrying a bowl of delicious-smelling stew, a loaf of bread, and a mug of steaming apple cider. The smell of the food made his mouth water and his stomach clench. She squatted next to him, put it all down and said softly, "Here you go."

In the near-dark, he thought Xena gave him an odd look, as if she were about to say something else, or to touch him. He hoped she wouldn't. At last she got up and walked away. She stopped in the wide doorway of the barn to look back, her silhouette black against the darkening blue-gray sky. Then she was gone.

Ares picked up the bowl and dipped the spoon in the stew.

Damn. Damn it all to Tartarus. It would be so much easier if he could hate her. But no, he had to melt every time she did some little thing which made him believe that she cared. Maybe Athena had been right all along -- he was really whipped.

* ~ * ~ *

When they were done cleaning up after dinner, Gabrielle went back into their room and came out in her Amazon garb, armed with her sais.

"I'm going out," she said. Her tone was casual, deliberately so.

Xena turned abruptly.

"Out?"

"Yeah. To scout the area, see if Gascar's army is gone."

There was still a chance to pull back, for both of them.

"Want me to go with you?"

"No." Gabrielle paused and smiled a little. "I'll be fine."

Xena followed Gabrielle out on the porch. Clio, who had been grazing untethered along with Argo, cantered up in response to Gabrielle's whistle. The women hugged and kissed briefly, the way they would on any night when one of them was going out alone on some errand.

"Be safe," Xena said.

Gabrielle nodded, giving her hand a light squeeze, and got in the saddle. As she rode away, a charcoal-gray cloud swallowed up the moon, and the horse and the rider melted quickly into the darkness.

Xena shook herself and went back into the house.

She told herself that just because Gabrielle had given her the go-ahead didn't mean she was going to do anything.

She wondered if Ares was going to stay in the barn all night.

Then she heard his footsteps on the porch and he came in. Xena noticed with relief that some life seemed to have come back into his face, though it was hard to tell in the low light of a single oil lamp. Their eyes met briefly; he was the first to turn away. She wanted to ask if he needed anything, but that didn't feel right. He muttered, "Good night" and went to his room.

Xena sat down and stared into the fireplace.

She could go out and take Argo to the barn ... then come back to the house and go to

bed, alone.

And tomorrow or the next day, Ares would be gone. Whether she had loved him or hated him, he had been in her life since she was scarcely out of adolescence, longer than anyone now alive ... unless, perhaps, her elder brother was still alive somewhere. And just like that, he wouldn't be there anymore.

Gabrielle's voice echoed in her head: *You are in love with him*. She hadn't, until then, given words to it. Perhaps she had loved him for a long time, when he was still a god, and when she knew -- or thought she knew -- that he couldn't love anyone.

How could she, after everything he had done? Well, she wasn't exactly in a position to wonder if someone who had done terrible things deserved to be loved... Maybe what did it was knowing, ever since Ares' first brief brush with mortality, that buried somewhere under the full weight of the Godhood of War was a human core, vulnerable, capable of feeling -- much as she had once crushed her own human yearnings under the hard armor of the Destroyer of Nations. Not only that -- but knowing that it was she who brought out this human part of the god. Maybe that was why, even in the middle of some vicious, twisted scheme of his to win her back into his service, she had always felt some strange link between them, some special understanding. And then, his sacrifice -- how strong his love had to be, to break through so much power-lust and selfishness and cruelty...

It wouldn't be cheating, really, not if Gabrielle knew and agreed to it. Not cheating, no ... just inflicting a wound that nothing would ever heal. But maybe Gabrielle was right; maybe it would be even worse to share her life and her bed with Gabrielle while missing Ares, thinking about what it would be like to kiss those lips, to look into those deep brown eyes while he sighed in pleasure, his hard body naked under hers --

She tossed her head. Maybe there wasn't any point in trying to snap out of it.

The thought of Gabrielle tugged at her painfully. Gabrielle was out there somewhere, riding all by herself ... probably imagining her in Ares' arms. Even if she didn't go to Ares, Gabrielle would spend the night thinking that she had.

Maybe she could just go and talk to him, and then, if something happened, it would just -- happen.

The fire was dying, a few puny flames still clinging to life among the bright-red embers and the pale ashes. Xena sighed and got up.

Almost at the door of Ares' bedroom, she stopped and stood still for a few moments before walking on to the room she shared with Gabrielle. Groping in the dark, she lit the lamp on the small table by the bed, then reached into the bag where she kept her medicines and fished out a small, dark green velvet pouch. She fumbled at the strings and stared at the herbs inside. There was plenty.

Years ago, Lao Ma had taught Xena about these herbs, which a woman could take after being with a man to keep from having a child. She still carried them for their other medicinal properties, and also to help other women in various emergencies.

There was no use pretending now. She was about to make love to Ares -- not in a moment of weakness, not because she got carried away, but *because she wanted to*.

Xena took off her dress and her undergarment and slipped into the shift she sometimes wore to bed. Then she picked up the lamp and went to Ares.

* ~ * ~ *

He could still hear her moving around the house.

Ares pulled the thin blanket over his head, as if it could shut out her steps and the groaning floorboards. If she'd only stop, maybe he could get some sleep.

He wondered where the other one had gone off to at such an hour, all by herself; he had seen her ride away when he stepped out of the barn. Probably scouting the area to make sure Gascar's army was gone. Couldn't wait to get him out of the way. Of course.

Finally, it was quiet. Ares turned on his back and closed his eyes, trying to keep his mind blank.

Dammit -- there was her door, opening and shutting again. And steps, getting closer ... stopping ...

The door -- *his* door -- creaked open. Ares' heart did another somersault.

Cautiously, he lifted an eyelid and saw a dim light. He turned his head a little, not sure he wanted her to see that he was awake.

Xena, clad only in that pale purple little number she'd worn when the three of them shared a bed on that first rainy night, carefully put down an oil lamp on a shelf across from the bed. It cast a watery circle of golden light, making stark black shadows glide on the walls of the small room.

What in Tartarus was she doing?

She turned to him. Ares quickly closed his eyes but it was too late.

"Hey," she said.

Pretending to be asleep would just feel dumb. He opened his eyes.

"What do you want?"

She came up and sat down on the edge of the bed, smiling a little. She looked nervous.

"I'm -- " she licked her lips. "I wanted to see you."

Then he got it, and a spasm of rage rose to his throat. Abruptly, he raised himself up on his elbow.

"What for?" His own voice sounded strange, like a croak. "My going-away present?"

Xena winced a little and looked at him sideways.

"Ares -- "

"Get out." He had regained control of his voice. "Get out."

"What?" she whispered. Her eyes were wide and hurt --. just like she looked in Amphipolis when she played her damned cock-teasing game with him, and when he had the good sense to reject her at first, knowing she was up to something. The hurt was real, no doubt. Such a blow to her ego.

"I don't want your pity," he spat out.

"It isn't like that."

"Then what's it like? Didn't get enough this afternoon?" He saw her flinch and added with a crooked sneer, "I bet they heard you all the way to Rome."

She lowered her head.

"Ares... don't."

"Don't what? Don't stop being a doormat?"

Xena looked up, and their eyes met.

"I'm here because I -- " She paused. "I want to be with you."

He was silent for a few moments, catching his breath. It was awfully difficult to hold on to his anger, especially when she was sitting so close, her eyes tender, her hair falling on her naked shoulders, her nipples erect under the flimsy fabric ... offering herself to him.

He swallowed.

"What about -- "

"It's okay," she said quickly. "Everything's okay."

Suddenly, he knew why the blonde had left, and in a flash his anger was back.

"So you've got it *all* worked out between you two." He shook his head disbelievingly. "I don't get any say in the matter, do I?"

"Ares -- "

"Well, why should I. You think that if you make a move on me, I won't be able to resist."

Xena looked at him, obviously thinking something over, and then got up.

That was it. He'd done it. She had come to him -- he had one last chance, and he had blown it, thanks to his stupid, *stupid* pride.

"Ares. It *is* your choice. You can -- make the moves. I won't ... I won't do anything."

She walked over to the window, which had been left ajar, and stood there just a few paces away looking out into the night, her back to him, the lamplight gleaming softly in her hair.

Ares leaned back on the pillow and shut his eyes. But she was still there, and he could see her just as well with his eyes closed.

He could just lie there until she left. It wouldn't be easy, but he could manage. She wouldn't wait forever. And that would be the end.

If he made love to her, it could -- dammit, probably *would* -- end up being just this once. He would still go away, carrying this night with him to the edge of the earth. It was bad enough to long for her when the only actual memories he had to torment him were of a few kisses and some interrupted foreplay. To be away from her and have the memory of her naked body against his, of being inside her, of her crying out her pleasure in his arms...

And if he let her walk away, yet again? Then he'd be away from her knowing that he could have had those memories, and perhaps more -- and didn't take his chance.

Some choice. Who was he kidding?

Ares threw the blanket aside and got up. He was glad he'd worn those ridiculous linen pants to bed; somehow, it made him feel ... well, a little less naked.

He came up behind her and put his hands on her arms. She shivered a little. He leaned down, closing his eyes for an instant, and pressed his lips to her shoulder. His mouth trailed upward, and Xena sighed and let her head drop back, leaning into him, as he swept her hair aside and kissed under her ear. Raising his hand, Ares ran his fingertips across her cheek and the corner of her mouth and her chin, down her neck and chest, and further down over her shift to trace the outline of a breast -- feeling her tremble, listening to her husky shallow breaths.

His other hand crept under her shift and moved up her side, barely touching the skin. He wanted to squeeze her breast but resisted the impulse, instead letting his fingers make small circles around her nipple. This time she moaned aloud. He shuddered and kissed her neck again. His hand slid very slowly down to her stomach, and lower, brushing against the thick curls.

"Ares..."

Gods -- to hear her say his name like that...

He had meant to play with her a bit, to drive her crazy -- to really be in charge for a while. At that moment, he knew it was a lost cause. For one thing, he was driving himself just as crazy. His control over his body wasn't what it used to be; his weak mortal flesh was already demanding relief, and if he drew this out much longer it would be over, in the most mortifying way possible. But even aside from that, he just couldn't be playful right now. He needed her too much, needed to lie with her, hold her and be held, feel the warmth of her lips...

When Ares turned her around, Xena reached toward him, as if she'd been waiting for this, and brought her mouth to his with a hunger that couldn't be denied anymore. She broke away to let him take off her shift and then she kissed him again, her hands tugging at his pants, pushing them down --

The pure shock of her touch made him cry out. He dropped his head on her shoulder, gasping as she caressed him; he had to stop her but it felt as if he'd die if she stopped. He managed to get out a choked "Xena -- Xena, don't -- " and she moved her hand away, making him groan in frustration. She stepped back. A mild golden haze seemed to hang around her body, whether it was the lamp behind her or his eyes playing tricks on him.

Maybe this wasn't really happening -- any moment now, he would wake up, or something would interrupt them, or she'd turn and leave. But no, there she was, taking his hands, pulling him back toward the bed, pulling him into another fevered kiss as they sank down on the bed, her body under him a perfect harmony of a warrior's supple strength and a woman's softness. He dipped down to press his mouth to her

breast; he wanted to caress all of her with his hands and his mouth, but he couldn't wait anymore.

They kissed very gently, just the tips of their tongues touching, lips parted slightly, catching each other's breaths as she opened up to him.

Ares had tried to prepare himself, not to let it overwhelm him. But there was no preparing for this -- not only for the sensation of melting into her liquid heat but for what it did to him to hear her moan, to feel her meet his thrusts, to watch her eyes blur in tender bliss. He whispered her name and covered her face with kisses. If this could last all night, it would still end too soon.

Except that it wasn't going to last all night; it wasn't going to be like one of his fantasies in which Xena kept coming and coming and coming as he made love to her. His mortal body was already letting him down, pleasure building inside him like a fragile bubble that could burst at any moment.

"Xena..." he whispered hoarsely. "I -- I can't -- "

"Mmm" -- she reached up to kiss his lower lip -- "what?"

"Oh gods -- I can't hold on -- "

"It's okay." She touched his face, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"No." Ares grit his teeth, trying to keep some control. "You haven't -- " her inner muscles clenched around him and he groaned, closing his eyes -- "you haven't -- Xena -- I wanna make it good for you -- "

"Oh it's good," she breathed into his ear, running her hand down his back, "it's -- better than good." He made one more effort to slow down but his body would have none of it. Her hand moved lower to stroke him, and she caught his cry in her mouth as a new wave of sensation tipped him over. The bubble shattered, its sweet poison spilling into his blood, and this time he truly felt as if he were dying, dissolving into nothingness, into her.

Ares lay still for a while, his face buried in Xena's hair, a wonderful, warm heaviness seeping into every fiber of his body. Then he forced himself to stir -- he couldn't fall asleep -- and rolled off her, kissing her lightly. His fingers grazed her thigh; Xena gave a slight shudder and drew in her breath in anticipation. Bending down, he brushed his mouth against the hard peak of her nipple, then teased it with his tongue, and heard her ragged sigh. She ran her fingers through his hair and moved her legs, almost impatiently, and said, "Ares..."

Her voice was thick and breathless, quivering just a little, just enough to drive him wild. He slid his hand up, feeling the silky warmth of her inner thigh, and higher still, watching her neck arch, watching little spasms run across her face. It was incredible to see her like this, so lost to the world, lost in the pleasure he was giving her -- so completely vulnerable that Ares felt strangely protective toward the Warrior Princess, in a way he had never felt even as a god.

He cradled her in his arms when it was over, almost as if he were comforting her, her head resting on his chest.

If, by some unlikely miracle, he ended up in the Elysian Fields after he died, this would be the one moment he's choose to relive for eternity.

Maybe that meant he was happy.

CHAPTER 3

One look was enough to determine that Gascar's camp had been deserted for hours, probably since the day before. They might have left right after the search party had returned from the farm, Gabrielle thought as she looked around in the moonlight. The pungent smell of horses, mixed with the stale odor of bad cooking, was already wearing off.

The thing to do now was look at the tracks and see in which direction Gascar and his band had gone. She lit a lantern, jumped down from her horse and walked across the site, idly kicking at the trash that got underfoot: a broken wine jug, a torn boot, the remnants of a fried chicken.

She followed the tracks to the road. It looked like they were definitely headed toward the Horada pass, following the false lead.

Then she remembered how, seemingly in another life, she and Ares -- also mortal then, but accidentally and briefly -- were trying to find the enchanted scroll that had undone his powers and screwed up everything else. "Where'd you learn to read tracks like that?" Ares asked, and she proudly told him Xena had taught her. They started talking about Xena and realized, to their mutual consternation, that they had something in common: an unbridled enthusiasm for the Warrior Princess.

Gabrielle put down the lantern, sat down on the trampled grass, and wept silently.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she thought that she should go toward Horada, look for other campsites, make sure that Gascar's men had indeed left the valley. But what was the point? Of course they'd left. She might as well admit it; the real reason she had gone out wasn't to make sure that the way was free for Ares to leave. She knew it and Xena knew it.

A chill wind blew through the trees and lashed at her wet face. Gabrielle hunched her shoulders, wishing she'd taken a cloak with her, wishing she'd never had this crazy idea, wishing she weren't such a damn fool. She prided herself on how strong she had become since leaving Potadeia, and yet here she was, getting out of the house like a good little girl so that Xena could ?-

She shivered and crossed her arms, trying to shield herself from another nasty gust of wind. The moon was hiding again. Her thoughts went back to the first and only time she had been with a man: her wedding night with Perdicas, kind sensitive Perdicas who had been so afraid to hurt her that it was a wonder anything happened at all. And it had been good, in spite of their fumbling; he had held her so lovingly in his arms, caressed her with such eager tenderness. Oh, it would be nothing like that for *them* -- they were probably going at it like animals, doing wild, bizarre things like in those carvings in Aphrodite's temple... *Stop it. Stop it.* She clutched her head. This was a good way to go insane.

What if Xena had felt the same way about her and Perdicas, back then? If it had been even half as agonizing for her... No, impossible -- Xena couldn't have had such feelings for her at the time, she was sure of it ... or almost sure. And there was that other time when she had nearly left Xena to stay with Najara; she wondered vaguely if, underneath all her spiritual pretensions, Najara had been interested in her *that* way. Maybe she had betrayed Xena first, and now it was coming back to haunt her.

Oh, but she had betrayed Xena far worse, betrayed her to the cruel tyrant Ming Tien when Xena went to Ch'in to kill him at Lao Ma's request; not because she wanted to stop Xena from committing murder, as she had told herself then, but because she had felt so threatened by Xena's bond to this mysterious woman from her past. Jealousy -- even if it was a friend's jealousy at the time, not a lover's -- had pushed her to do something that nearly destroyed them both, nearly cost Xena her life. She couldn't allow it to happen again, couldn't succumb to that emotion; she could never, ever again let herself act on jealousy.

Something wet landed on her hand. She hadn't even noticed that she was crying again. *No, wait a minute...* Another drop fell on her arm, then on her back. *Oh, why not. If she was going to sit here cold and alone while Xena was in a warm bed with **him**, she might as well get rained on.*

The rain ended almost as quickly as it began, and Gabrielle felt irritated at herself for wallowing in self-pity like that. She had known what she was doing when she had told Xena, in so many words, to go ahead and sleep with Ares. Xena's feelings for Ares might run deeper than she had realized before, but if it came down to a choice, Xena would always choose her. They were meant to be together -- Xena and Gabrielle, Gabrielle and Xena, two halves of one whole -- and they always would be. She had to be strong, for Xena.

Gabrielle got up and walked back to where she had left Clio. At the sight of her, the horse snorted impatiently and stamped her foot.

"We're going." She patted Clio on the muzzle. "Sorry you had to wait."

The sky was a solid black now, the night pitch-dark, but she still put out the lantern once she reached the road. If she did run into Gascar's men, she had to spot them before they spotted her.

She rode at a trot toward the Horada pass, reciting poems in her head to keep her mind off other things. It seemed to be working, as long as she remembered to steer clear of anything involving love and jealousy.

It had been nearly an hour since she had left Gascar's camp. The rain had started again, a small drizzle that wouldn't even give her the satisfaction of getting thoroughly, miserably, melodramatically soaked. Gabrielle thought of taking refuge in the thick grove by the roadside. Just then, she saw distant lights moving toward her. Probably just a caravan of merchants traveling late -- but it was best not to take chances. She rode off the road and waited behind the trees. At least it was relatively dry.

Soon enough, she heard the low rumble of hooves, getting closer, and then still-unintelligible voices. She peered between the trees. There were at least twenty-five men on horseback, three of them carrying lanterns.

"... an' he sez, 'Yes, Miss -- would you hold the horse, please?'" said a boorish voice followed by a gale of crude laughter -- it was apparently the punchline to a joke.

The wavering light of a lantern snatched a man's face out of the darkness in a yellowish cloud of watery mist, and Gabrielle stifled a gasp, her hands tightening on Clio's reins. It was Demetrius, the young warrior who had led the bounty hunters' raid on the farm in search of Ares and had tried to banter with her while she posed as a peasant girl.

They were back.

A heavy, deep voice said, "Hey, Demetrius. How much further to that damn farm?"

* ~ * ~ *

Ares lifted a hand and brushed his knuckles over Xena's face, tracing its outline. She lay on top of him, her hair cascading down on his chest and shoulders, a soft twinkle dancing in the infinite blue of her eyes. The shadows on the walls swayed gently as the flame in the lamp flickered, its glow made warmer by the glimpse of densely knit darkness in the half-open shutters.

She leaned forward to pluck a short kiss from his lips. *Never, ever again would he complain about mortality.*

"Hey," Xena said.

"What?"

"Was this your" -- there was mischief playing at the corners of her mouth -- "your first time as a mortal?"

"Gods." He laughed ruefully. "Was I that bad?"

She pressed her forehead to his, chuckling.

"You were great."

"It wasn't. I mean, wasn't my first time." *And thank the Fates for that; it had been embarrassing enough with whatever her name was.* There hadn't been many; just the occasional woman in a village or on a farmstead who would offer him a hot dinner and a warm bed with her in it.

Ares thought he saw a shade of disappointment cross Xena's face.

"Or maybe it was," he said. "First time *ever*."

Her eyebrows twitched in puzzlement. He drew her close and touched his lips to hers.

When he opened his eyes, there was understanding in her look -- and then, unexpectedly, a trace of sadness.

"Ares..." she said thoughtfully. "How old are you?"

It had to be a bit disconcerting to her, to know that he was a few thousand years old. He was jolted by the realization that it was a bit disconcerting to *him*, too. Was he starting to think like a mortal?

"I told you my life didn't really begin until I met you. You just never believe me when I say this stuff." He grinned at her. "Guess that means you're in bed with a younger man."

"Oh yeah.... right."

She gave Ares a slow, lingering, teasing kiss. As he locked his arms around her and parried the play of her tongue, her breath quickened and she squirmed a little, grinding her hips into him.

"Uh -- " *Dammit, there were some things about mortality he could still have done without.* "You gotta give me some more time..."

"Well -- you're only human, Ares. I like that in a man."

She dove to kiss his nipple, taking it gently between her teeth, swirling her tongue around it, making a tingling warmth spread under his skin.

"Maybe not *that* much more time..."

He heard her muffled, husky laugh and closed his eyes, ready to let the next wave lift him up, rock him, sweep him away. But something was worrying at his mind, some thought trying to wriggle its way out of the dark corner where he had squashed it earlier.

"Xena...." He ran his hand over her hair. "What happens tomorrow?"

She was still for a moment. Then she lifted her head. There was wistfulness in her stare, and uncertainty, and something like a hopeless plea.

"Maybe there *is* no tomorrow," she said softly.

"Yes, there is."

Her face half-turned and framed by the pale golden light, Xena was a thousand leagues away. After a while she said, slipping her fingers through the hair on his chest, "You could stay here... you'll be safe -- no one will bother you. You know, you might find a kind of peace here that you might not find afterwards..."

It wasn't completely unexpected -- but still, it was hard, this fall from his newly built little Olympus on earth. So that was what she'd had in mind all along, to stash him away in this dump.

She finally turned to him and made a brave effort to smile.

"And I'll come and visit you..."

The anger he had felt earlier was stirring again, and he almost wanted to say something brutal -- *You want me to sit around and wait for you like some damn concubine?* -- but no, dammit, no, this could be their only night and it was not going to end that way.

Maybe she was right; there was no tomorrow. Ares gripped her shoulders and pulled her up, and when he kissed her again it was a hard demanding kiss, as if he were claiming her, making her his own, no matter what happened next.

After they broke apart, Xena took only a moment to breathe before she kissed him back with equal force. Then she slid down and caressed his nipples again, stroking, licking, using the lightest touch of her teeth until he was panting and gasping and more than ready for her. Ares' hands cupped her breasts as she took him inside her. At that moment he knew, with the same flat certainty that he knew he was mortal, that for her, he would wait not only on a farm but in an Elijan village. Maybe later, he would be irritated at himself for being so weak. Maybe later. But not now, not now.

* ~ * ~ *

"Shouldn't be more than a coupla hours, Gascar."

Gabrielle recognized the voice as Demetrius', even though the darkness had swallowed up his face once again.

"You sure you can find it?"

Clio picked this moment to toss her head, making the leaves rustle, but the men must have thought it was the wind. Gabrielle lifted her hand, which suddenly seemed to belong to someone else, and put it on the mare's head to still her. Each breath she

made was burning her throat.

"Sure thing, Gascar," Demetrius said with a false joviality that disguised a hint of fear.

"You fuck up one more time, and I'm gonna make you regret you ever joined up for this job."

"Hey, how was I supposed to know it was him?"

"How indeed," Gascar snorted. "You were too busy making eyes at some little hussy." (As the men guffawed, Gabrielle felt a sickly heat rise all over her face and neck.) "Good thing we didn't get too far away."

"Xena's gonna pay for this," said Demetrius.

"Listen, smart guy." Gascar's band had ridden past her, and the voices were starting to fade. "We don't wanna mess with Xena unless we have to. If Ares is in there alone, we go in, do the job, and go off to collect the bounty. Got that?"

"Got it, Gascar. You're the boss."

Gascar grumbled something about the dark night and the rain, and then the men's voices could no longer be heard over the wind and the clatter of hooves. When all trace of them had dissolved into the night, Gabrielle let out her breath.

Biting her lip a little too hard in concentration, she lit her lantern to look for the path. There was a shortcut through the woods and she was going to find it. She couldn't panic, couldn't panic or she would get lost. *Focus and stay calm, just like Xena.* All of her consciousness had shrunk to a single thought -- *Don't let them get to the house first* -- but if that was focus, it wasn't making it any easier to stay calm. A vision of Xena in Ares' arms, her face peaceful, her head on his shoulder, intruded momentarily into her mind; this time, though, the pang barely registered. Right now, it didn't matter who Xena was with, only that she might still be sleeping, exposed and unprepared, when Gascar and his men attacked.

* ~ * ~ *

The oil lamp had burned out when Xena woke up. She turned to settle more comfortably and laid her head on Ares' chest, listening to the distant sound of his heart, to his soft level breath. As her eyes got used to the dark, she looked up at him, just able to make out the shape of his features. It all came back to her: the look on his face when they made love, a look of pleasure that was almost agony, of unbearable tenderness, of something like surprise; the sound of his sighs that deepened into moans; the strength of his arms as he pulled her down toward him when it was too much for him to endure. "Don't let me sleep," he had muttered afterwards, still holding on to her, "don't let me sleep" -- only to drift away moments later.

She didn't want to wake him yet. She stretched a little and marveled at how light she felt. It was as if she had been carrying something heavy for a long, long time, desperately struggling not to drop it, and had finally let go.

Xena turned and lay on her back, and looked toward the window. Out there was a moonless night, a blanket of darkness still untouched by dawn, and --

Gabrielle.

The walls crumbled inside her, releasing a flood of misery. Gabrielle was out there alone and cold and unhappy. Xena felt a scalding shame at the thought that she had, at least briefly, wished this night would never end. She sat up abruptly and got out of bed, wanting to get away from herself more than from Ares.

She walked to the window, the floor cold and rough under her feet.

She had spent half the night rolling around in bed with Ares, barely giving a thought to the woman with whom she had pledged to share her life -- except when he'd asked her what would happen next, and she had been weak enough, or crazy enough, to all but promise that she'd continue to sleep with him. Xena pushed the shutters wide open and breathed in the cool air. *I'll come and visit you...* Would she actually have the nerve to tell Gabrielle she was going off to visit Ares? Gabrielle would probably nod quickly and avert her eyes, and that would make it worse. How could she have convinced herself that she wasn't betraying Gabrielle? Of course, Gabrielle had told her so ... but only out of desperation. It wasn't as if she had left Gabrielle much of a choice.

Something else was troubling her. Xena rubbed her arm ... the wetness on her skin -- it was raining. *Dammit.* She shouldn't have let Gabrielle leave -- should have gone with her -- should have gone after her and stopped her...

She went back and sat down on the edge of the bed. Ares stirred and sighed in his sleep.

Xena remembered the way they had looked at each other, his face lit with such quiet, simple happiness. Even if she could undo it, she wouldn't. She wouldn't take that away from him ... wouldn't take it away from herself.

Her eyes burning with unshed tears, Xena sighed and stared into the window. Maybe it would all work out somehow.

Outside, the black of the sky was now dabbled with the first streaks of pale grey. A bird began to chirp, tentatively at first and then louder as its warble was joined by another. She had to go back to her room; she owed Gabrielle that much. *And leave Ares to wake up alone, and miss seeing him wake up and smile at her... Maybe she could wait a little longer. Maybe she could wake him.*

She was still thinking about it when the predawn quiet exploded in a loud crash.

* ~ * ~ *

Ares bolted upright and groped automatically for the sword at his side. It took him a few moments to remember where he was. The farmhouse -- Xena --

Xena?

A dream ... no, not a dream, there she was, standing by the bed. Life was wonderful.

And it could also turn out to be really, *really* short, judging by all that banging and clattering in the house.

"Shit," Xena whispered. "All my weapons are in the other room -- "

"You think it's Gascar and the boys?"

He jumped out of bed, fumbling around for his clothes.

"Could be -- I don't know -- " She was slipping hastily into her shift.

"I'll go first." Ares had found the pants and hopped around trying to get into them. Knowing that those cockroaches could kill him was bad enough, but not being able to dress with a snap of his fingers -- even after all this time, it was damn frustrating.

"No, no -- give me your sword -- "

There was another clatter, followed by a shout of, "*Xena!*"

Gabrielle? From sheer shock, he missed the pant leg, stumbled and landed hard on the floor, muttering a curse. *Great. If it isn't the morals squad.*

"Xena!" she yelled again, her voice frantic. "Gascar's army is on its way!"

* ~ * ~ *

She hadn't beaten them by much. Not half an hour later, peering out of a side window of the house Gabrielle spotted Gascar's men coming over the ridge of the hill. It was almost light now, and the air rang with birdsong. Silvery beads of water still glittered in the trees, but the drizzle had ended, giving way to a wispy gray mist.

"They're here," she said, not looking at Ares. "She should be ready soon -- she'll give you the signal. I'll try to stall them as long as I can."

"Yeah, yeah," he grunted. "You saved them the trouble of knocking down the door."

"Well ... it's not like it would have been much trouble."

In her determination to make enough noise to ensure that Xena and Ares were awake and presentable when she saw them, she had slammed the front door a little too hard behind her. It had come off the hinges and now held in place only because it was propped up by a rickety chair.

Gabrielle smoothed the blue dress she had put on over her warrior garb, and finally brought herself to glance at Ares. In the half-darkness, she thought she saw him give her a nervous look. It occurred to her that he might be worried she'd give him away to Gascar. She pursed her lips. Of course, Ares *would* get such an idea.

The warriors stopped outside the house. Some of them began to dismount, obviously trying to keep things quiet.

"You're on," Ares whispered tensely.

The porch groaned and squeaked under the heavy boots; the chair grated on the floor as the door was pushed slowly, and then came the expected crash as the door and the chair tumbled down. That was her cue.

Gabrielle screamed at the top of her lungs and raced toward the door, making a spur-of-the-moment detour to grab a couple of pots and a frying pan from the kitchen. Three men were already inside the house. Screaming again, she threw the pots at them and advanced, swinging the pan. At least for a moment, they were startled enough to retreat.

"What's going on?" said a heavy voice she recognized as Gascar's.

"Get out of my house, you -- you -- you no-good thugs!" she screeched as she ran out on the porch, waving the frying pan around.

"Go on, search the house," Gascar said irritably. Gabrielle took a look at him. He was stocky and broad-shouldered, with a scarred, craggy face, harsh yet unmistakably intelligent.

"No, no -- *please!* We're just poor peasants! We have no money ... there's nothing to take here!"

She knew she was giving a bad performance -- nothing like that brilliant improvisation last time. Maybe it could only have worked on the spur of the moment.

"Calm down, sweetheart," said Demetrius. "No one wants to rob you. We're after Ares."

"Oh, it's you!" She tilted her head in what was meant to be a seductive manner. "Well, you know Ares has left -- my husband told you -- "

"Girlie, if that was your husband, I'm the Emperor of Rome," Gascar said. "You give us any more trouble and you'll be sorry. All right, boys, go in. And remember, don't bother trying to take him alive. You see him, you kill him."

"Hey, Gascar," Demetrius said. "It could be fun, you know -- to have him on his knees, begging for mercy and all..."

"Shut up, you moron," Gascar snarled. "We're not here for your entertainment. We can't take any chances, not if Xena's helping him. Go on."

Gabrielle stepped aside -- it wasn't time to start fighting yet -- and several of the warriors went inside the house. Gascar turned to her again, eyeing her thoughtfully.

"Wait a minute. You're no farm girl, are you." He scratched his beard and then looked at her with a crooked sneer. "I know -- you're Gabrielle, that girl who hangs around

with Xena. The famous -- what do they call you again? -- Battling Bard."

"She's famous?" said Demetrius, clearly impressed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gabrielle said.

"So," Gascar said. "None of my business really, but why is Xena hiding Ares? I heard about some of the things he did trying to get her back in his service -- set her up for murder and nearly got her hanged, didn't he?"

There was probably no point in trying to maintain the charade; Gascar was too smart. Still, she said feebly, "Really, sir -- you're mistaking me for someone else..."

"Come on, give it up. You know I'm on to you. Look here, I don't want any trouble with you or with Xena. All we want is" -- he drew a finger quickly across his neck and made a hissing sound -- "Ares."

She stared back at him silently. Inside the house, the soldiers could be heard stomping around and knocking things over.

"You almost got away with it, you know," Gascar chortled. "Lucky for us Ares decided to get plastered in a tavern and spill the beans. One of the fellas there had heard about the bounty, knew which way we were headed, so he went after us and tipped us off. Once the barkeep told me he left with a tall dark-haired woman, it all fell into place. Otherwise, we'd still be on that wild goose chase, riding to the -- "

"He's getting away!" a man's voice shouted from inside.

Gabrielle turned and saw Ares jump out the window and bolt toward the barn. She held her breath.

"Shoot him!" Gascar yelled, forgetting all about her for the moment. One of the men drew his bow. Gabrielle swung the frying pan and it hurtled through the air, knocking him out just as he was releasing the arrow. Then she took off running as fast as she could, hearing Gascar bellow behind her, "Get him, dammit! And get her too!"

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that at least a dozen men were chasing Ares. So far, everything was going according to plan.

A man on horseback caught up with her and swung his sword; Gabrielle dove and rolled on the soggy grass, reaching under her dress to get one of her sais. It was a clean shot, right in the side of the neck; he made a choked sound, his hands going up, and sagged heavily, then tumbled to the ground while the startled horse neighed and bucked.

We're not here to participate in a bloodbath... That was what Xena had said to Ares when they'd tracked him down and told him about the bounty. *Well, so much for that,* Gabrielle thought, tugging angrily at the dagger. She ripped off her dress, almost tearing it in half, and wiped the blade on it before throwing the wet rag away. Two more men were already coming toward her. Meanwhile, Ares' pursuers had run into the barn after him. If the trap worked properly, any moment now --

A thunderous boom shook the ground as the barn exploded in flames.

* ~ * ~ *

Yeah, baby! Ares couldn't help grinning as he stopped to catch his breath and looked back at the giant ball of fire. Damn, she was good at this stuff.

"Are you okay?" Xena yelled, running up behind him.

"Yeah ... sure."

More than okay. To make love to her and fight by her side in one night -- after this, one could die without too many regrets.

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll go round the house and take them from the back."

That was the thing to do -- attack now, before Gascar and the surviving men had time to recover. To make sure they didn't recover too quickly, Xena's ululating battle cry pierced the morning mist, rising above the roar of the flames. Beautiful.

As Ares sprinted behind the shack, he almost collided with one of Gascar's warriors. The man, who looked shaken and confused, raised his sword somewhat tentatively. Ares' blow knocked it from his hand and sent it flying. With surprising presence of mind, the man lunged forward and went for his throat, taking him down into a puddle. The son of a bitch obviously hadn't washed in days, and his breath reeked of garlic. As they wrestled, Ares couldn't get an angle to turn the blade of his sword toward his attacker; finally, he jerked the hilt forward and rammed it into the man's head. His eyes rolled back and his hands slackened; he slumped, dropping his head on Ares' shoulder, and stopped moving.

With an effort, Ares pushed him off, not sure if his enemy was dead or unconscious, and sat up. He was muddy and wet, his face and neck splattered with blood. Yet again, the thrill of the fight had eluded him. Maybe he was just too close to it now, when he could still feel the man all over him, when he knew that the crunching bone and the thick gushing blood could have been his own. Yet mortals knew it too, and still felt the intoxication of deadly combat; he had felt it with them when he was a god. Maybe they were just used to it.

There wasn't time to think about it now. Ares dipped his palm in the puddle and ran it across his face, but the cold slimy water made him feel even dirtier. Picking up his sword, he jumped to his feet and ran toward the front of the house, to where he could hear the shouts and the clang of metal. He got there just in time to hear Gascar shout, "Dammit, it's just two of them!" and to prove him wrong by quickly taking down two of his men.

Breathing hard, he looked up and found himself staring into a pair of steely gray eyes, one slightly bluer than the other.

"Ares," Gascar said in a low growl that actually gave Ares a shiver of fear.

The warlord charged.

Good thing he didn't have to fight Gascar when mortality was still new to him, when every movement felt slow and clumsy, hampered by the lack of god-power in his limbs and by the unaccustomed need to avoid injury. Even now, it wasn't going to be easy. Though past his prime, Gascar was good.

As their swords clashed, Ares saw a crooked sneer on the warlord's face.

"Not so much fun, is it, when you can't just zap people with fireballs?" Gascar was panting but he still managed to put some mockery in his voice. "You had it pretty good -- pushing people around, knowing no one could ever lay a hand on you... Well, guess what, you're just one of us now. You're not even that good a fighter."

Parrying a blow, Ares scowled and bit his lip. The man was obviously trying to throw him off-balance, but knowing that didn't make it any easier to ignore his taunts.

"Don't worry, if we don't get you, someone else will," Gascar went on. "That's a pretty long list of people you pissed off. Lucky for you if they make it quick. Probably have you squealing like a stuck pig before you die..."

Ares flinched and barely avoided getting hit as his foot skidded. The morning light was in his eyes, peeking through the thinning clouds, making him squint.

"Shut up," he said through clenched teeth.

"Can't manage anything smarter than that, eh?" Gascar advanced on him, making him back away toward the house. The morning light glared through the thinning clouds, hurting his eyes. "You know how pathetic you are? Even if you survive, you'll never be anything more than a loser" -- he made another thrust and the tip of his sword slashed Ares' arm -- "relying on Xena to bail you out..."

At that instant, Ares caught sight of her dispatching one of Gascar's men; she looked in his direction, and their eyes met. He wanted to laugh. To think that he'd let this blowhard get to him.

He chuckled, and the gloating in Gascar's face gave way to puzzlement. Ares' next blow nearly knocked the sword out of the warlord's hand.

"You have no idea," Ares said.

They fought silently after that, except for harsh gasps and grunts, in a whirl of thrusts and parries and blocks, steps forward and steps back on the slick ground; it ended when Ares' sword slid past Gascar's, metal grating on metal, and plunged into his stomach right underneath the armor. Gascar gave a hoarse cry, and as Ares yanked the blade out he swayed and sank to his knees. His eyes, already growing glassy and dim, looked up at the former God of War with that mix of agony, rage and disbelief which Ares had seen on so many faces over millennia. A strand of saliva hung from his open mouth.

"I'll see you in Tartarus ... someday," he rasped.

Ares nodded grimly.

"You probably will."

A quick stab to the neck finished the job. He watched the warlord crumple, a dark pool of blood spreading over the shiny grass.

The last of Gascar's men were making their getaway over the top of the hill, their shouts and the neighs of their horses fading in the distance. A gust of wind whipped at the wet grass and made the flames rise higher over the still-blazing barn, where a moment later something crashed loudly, making a fountain of sparks shoot up toward the sky. The battle was over now. Ares wiped his face with a damp mud-streaked hand, trying to steady his breath. His eyes locked on Xena's again, and suddenly, there it was at last, that moment when fighting together made them one. He thought he saw a smile touch her parted lips.

She gave him an almost imperceptible nod, turned away and went to inspect the bodies.

Ares looked around and noticed Gabrielle approaching. The girl had actually come through for him; after everything that had happened, he hadn't been entirely confident of her dedication to keeping him alive.

He was still thinking of what to say to her when he saw her hand flash upward, a glint of metal in it.

No.

Ares was too paralyzed to move when the almost white blur sliced the air, swishing toward him. *That little --*

He expected to be thrown back by the sheer force of the blow, and to feel excruciating pain shoot through his body; but there was none of that. Instead, he heard a dull thud behind him. He whirled around. One of the men he had brought down before, and apparently only wounded, was sprawled with a sword clutched in his hand and Gabrielle's dagger buried in his neck, his head resting at an unnatural angle on the bottom step of the porch.

Ares' knees buckled, and he had to lean on his sword to stay on his feet. He blinked and gulped painfully for air, waiting for his heart to slow down.

"So ... it's come to this," he said, gasping. "The God of War ... saved by the little sidekick."

Gabrielle gave him an exasperated look.

"You're welcome."

Xena ran up and squeezed her in a hug, resting her chin on Gabrielle's shoulder and closing her eyes for a moment.

"Gabrielle ... thank you..."

"Yeah," Gabrielle said in a small voice.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Xena held her a few moments longer, then let go and went over to Ares. The sight of all the blood on him made her frown.

"Are you hurt?"

"Nah, just a scratch." He pointed to his arm. Then he glanced down at Gascar and said, almost admiringly, "He was one tough son of a bitch."

"Come on," Xena said. "I'll take care of that for you."

He followed her into the house, hoping Gabrielle wouldn't tag along. She did, of course.

In the kitchen, Ares took off his vest and washed off the blood while Xena went to get the bandages and the ointment. Then she cleaned and dressed his wound, and said with a quick half-smile, "All better now" -- and she was so close that he couldn't resist reaching up to plant a small kiss on the corner of her mouth. Xena tensed and stood up straight.

"I think we all need to wash up," she said. "I'll bring in some more water."

She walked out briskly.

Smoke from the barn, with a hint of the nauseating smell of burning flesh, drifted into the kitchen through the small window. The fire was still crackling outside; the only other sounds were the occasional whinnying of a horse and the short screech of the rusty handle when Xena pulled up the bucket from the well.

She was gone for too long. After a while, Ares glanced at Gabrielle and saw her make for the door. He got up and went after her.

Xena was standing on the porch, with the full bucket at her feet. She leaned against a pole, absently running her hand over the rough wood, her head hung low.

"Xena." Gabrielle came up and touched her shoulder. "Is something wrong?"

She looked up, a faraway, perplexed expression on her face.

"We've got to do something about the bodies..."

"Drag them to the barn," Ares said. "Perfect for garbage disposal."

"Yeah..." Xena lowered her eyes again. When she spoke next, she seemed to be talking to herself.

"This was one peaceful place in my whole life..."

Gabrielle shot Ares a look that said, "This is all *your* fault," and patted Xena's hands. As he watched Xena rest her cheek on the top of Gabrielle's head and press her hand, his mouth tightened bitterly. *Three's a crowd*. Yet he had to admit that right now, Xena needed the meddling blonde. How could *he* offer her comfort when her distress was somewhat baffling to him, something that he would surely never feel or even completely understand?

He turned and was about to go back into the house when he heard her say, "Ares."

Something in her voice made Ares' heart skip a beat and the breath stick in his throat. He turned back. There was a timid, almost frightened look in her eyes.

"You can't stay here." She glanced furtively at Gabrielle. "Some of Gascar's men got away -- they could come back and -- " Her voice trailed off. "It isn't safe anymore."

Her words seemed to hang in the air between them as he stood still, waiting for the verdict.

Gabrielle opened her mouth, looked from Ares to Xena and back, and sighed.

"You can travel with us for a few days," she said. "Until we find a safe place."

Xena let out a long breath, her shoulders sagging a little.

Her voice sounded quite casual when she said, "All right."

* ~ * ~ *

The clouds had cleared by the time they left the farm, riding side by side with Xena in the middle. Ares, unusually subdued, rode astride a horse taken from one of the dead men; it was a beautiful animal, its sleek hide almost jet-black with a tint of bronze. As Xena glanced at him, his ring glinted a bright white in the sun, hurting her eyes. She thought of Ares' almost childlike excitement when they'd found it on Gascar while dragging the body to the barn, and of his surprising squeamishness when it turned out that cutting off the dead man's finger was the only way to get the ring off. Their eyes met, and she turned away toward Gabrielle, who was staring straight ahead, her face tense.

Xena wasn't sure what would happen now -- not even sure what she wanted to happen. That was something new, and it scared her; it was as if she were riding a horse and had lost control of it, which hadn't happened to her since she was fourteen. Thinking too far beyond the next few days was a bad idea.

What she needed, what *they* needed, was a purpose. She remembered that when she and Gabrielle heard about the bounty on Ares, they had been on the way to Elaea; the once-quiet town, where the worship of the Olympians had been almost completely

abandoned after news of the Twilight had reached the populace, had found itself embroiled in a nasty turf war between two upstart religious cults, and an old acquaintance on the city council had pleaded for Xena's help. They'd go to Elaea, then. That was the thing to do, pick up where they'd left off.

They rode for a while over the bright emerald-green hills, past sparse trees, past a distant cluster of huts with thatched roofs and a large vineyard where a few peasants were tending to the vines, across a shallow brook where the horses' hooves kicked up spurts of silvery droplets. When Ares spoke up, the sound of his voice was almost a shock.

"So. Are we going anywhere in particular?"

"Elaea."

Gabrielle shot her a surprised look.

"What's in Elaea?" Ares asked.

"Couple of cults making trouble."

Ares seemed to ponder this information. "Cults." He wiggled his eyebrows and gave her a fake grin. "Any -- interesting rituals? Virgins dragged kicking and screaming to the altar?"

Gabrielle sighed in exasperation.

"It's a job," Xena said curtly.

Ares nodded, obviously realizing the futility of attempts to make conversation. After another brief pause, he started whistling a tune that Xena recognized as an old Thracian war song. She could almost physically sense Gabrielle's impulse to yell at him to shut up. She thought of telling him to stop, but in a few moments he stopped on his own, and they rode on in silence.

CHAPTER 4

Gabrielle shuffled into the cramped, stuffy room lit by a sputtering lamp; the innkeeper was obviously skimping on oil. She took off her boots and undressed, slipped on her nightshirt, put out the light and dove into the bed, trying to get comfortable on the coarse sheets and the lumpy stale-smelling pillow.

Once, she had wished so dearly that Xena would stay indoors more often instead of braving the weather and the bugs at yet another campsite. *Maybe it's true*, she thought; *when the gods want to punish us, they grant us our wishes*. She wasn't sure which gods were still around, but some higher powers had obviously played such a trick on her. What she wouldn't have given right now to curl up in a bedroll under the stars, by

the still-shimmering remnants of a campfire ... with no one else around except her and Xena.

She thought of the first time they had camped with Ares, the night after leaving the farm. After a quick cold meal, Xena tossed him a couple of extra blankets, and they all turned in. It was a while before Gabrielle fell asleep. The next thing she knew, the sun was high and hot and the sky was a pitilessly bright blue, and Xena and Ares and their horses were gone. She opened her mouth to scream and jolted awake, sitting up in her bedroll with a gasp. It was still dark, and everyone was still there.

She felt a little better in the morning when they were briefly alone, and Xena hugged her and kissed her so very sweetly, and asked if she was okay; Gabrielle nodded, and Xena whispered in her ear, "I love you."

They stopped at a lake in the afternoon, when daylight hadn't even begun to fade yet. After they set up camp, Xena said quite casually, "We're going for a swim..." and there was a moment of uncertainty before she added, "Gabrielle and I." It made sense, of course. They undressed behind a shrub and swam toward a tiny island with a cluster of trees; and when they were almost there, Xena dove down and slid between Gabrielle's thighs and nuzzled her, making her gasp and splutter. When Xena surfaced, there was a sparkle in her eyes but also just a hint of anxious yearning for approval; they looked at each other, and Gabrielle shook her head and laughed. Having reached the island, they rolled in the tall wiry grass, kissing the cool droplets of water off each other's faces and necks and shoulders, and it was wonderful -- until the moment when Gabrielle gently ran her teeth over Xena's nipple and heard the husky sound she was waiting for, and her mind filled instantly with the knowledge that Xena had made that sound for Ares; she felt sick at the thought that she might still be able to smell him on her, taste him on her. That was almost enough to make her stop; but Xena pulled her up for a kiss and stroked her wet back, and moaned louder, and Gabrielle knew that she would still do anything to hear those sounds and to feel Xena's body arch against hers.

When they returned to the campsite, Ares gave them a silent sideways look, got up and went to unsaddle and brush down his horse. Gabrielle felt sure that he knew what they had been up to. There was no reason he shouldn't know, she told herself; except that she couldn't quite chase away the thought that one of these days, she might be the one waiting for Xena and Ares, and wondering what they were doing.

Dinner was caught and cleaned and gutted, and Gabrielle went into the woods, less than fifty paces from the water's edge, to gather dry branches for the fire. As she was coming back, her view of the shore blocked by the dense foliage, she heard Ares' voice -- "Oh yeah... that feels good" -- and stopped in her tracks, nearly dropping the firewood. *She wouldn't -- not so soon...* Then, Ares said, "Ow -- ow" and Xena chuckled, "Don't be such a baby." With some trepidation, Gabrielle parted the branches and saw that he was lying on his stomach, his vest (but only his vest) off, Xena straddling him and kneading his back. Gabrielle took a deep breath; this, she could live with. She walked toward them, and Xena looked up and said, with a jocularly that had a slightly defensive edge, "Mortality hurts, you know."

The next evening, as they sat by the campfire eating roasted partridge, Gabrielle glanced up to see Xena and Ares looking at each other. It was a look that told her too

much, and it cut deep, making something dull and cold lodge inside her chest. Then Xena turned her head and their eyes met; and after a moment Gabrielle inclined her head slightly, biting her lip, and looked up again. It wasn't even a real nod, but she knew she was saying yes to a question Xena would never dare to ask. She reflected that she had, after all, given Xena the go-ahead; if she went back on it now, it would feel like an act of jealousy rather than love, like yanking at a leash. Ares would be gone, and it would be just her and Xena, and -- she couldn't have explained it, but something between them would be gone too.

Another night went by, and another day. On the night after that Gabrielle woke up to hear a faint noise, and two tall shadows, one after the other, separated themselves from the dark mass of the trees. She watched as they walked back to the campsite, as Xena wordlessly squeezed Ares' hand, as they both settled into their bedrolls. So this was how it was going to be.

Three days later they arrived in Elaea. As they stood in the dark, dank-smelling anteroom of the inn, Xena paused briefly, her face impassive, turning her head only for an instant in Ares' direction, and finally said, "Two rooms." In her mind's worried eye, Gabrielle saw Xena tiptoeing out in the middle of the night, and then heard her own voice say, "Make that three rooms." Xena turned abruptly and gave her a startled look, both guilty and relieved.

When she came to Gabrielle's room that night, she looked almost timid, as if half expecting to be kicked out. Then they lay together, just hugging, and suddenly Xena said, "Tell me a story." Gabrielle squinted warily; Xena had seldom reacted to her storytelling with anything more than bemused tolerance. "What kind of story?" she asked, and Xena muttered, "Any kind ... I like the way you tell them." She slid down a little, resting her head on Gabrielle's belly. A little hesitantly, Gabrielle launched into a tale about a poor fisherman who caught a fish of such beautiful colors that he felt sorry for it and let it go, and the fish turned out to be a sea nymph who promised to grant him three wishes for his kindness. (At that point, she realized that Xena was listening attentively and really began to put her heart in the story.) The fisherman, she continued, hurried home to tell his wife of his good fortune; and then, looking at the meager dinner on their table, he sighed for a big juicy steak. Lo and behold, one appeared before them that very instant, and the wife cursed him for wasting a wish on such foolishness; on and on she went until the poor man cried, *May the gods strike you dumb, you harpy!* -- and he had to use his third and final wish to restore her gift of speech.

Xena chuckled quietly; after a moment's pause, she said, "That's pretty sad, isn't it?" and Gabrielle replied, stroking her hair, "Well, I don't know ... it was a really good steak!" They both laughed, and then Xena shot her a mischievous look and said, "Let's hope it was better than the happy boot." That was a reference to a lighthearted moment they had shared at a tavern in Thessaly a couple of months earlier: Gabrielle had complained that her steak tasted and felt exactly like a boot, and Xena, who liked to rib her about getting all sentimental toward animals, had deadpanned, "At least the boot lived a happy life." The memory of it made them both laugh, and they laughed together until they were kissing; then they made love, and held each other in silence, and talked some more, and all was well. Or almost well, because hiding out in the back of her mind was the knowledge that they could no longer talk about *everything*.

Xena's scheme to deal with the two rapacious cults actually gave Ares more to do than Gabrielle; but it worked. Since this scheme also involved getting some of the locals to believe that Ares was still a god, for him to stay in Elaea was not an option, and so they moved on together -- just as they moved on from the quiet village they passed through a few days later. The question of finding a safe haven for Ares had yet to come up. Somehow, without ever talking about it, they began spending more nights at inns, and it was tacitly understood that on some of those nights Xena went to Ares; and somehow, this insane arrangement had started to seem almost normal, even if it was almost impossible at times to pretend that it didn't exist.

There had been the morning when, having slept late (and alone), Gabrielle came down into the inn's greasy-smelling dining room and found Xena and Ares sitting at a table half-turned toward each other, laughing at something, hand in hand, faces glowing. Seeing her, Xena froze in mid-laugh and awkwardly moved her hand away, the joy ebbing from her face and giving way to an apologetic look. There had been the night when Gabrielle was startled from her sleep by a loud crash; the next morning, Xena had stared into her oatmeal and muttered a quick explanation about rickety furniture. Before they left, she conferred in hushed tones with the smirking innkeeper, and then spent a long time hammering in Ares' room. As they were leaving the inn, Gabrielle felt like grabbing Xena by the shoulders and shouting in her face, *What are you doing? How can you?* That frightened her.

And there was more: the time when they had fought to free some children from a couple of slave traders and their guard of mercenaries; and when the fighting was done and Gabrielle went over to comfort the huddled children -- crying and frightened but unhurt -- she turned and saw the look that passed between Xena and Ares as they re-sheathed their swords. They were both slightly out of breath, their lips parted in a hint of a smile waiting to break through, the same glint in their eyes. They only looked at each other for an instant, but that was enough. It was as if, across a distance of at least ten paces, they had clasped hands. He was still bad for her (*of course!*); this was exactly why. But before Gabrielle could focus on that, another thought filled her with a dull aching heaviness: the knowledge that their mutual joy in a good fight was a bond between them which she could never share.

Before, when they had traveled in the company of Eve or Virgil, Gabrielle had sometimes found that she missed having Xena all to herself, missed the ease of their chats and the comfort of their silences. This was different. The day after leaving Elaea, as they rode through a long stretch of the open plain, it finally got to her; she prodded Clio and took off at a gallop, slowing down nearly two hundred paces ahead. Xena caught up with her and said quietly, "Gabrielle?" ?- and Gabrielle replied, much more caustically than she'd meant to, "I think I need a little break from all this togetherness." They rode by side for a while, just the two of them, and Gabrielle relaxed enough to make small talk; then she noticed Xena stealing a look behind her shoulder to make sure Ares was behind them, and she sighed and tugged at the reins, stopping to wait for him.

The lack of privacy was bad enough; having something unspoken and unspeakable linger between them when they were alone was worse. They had swept things under the rug before -- but it had always been things they had managed, for better or worse, to put behind them. This was here and now, a part of their lives they couldn't possibly share.

Once, she had decided to talk about one of those buried things from the past -- what happened in Ch'in, her anger at Xena back then, her horror at her own betrayal -- with the small hope that it might lead to a talk about the here and now. They were camping out near a stream; Ares had fallen asleep, and Xena sat by the water watching the quivering pearly trail of moonlight and occasionally making it ripple with a long stick. Gabrielle crawled out of her bedroll and came to sit next to her. Xena wrapped a warm, comfortable arm around her shoulder, and Gabrielle leaned against her, catching the leathery scent of her sweat. After a long silence she said, "Xena... you know -- I've been thinking..." She felt Xena's body tense a bit, and in that instant she knew that if she started to talk about this, it would sound as if she were blaming Xena, or blaming Ares -- after all, he was implicated too, however hard it was to comprehend that the man she had just watched fumble with a fishing line was the same being as the god who had sent her half across the world with a flick of his hand.

Her words still hung in the cool air over the murmur of the stream and the clicking and whirring of insects, and Xena's arm was stiff around her. Gabrielle let out a slow breath and closed her eyes. After a moment she dropped her head on Xena's shoulder and whispered, "I love you."

She and Ares avoided each other as much as they could, which wasn't much. Being Ares, he couldn't resist the occasional gibe about little things like Clio's name: "You named your horse after one of Apollo's floozies?" he asked, eyebrows raised in mock puzzlement, and when Gabrielle tersely replied that Clio was the Muse of History, he smirked, "Right, one of Apollo's floozies." Mostly, though, even Ares apparently knew better than to snipe at her now. And yet with every passing day, he got on her nerves more and more.

A part of her knew that in a different situation, some of the things that drove her crazy would have seemed innocuous or even endearing: his one-liners, his half-joking gripes about the lack of creature comforts, his efforts to maintain an immaculate appearance (which, she dimly realized, was less about vanity than about holding on to what he was); the fact that he named his horse Dragon; the fact that he bungled nearly every chore he tried to do, and that he wasn't trying much anymore. Once, after an exhausting day, she asked him to watch a pot of rabbit stew while she took a nap; she woke up to find the stew burned -- after all the time she'd spent preparing it -- and Ares engrossed in watching Xena brush down Argo on the other side of the clearing. She nearly lost it that time, especially when he gave her an innocent shrug and said, "We can always have fish..."

Yet, at odd moments, she felt almost sympathetic. There had been the time Xena went hunting on her own, leaving her and Ares to set up camp. After a while they heard a noise that might have signaled her return; they both turned their heads with nervous anticipation, and it occurred to Gabrielle that they were both caught up in something beyond their control, like fellow survivors of a natural disaster. Hurricane Xena.

She had stopped thinking about how it would all turn out.

She wasn't thinking much, either, about some of the things that had preoccupied her lately -- whether the warrior's path was right for her, and what it was doing to her soul. She could go for days now without remembering that boy she killed in the north

African desert by mistake, when she thought he was about to attack Xena. What did it say about her, she wondered occasionally, if she was more terrified of losing Xena than of losing herself?

Gabrielle raised herself up and poked at the pillow in a futile attempt to make it softer. Just then, she became aware of light rustling and scratching in the corner. Mice. Well, at least it wasn't bedbugs. She sighed and lay down, pulling the threadbare blanket over her head. She had to try to get some sleep; they were planning to get an early start. She thought of how Xena had come to her the previous night, how greedily Xena had kissed her mouth -- she had never kissed so hard before and it made Gabrielle wonder fleetingly if that was the way she kissed men, the way she kissed *him* -- how gently they rocked against each other in a familiar rhythm that let the heat build up slowly until it was almost melting her skin from inside, how they snuggled afterwards with her head nestled between Xena's sweat-dampened breasts. Gabrielle sighed and hugged the pillow.

The floorboards in the hallway creaked wearily. She shivered a little and wrapped the blanket tighter around herself, wondering if that was Xena.

* ~ * ~ *

No, definitely not her -- just some dumb hick trampling past the door.

Ares turned on his side and tried to stretch his legs; you obviously had to be a midget to stay at this place. Village inns ... He didn't want to think of the spacious bed, with sheets of black silk and formidable ornate bedposts, where he once entertained his women at the Halls of War ... a lot of women who were not Xena.

He wondered if any of the gods were still alive, and whether they ever checked up on him. He hoped not; he especially hoped that Athena couldn't see him from wherever gods went when they died. He could just see her shake her head with the usual mix of slightly scornful superiority and genuine embarrassment on his behalf. After all those years of trying to win Xena as his Warrior Queen, he had become little more than her sidekick, following her -- and her girlfriend! -- all over Greece, playing his part in her humanitarian projects and sleeping in these ratholes ... and Athena would never understand what made it all worthwhile, at least most of the time.

For a couple of days after they left the farm, he wasn't sure what was going to happen. He and Xena barely spoke, even when alone for a few moments. On the second day, when they camped by the lake and the two women slipped off for a swim (*oh yeah, right ... a swim*), Ares felt apprehension and anger clutching at his throat. Did she expect him to put up with this? He remembered how, right after he'd given up his godhood, they were talking on a grassy beach and he kept hoping that she'd invite him to join her and Gabrielle and Eve -- thinking that even if she wasn't going to sleep with him, it was okay as long as they could travel together and fight together, as long as he could discover the mortal world by her side. He was thinking the same thing when Xena walked away from him a second time, after saving him from the Furies. But the last few days had changed everything. Damned if he was going to tag along like a eunuch while she and her girlfriend made out behind his back.

The backrub she gave him later in the evening cheered him up a little, besides easing

the cramps that had plagued his mortal existence. It was good to feel her touch again, the warm, gentle strength of her hands. But it also made his yearning for her all the more acute, nearly unbearable as he lay just a few paces from Xena that night. There was an easy way out of his misery; but under the circumstances, it seemed like a final humiliation -- especially if Xena or, worse yet, Gabrielle woke up and caught him in the act. Somehow, eventually, he fell asleep and found relief in a dream.

The next morning, when Gabrielle went to wash up in a little cove shielded by lush shrubbery, he wanted to talk to Xena but couldn't work up the nerve, afraid he'd bungle it. As he was rolling up the blankets, he turned and saw her looking at him, and the tenderness in her eyes made him momentarily forget to breathe. He stood up straight and came up to her. After a brief, tense silence, he gave her a lopsided smile and said, hoping his voice would hold steady, "So ... what does a guy have to do to get a date around here?"

Xena almost smiled back but bit her lip; her eyes flickered as she turned away, obviously making an effort to keep a grip on herself. His heart pounding, he took her hands, and she murmured wistfully, "Ares..." There was a rustle behind the bushes -- Gabrielle was obviously back from her bath and getting dressed -- and he could have kicked himself for waiting so long. "Look," he said brusquely, "I just need to know..." She looked up at him, anxiously and a bit defensively, and lightly squeezed his hands, weaving her fingers through his. Ares stopped before he could utter something that would come out as bitter or whiny, or both. With a small smile, he let go of her hands and said, "Well, if you do decide to visit -- you know where to find me."

That evening when they were sitting around the fire eating, he caught Xena looking at him, but he couldn't tell what she was thinking. Another day went by; the next night, Ares lay very still in his bedroll, wondering if it was going to happen, hoping that Xena was only pretending to be asleep and that Gabrielle really was. Then Xena stirred and sat up, and a moment later he raised himself on an elbow. The blue-tinted light of the nearly full moon gave her face an eerie look, chiseled and smooth as marble, but then she turned slightly, and her eyes were sparkling and alive as they met his. Without a word, she rose, walked to the edge of the clearing and vanished into the woods. He got up and followed her as quietly as he could; the tall grass was cool and dewy under his feet, the dampness seeping into the linen of his pants and making them cling heavily to his ankles. His eyes made out a narrow footpath between the trees. It occurred to him that he might lose track of Xena and end up stumbling around the woods looking for her, feeling completely ridiculous.

He caught up with her in a tiny patch of a clearing, where the thick weave of branches and leaves overhead opened up just enough to let in the moonlight. She stood still and rigid by an oddly twisted, moon-bleached fallen tree, watching him as he walked toward her. With no more than half a pace between them, they faced each other, probably for not nearly as long as it seemed. Then they were locked in each other's arms, feeding on each other's mouths, and he willed himself not to rub against her through the thin fabric that was the only thing separating them now. He drew back and actually managed a grin -- "This *is* what you had in mind, right?" ?- and she shushed him, pressing into him, biting his lips, breaking the kiss to brush her cheek against his and breathe his name.

They sank down into the grass; Ares slid down to taste her and didn't stop until after

the second time she came, and then it was his turn to find out to what exquisite madness she could drive him with her mouth. "Are you okay?" she said afterwards, stroking his forehead, and he knew that she didn't mean just his ragged gasps for breath. He took her hand, kissed her knuckles and whispered, "Never better" and then, after the briefest pause, asked, "Are *you*?" Her mouth tightening a little, she turned away for a moment, then looked at him again and nodded. "Yeah." She settled into his arms and nestled her head on his shoulder. "Yeah."

That moment was enough for him to wonder if she was thinking about Gabrielle, or about one of the many things she had reason to hold against him. But none of it mattered as they lay together on the warm crushed grass, her lips roaming over his neck and shoulder while her hands stroked his back. He joked with her about giving him backrubs every day, and she laughed softly and held him close, running her fingers through his hair. She asked him if he knew how to fish, and when he said no, she promised to teach him. "I guess you'll have to teach me everything now," he said, half-facetiously but with a touch of real embarrassment at his helplessness; and she gave him a long kiss and said teasingly, "Not everything." This time, when they made love, he knew that she was accepting him not only into her body but into her life.

In Elaea -- where, at Xena's insistence, he grudgingly changed into less conspicuous clothes -- he got to help her on the job. Personally, Ares was of the opinion that the people of this town were smug morons who deserved to be fleeced by cults, warlords, or anyone else who would bother; but he knew better than to voice his views on the subject. He was amused to find out that one of the cult leaders, Ixidor, had formerly served as a very junior priest at one of his temples. This gave Xena an idea -- one that made him rather nervous at first, since she wanted him to do nothing less than pose as a god. He told her she was crazy; she told him he was scared. It worked.

She did an amazing job of rigging up the effects at the temple so that, when he stepped out from behind a statue, it really looked like he had arrived through the ether with the usual light show. He was quite convincing as he glared at the cult leaders and their followers -- whom Xena had managed to gather at the temple on some made-up pretext -- and told them they were toast unless they cleared out of town by sundown. If anyone doubted Ares' identity, it helped that Ixidor, who had seen him before, crumpled to his knees, his ruddy face turning greenish and dripping with sweat, and squawked, "My lord Ares!" (It also helped that, moments before, Xena had coaxed the fool into making some disparaging remarks about his former god.) A glass ball filled with some kind of glowing concoction supplied the finishing touch. Raising the ball in his hand, he growled, "Do *not* make me zap you!" and the cult members began to move nervously toward the doors while Ares laughed gleefully at the sight of Ixidor trying to back away on his knees. Then, at Xena's discreet signal, he lobbed the ball into a corner where Gabrielle set off a small explosive device, and the stampede that followed was a lot of fun to watch.

It felt good to be feared again, though there was also a quick tug of sadness at the thought that it was all faked, that his powers were gone; holding the glowing ball, he had had a vivid, aching memory, not so much in his mind as in his flesh and bone, of what it was like to have a real fireball form in his palm, born effortlessly from the power coursing under his skin. But then Xena came up to him, smiling warmly, and held his hands and said, "You did great." She looked like she wanted to kiss him -- in fact, she looked like she wanted to pull him into a back room and have her way with

him, except that the annoying blonde was already trudging up behind them. They made up for it, though, that night at the inn.

Their next task turned up unexpectedly while they were passing through a village where half a dozen kids had been stupid enough to get themselves abducted by some slave traders (who were smart enough to have the protection of a corrupt magistrate). This time there was real fighting involved. Apart from the thrill of fighting at her side, doing *anything* at her side, there was a curious moment when they brought the kids back to the village and watched the parents sweep them up in tearful hugs, and Ares caught himself getting an embarrassingly pleasant feeling at the thought that he'd had a hand in making this possible. It occurred to him that Xena must have felt like this too, and he was sharing in her life just like he had wanted. Once, when he was still a god, he had told her that he was willing to fight beside her, to champion the common folk he had never really seen as much more than fodder for his wars. He wasn't even sure he had truly meant it then, but maybe there was something to be said for all this up-with-people stuff.

He was sure of one thing: however he had imagined his life with Xena back then, he hadn't expected Gabrielle to be in the picture -- at least not quite so much, and not in that way. Having to put up with her was bad enough; he actually had to play nice and make sure *she* was willing to put up with *him*. When they rode together, he would hang back once in a while to let her have her quality time with Xena -- though, truthfully, that was far better than being subjected to the bard's deep thoughts about the colors of the sky or the inner lives of flowers. (Unfortunately, if Xena hadn't gotten tired of this crap in six years, it was unlikely that she would now.) He had to reconcile himself to never waking up next to Xena, to acting as if they were no more than traveling companions when the blonde was around. Despite the need to keep Gabrielle reasonably happy, he hoped she had a vivid imagination; he certainly got a kick out of the look on her face the morning after he and Xena broke the bed at one of those dingy inns.

The problem was, he had a vivid imagination, too. Given the amount of time he had spent around the Amazons in the old days, sleeping with women who also had female lovers was nothing new, and could make for a nice diversion. But being jealous of a woman ... that was different, and damn disconcerting. Not that he had any reason to doubt his ability to please Xena -- but obviously, being in bed with Gabrielle gave her something that he couldn't, and that knowledge gnawed at him far too often for his comfort. Once, he had a dream in which the two women made love to each other in complete abandon as he lay watching them, mysteriously unable to move, horrified and aroused in equal measure; it was even worse than the recurring nightmare which had him waking up at a campsite or an inn to find that they had dumped him, vanished without a trace. A few times, too, his brooding about what Xena felt in her girlfriend's arms led him to imagine what it was like to caress Gabrielle's small lithe form, and his body's reaction to these thoughts left him annoyed at himself and at her; surely, he wouldn't touch the blonde harpy if he were stranded with her on a desert island.

Occasionally, it occurred to Ares that he, the God of War, should have had more pride than to accept this ridiculous setup -- that he should tell Xena to choose between him and Gabrielle, that if she chose as he glumly suspected she would, he should leave, start a new life overseas ... maybe even try to get his godhood back. He didn't think about Olympus nearly as often as he had in the early days, but he did think about it,

and he knew that a part of him still believed he would return there, someday. Then, before this thought could solidify into anything like resolve, his mind would fill with memories: Xena smiling at him when he brought her blackberries one morning, and kissing the scratches he'd gotten on his hands picking them from the thorny bushes; Xena shuddering in his arms with her eyes closed and her mouth open; Xena looking at him when he fought Gascar; Xena tugging playfully at his ear and telling him to sit still while she cut his hair. It was all worth it; he couldn't walk away from her, from them, from the fact that there was a *them*.

It wasn't easy; even without Gabrielle, there was plenty to haunt them. One evening when they were having dinner at a nearly empty inn, a young woman entered with a pretty child in tow, a girl no more than six summers old with shoulder-length brown locks and huge hazel eyes with long dark eyelashes; as they came up to the grey-haired innkeeper, the young woman said, "Hi, Mom" and the girl squealed, "Grandma!", and the innkeeper hugged them with exclamations of joy. Xena's spoon clanked on the table. Ares glanced at her and saw the quiet heartbreak in her face before it turned distant and blank; she looked, as mortals said, as if she'd just seen a ghost. In the next instant, he knew that she had: the ghost of the daughter whose childhood she had missed, the ghost of the mother she had lost while sleeping in an ice cave for twenty-five years ... the cave where he had buried her after she'd faked her death to fool the gods. Their eyes met; her lips tightened and twisted slightly, and he thought he saw a mute reproach in her stare.

Perhaps it was a good thing that Gabrielle came back to the table just then and he had to hold his tongue, because otherwise he might have blurted out, "Dammit, *you* made me watch you die! If you had only trusted me enough to let me in on your plan..." And Xena would have told him -- as he reflected moments later, when the hot rush of anger had worn off -- that she had little cause to trust him back then, and plenty of cause to think that if she took him into her confidence, he'd just use it to manipulate her. She could have reminded him of other things, too; for instance, that once he had tried to make her kill her mother in a scheme to force her into his service. The ghosts were there to stay.

A couple of nights later, at a different inn in a different village, in the drowsy warmth of their embrace after making love, he thought of that moment -- of the doe-eyed little girl, of the grief and loss in Xena's face. "Xena," he whispered into her soft hair, and when she responded with a contented "Hmm?" he said, "Let's have a child."

In an instant, her body went rigid; disentangling herself from his arms, she moved away to the edge of the bed. "You're crazy," she said, her voice crisp and flat. Ares wondered if she meant "You're crazy to think that I would bring a child into this mess," or "You're crazy to think that I would do this to Gabrielle," or "You're crazy to think that I would have a baby with a man who once threatened my daughter's life if I didn't bear him a child," or all of the above. At least she didn't say that the thought of it sickened her, the way she did once. They lay silently for a while, and he felt cold and miserable between the damp sheets. Then Xena muttered, "I'd better get going," and slipped out of bed.

When the door closed behind her, Ares slammed his fist into the wall, wincing in pain. He tossed and turned for at least an hour, and finally, when the patch of sky in the tiny window was turning from black to grey, he did something that was absolutely

forbidden by their unspoken agreement: he went to her room. Luckily there were no locks on the doors. Xena sat up abruptly. "It's me," he muttered before any sharp objects could fly in his direction, and she hissed, "Ares, you fool -- what are you doing?" He came up and knelt by the bed. "What?" she asked, a little less harshly, and he swallowed and said, "I love you."

She sighed -- "Ares..." -- and put her arms around him, rocking back and forth a little as he rested his head in her lap. "I know you do," she whispered, "I know. I..." He held his breath, wondering if she was going to say it. She took his face in her hands, lifted his mouth up to hers and kissed him, and said, "It's okay."

In a few moments she gently told him to go; he slunk back to his room and managed to sleep a little. The next morning when he came down for breakfast, Xena was alone at the table. Ares stopped and looked at her, anxiety surging again, tightening into a coil in his chest. Then she reached out to take his hand, and her smile made him dizzy with happiness. He sat next to her, breathing in the light tangy scent of the herbs she used in her bath; she picked up a piece of honey-dipped flat bread from her plate and slipped it in his mouth, and he licked her fingers and they both shivered. They talked about nothing in particular. She told him they were heading to a nearby village to help resolve a dispute with a landowner over water rights; "I bet you'll put me to work digging ditches," he said, and she teased him about how great he would look digging a ditch -- and then her laugh broke off as if she'd been slapped, and she let go of his hand. He didn't have to turn and look to know what was wrong. Blondie's timing was still impeccable.

He tried not to think about how long this setup could go on, or how it would end. For the time being he was sharing Xena's life, and sometimes her bed. It would have to do.

Maybe she would come tonight.

It had started raining outside, the water dripping, pounding on the roof, sloshing in the trees. There was a noise in the hallway -- a soft thump, a creak... something that could be footsteps. Ares lifted his head, straining to make out the sounds over the patter of the rain.

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The footsteps came closer; not one but two people, one stomping heavily, the other shuffling. "This way, Sir," said the innkeeper's wheedling voice. A door opened with a fretful squeak. Apparently a late arrival, some tired traveler coming in from the rain. The innkeeper said something else and a male voice replied to her, muffled by the distance. Something thudded on the floor, then the door slammed shut, and the innkeeper trudged back down the hallway.

Xena took her hand off the door handle, went back to her bed and sat down with a sigh.

She had been about to walk out of the room when she heard the steps. She didn't really care if the innkeeper or the new guest had seen her tiptoeing through the hallway in her shift, or if she got lewd stares and winks in the morning; a steely glare was usually enough to fix that. It was just that she felt too much like a teenage girl

sneaking out at night to meet her boyfriend. And that was strange, because she didn't feel very young ... she felt worn out.

She hadn't planned for it to happen this way. The first night they camped out, lying in her bedroll under the chilly white moon, she told herself that she had to do right by Gabrielle. Whatever Gabrielle had in mind when she told her to go to Ares, it certainly wasn't "Let's have Ares join us so you can take turns sleeping with both of us." Even to think about it was absurd.

Gabrielle lay about four paces to her left, and Ares on her right a little further away, and she might as well have been stuck on some deserted rock in the middle of an ocean. She needed Gabrielle so badly, needed to fold herself around Gabrielle, to caress her until they both forgot the hurt, to see her eyes smile. She tried not to think of anything else, but the memories came anyway -- the tender, eager, almost disbelieving look in Ares' face when they first made love, the quiver in his voice when he whispered her name, how it had felt to rest her head on his chest and rub her cheek on the fuzzy hair that covered it.

She wondered if it would ever happen again -- knowing that the answer should have been a firm no.

The memories returned when she and Gabrielle lay on the grassy island in the lake after making love. She drew a fingertip across Gabrielle's skin, glittery with water and sweat, tracing the outline of Gabrielle's breast and the curve of her hip, and found herself thinking about how Ares would look with his hair wet and tiny droplets of water sparkling on his body. Xena squeezed her eyes shut, nearly gritting her teeth in frustration. Gabrielle reached up to plant small kisses on her jaw, trailing toward her mouth and finally brushing against it; the soft flutter of Gabrielle's tongue between her lips brought Xena back to the present, to how good it was to hold Gabrielle in her arms. Gently, she kissed her back and slid a hand down her body, listening to her trembling sighs. She couldn't bear the thought of losing Gabrielle, yet again. So much of their life together had been haunted by loss: their first night, when they were sure they were saying good-bye forever; their bittersweet reunion after Gabrielle came back from seemingly certain death, when the pure joy of their love was tainted by Xena's conviction that the only way to save Gabrielle was to separate from her forever -- or else her vision of being crucified together would come true.

Xena shook her head slightly; she didn't want to dwell on doom and loss. A happier memory came to her, from just a few days before they heard about the bounty on Ares: how Gabrielle had made a new kind of dumplings and she'd tasted one and pretended to wince, only to laugh at Gabrielle's crestfallen look; and how Gabrielle's face had lit up in a still-girlish smile when Xena popped another dumpling in her mouth and grinned to show her appreciation.

She cupped Gabrielle's face and looked in her eyes, and kissed her deeper. It wasn't fair that she should want anyone else.

The sun was golden in the bright grass, and the breeze was mild, and for a brief time she was happy -- until they left the little island and swam toward the shore, and it occurred to Xena that Ares knew exactly why they had left him behind. Back at the campsite, he avoided her eyes and grunted in response to her soft-spoken "Hey." She

watched him walk away sullenly to take care of his horse; and in that instant she knew that she couldn't possibly expect Ares to ride with her, fight with her, sleep five paces away from her, and never touch her -- not after what had happened between them -- not when they were traveling in the company of her lover. Even if he went along with it, which was doubtful, she couldn't do it to him... couldn't leave him with so little dignity. Worse, she wasn't sure she could do it to herself.

Ares came back to the camp some time later, when Gabrielle was off gathering firewood and Xena had just finished cleaning the carp she had caught. She threw a furtive glance at him, long enough to notice the little grimace on his face as he sat down. "Are you all right?" she asked, and when he didn't answer she came closer and said, "What's wrong?" He looked up at her, his mouth twitching, and spat out, "My back hurts from riding. And from walking. I haven't exactly got the hang of this whole mortal gig, okay?"

He turned away. Shaking her head, Xena quickly rinsed and wiped her hands, then knelt next to him and said, "Lie down." She almost smiled at the startled look he gave her. "On your stomach," she said. "Take your vest off." As Ares complied, she reminded herself that she wouldn't be touching him for pleasure, hers or his; it was only for pain relief, she had the skill and it would be cruel not to use it. Wiping her still-damp hands on the grass, she straddled him and felt him shudder a little. She kneaded his back slowly, easing the tension in the muscles, pressing her fingertips into his spine and shoulder blades. He groaned and Xena bit down on her lip, getting an all-too-vivid picture in her mind of Ares turning over so that her hands were on his chest and his eyes were on her, wide and cloudy with desire. She pressed harder, and couldn't help laughing and teasing him a bit when he let out an indignant "Ow!" -- and then she heard a noise and raised her head to see Gabrielle coming toward them with a bundle of sticks in her arms. She reminded herself that she wasn't doing anything ... wasn't doing anything wrong. Not yet.

Lying in her bedroll that night, Xena wondered if she had half believed that spending a night with Ares would get him out of her system -- and if Gabrielle had believed it, too. What a stupid expression, she thought; what a stupid thing for people to say. After the other night, he was in her blood more than ever; it was as if they had truly merged with each other and being away from him felt like being torn from a part of oneself, like missing a lost limb and still feeling it all the time.

She knew that Ares wasn't asleep, and that he was as desperate for her as she was for him; just as she knew that he was going to talk to her when Gabrielle went to bathe the next morning. He did it his way, falling back on clever one-liners, getting clumsy and tongue-tied when his emotions got the better of him for a moment -- but it wasn't difficult to figure out what he was trying to tell her: *I'll wait for you, but I can't take it much longer.*

Xena thought about it that day as they rode on toward Elaea. It wasn't just that she wanted him; it wasn't just that she didn't want him to leave -- she cringed at the thought of using sex as bait to make him stay. She loved him. Trying to hold on to him and to Gabrielle was greedy and unfair; losing either one of them was unbearable.

It was meant to be, Xena told herself. She had always prided herself on making her own fate; but perhaps no one did, man or god, where love was involved. She hadn't

chosen to love Gabrielle, she certainly hadn't chosen to love Ares -- she just did.

That evening, they sat at a campsite eating in near-silence, and there was a moment when she found herself staring straight into Ares' eyes, dark in the deepening twilight, filled with a longing so intense that she couldn't look away -- a longing for so much more than her body. She wasn't sure how long they stared at each other like that, but when she shifted her eyes she caught Gabrielle looking at her, and it made her cheeks burn. Gabrielle tilted her head down in an almost imperceptible movement, her face lit up by the campfire's faint crimson glow; when she raised her eyes toward Xena again, it was in a look of quiet agreement. Xena's heart sank. So Gabrielle knew what she was thinking, and accepted it. To her dismay, she wasn't sure if that was a bad or a good thing. She couldn't do this to Gabrielle, she couldn't ... but what would it do to Ares if she pushed him away now, and what would it do to her and Gabrielle? There was no good way out of this.

The night after that, some part of her still wanted to believe that she wasn't doing this on purpose, just letting it happen -- that she was just going for a walk in the woods and Ares just happened to follow her. It was maddening, to be thinking that way. As a kid, Xena had sometimes overheard older girls talk about their boyfriends, in the neighborhood and at Cyrene's tavern; they had a way of making it sound like it was never their fault if they went too far, like they'd gotten carried away, swept off their feet. She had scoffed at that, even then: when she made love with someone, she had decided, it would be because she wanted to, and she would never lie to herself about it. This was no time to start.

In a small clearing, Xena stopped and stood still, her hands clasped on her stomach, her bare foot kicking away at the pine cones and sticks scattered in the grass. The moon peered through the murmuring leaves overhead, and everything was mottled with bluish white: the grass, the darkness of the trees, her own skin. Then the branches rustled at the edge of the clearing, and Ares came out into the moonlight. He walked toward her as she watched and waited. After all this time, she had stopped running.

Then there was no more distance between them, and she lost herself in the heat of his kiss, until Ares pulled back and joked, "This *is* what you had in mind, right?" -- and it jolted her back into reality, a reality in which everything had consequences and in which there was still time to turn back. Instead, she silenced him with another kiss and pulled him down with her into the dewy grass. But the thought of Gabrielle still nudged its way into her mind a few times -- even when Ares was kissing her stomach and she was trembling and raising her hips toward him in anticipation of more; even when she caressed him with her mouth, thrilling to the taste and feel of his hard yet so tender flesh, to his gasps and groans, *Oh Xena oh you make me feel so good*; and again when they lay together afterwards and Xena found herself thinking that Gabrielle might have woken up and noticed them gone.

She ran her fingers down his spine and he sighed. "Hey," he said, his breath soft on her neck, his beard tickling her skin, "you know what you can do for me?" "What?" she drawled in a mock-sultry voice, and he said, "Rub my back every day." She chuckled, but part of her wondered if he was asking her to say that they'd be together for good; she couldn't promise him that. "Is that all you want from me?" she teased, sounding more light-hearted than she felt. He nuzzled her and whispered, "Well --

since I have to put up with all this walking and riding -- getting used to it might as well be fun."

Her eyes tingled. Oh, Ares knew how to get to her, even if he wasn't doing it on purpose. By his side, she could help him learn to live as a mortal, help him stay human. She had made him her own; he was her responsibility now. *I won't ever let you go.* She couldn't say it to him, but she did think it, her lips moving soundlessly, as she hugged him tightly and stroked his hair. This was their real first night, their beginning. She knew that it was also the end of something -- of any chance that things between her and Gabrielle would go back to the way they were before.

Xena couldn't be sure whether Gabrielle was awake when she and Ares returned quietly to the camp; but instinct told her that she was.

As they rode up to the inn in Elaea three nights later, Xena realized that she had been trying not to think about the sleeping arrangements. If she and Gabrielle stayed in the same room, as they always had, she might not get a chance to be with Ares at all; asking for separate rooms felt like slapping Gabrielle in the face. She didn't fully make up her mind until she stood before the counter at the inn. "Two rooms," she said, keeping her eyes on the dour-faced, bored innkeeper. Then Gabrielle spoke, her voice sounding a little strange, as if she hadn't talked in a long time and was out of practice: "Make that three rooms."

In her room that night, as she was removing her armor, it occurred to her that this might have been Gabrielle's way of saying that it was the end for them. She was in a near-panic when she went to Gabrielle's room barefoot, wearing only her leather tunic. Gabrielle opened the door, her face slightly drawn and careworn, her eyes grave; then she gave Xena a plucky little smile as if to say, *We'll get through this*, and stepped back to let her in. Xena reached out and stroked her cheek, and for the next several hours there was nothing and no one between them.

She waited another night before she went to Ares.

After a while, it seemed almost normal. As far as anyone was concerned, the three of them were friends, companions, comrades-in-arms traveling together, helping those in need and fighting evildoers. Ares adapted to their life and their work surprisingly well. Xena knew, of course, that he had about as much interest in serving the Greater Good as she did in shopping for jewelry and perfume -- that he cared only about fighting at her side, and that if she said one evening, "Hey, let's go out and raid a village just for kicks," he'd cheerfully join her. Still, whatever his reasons, he was doing good things. Xena didn't expect him ever to shed his cynicism, and wasn't even sure she wanted him to; but she still hoped that goodness and nobility might grow on him, that she was giving him a chance to change the way she had. And besides -- she quickly brushed past this thought whenever it occurred to her, but there it was -- fighting next to someone who enjoyed fighting felt ... *good*.

Except that nothing was normal. The simplest things that lovers or even friends did -- a hug, a squeeze of a hand, resting one's head on the other's shoulder -- were now off-limits much of the time. Even the privacy of a room at an inn was only so private: she had to wonder how much could be heard through those walls, especially if the rooms were close by. One night, she and Ares tussled playfully on his bed, and she teased

him into such a state that he finally flipped her on her hands and knees and rode her in a near-frenzy, and she, for once, let him take charge completely, urging him on with short husky cries, until they collapsed in a heap. Then he moved off her, gently turned her over and hugged her to his sweat-drenched chest while she nestled her head in the crook of his neck -- and at that moment there was a loud peevish creak, and the bed wobbled and sagged and crashed under them as its wooden frame fell apart. Clutching each other, they burst out laughing; Ares whispered, "Did the earth move for you too?" and they laughed again, until it occurred to Xena that the next day she'd have to make some arrangement with the innkeeper to cover the damage -- and that Gabrielle, who must have heard the crash anyway, would inevitably know about it.

One morning, Xena woke up at the campsite, slowly opened her eyes, squinting at the searing sunlight, and realized that Ares and Gabrielle were gone. Fear jabbed into her chest, snatching her breath away: They had both gotten fed up and left her. She sat up abruptly and whirled around. Ares' horse, Dragon, was still there, but there was no sign of Clio. As Xena took a deep breath, trying to steady her lurching heart, the shrubbery at the edge of the clearing rustled and Ares came out. "Where's Gabrielle?" she blurted out, her voice a little hoarse. He shrugged, "Off by the brook, watering the horse with the fancy name," and then came up to her and added with a grin, "Here, your breakfast in bed." Only then, she noticed the clay pot in his hands; it was filled with blackberries. She didn't know whether she wanted to laugh, or to cry, or to kiss him, especially when she noticed the cuts and scratches on his berry-stained hands. The former God of War, battling the brambles to pick berries for her. She smiled and took the pot from his hands, and brought his hand to her mouth, pressing her lips to the hot scraped skin. A minute later Gabrielle came back with Clio and muttered a flat "Good morning." Life went on.

That first awful stab of fear stayed with her, and gave her a couple of troubling dreams. Another time, Xena dreamed that Gabrielle and Ares were caressing her at the same time, kissing her neck, stroking her breasts and legs, making her weak with pleasure -- until she woke up and sat in her bedroll gasping for breath, glancing about her wildly in harsh gray light of dawn. They were both asleep.

Often, she missed the old times when it was just her and Gabrielle. What was unnerving was that once in a while, she also caught herself wondering what life with Ares might have been like if ... no, not if Gabrielle hadn't been there at all, but if she and Gabrielle had remained only friends. She never allowed herself to dwell on this long enough to actually picture it -- not only because to do so would have felt like a final betrayal of Gabrielle but also because she didn't like to ponder the what-ifs; there were too many of those in her life.

Over dinner at an inn one evening, Xena watched as the grey-haired innkeeper, still beautiful despite the fine wrinkles on her face, greeted her daughter and granddaughter, and it struck her that it should have been her and little Eve, coming to see her mother at the inn in Amphipolis. She didn't even know what her daughter had looked like at that age. She sensed Ares' eyes on her and looked at him. It occurred to her that if she'd only let him in on her and Gabrielle's plan to convince the gods they were dead, everything would have been different: no ice cave, no twenty-five year gap in her life. With a twinge of guilt, she remembered the horrified look on Ares' face as she slumped in his arms after drinking the fake poison. What a twisted joke it all was: She had missed her daughter's childhood and her mother's old age, Eve had grown up

to be the murderous Livia and now carried a burden of guilt too much like her own, Joxer was dead, Gabrielle had lost her parents --. all because she had been determined not to give in to Ares ... and now, here they were.

Xena saw Ares' face twitch a little, and wondered if he was thinking the same thing. But there was no point in questioning her choices, really. She could have never given in to *that* Ares, the arrogant, seductive War God who had loved her in his own way, to be sure -- far more truly and deeply than she had suspected -- but who had wanted to bend her to his will, to win her love as one would win a battle, through force and manipulation. She must have gone mad, she thought, to ask herself if she had been wrong to resist him; if anything, she had far better reasons to ask if she'd been too quick to forget the past, to believe that Ares had really changed, even now that he was mortal and humbled.

She turned again. The woman was now talking to her mother now while the child was prancing around, twirling and tapping her feet. Then, as if sensing Xena's stare, she stopped for a moment and gazed at her gravely with those huge eyes before resuming her little dance. It occurred to Xena suddenly that it wasn't too late to get it right; now, she had another chance. She closed her eyes and saw Ares cradling a baby in his arms, its tiny hand wrapped around his finger, and herself standing next to him stroking the soft fuzz on its head, and Gabrielle... In the same instant, she pushed it out of her mind; she didn't even want to start thinking about all the reasons it was -- impossible.

A couple of nights later in bed with Ares, she wasn't thinking about anything as she lay half-slumbering in the gentle heat of his body, her breasts tingling from the touch of the hair on his chest, when his whisper brushed her skin and she heard him say, "Let's have a child..." Instantly alert, Xena felt ice-cold with terror, as if he somehow had the power to give her these thoughts the way he had given her passionate dreams about him once, as a god; but the chill melted away in a surge of aching tenderness -- toward him, toward this child that could never be. Before it could flood her completely, she moved away from him and said, "You're crazy." They lay like two strangers forced to share a bed and trying to keep as much distance between them as possible, and she was glad that it was too dark for them to see each other's faces. The memory came to her of a day long ago, when she was being hunted by three temple armies intent on killing her baby; Ares told her he'd make it stop if she accepted his bargain, and his deep smooth voice in her ear was captivating and insistent: *Give me a child*. She wondered how she could have put it all behind her -- why, even now, she longed to hold him again.

After a while she got up and said she had to go. Later, when it was almost dawn, Ares came to her room; "I love you," he said, kneeling by her bedside, and that hopeless tenderness washed over her again. She held him and kissed him, and told him it was okay, knowing that nothing was really okay and probably wouldn't be.

She didn't like to think about the way it was likely to end: she would have to do right by Gabrielle and leave Ares behind somewhere and break his heart one more time. Just like he said to her in the tavern that night: *Chewed it up and spat it out*. Maybe she could still come back and see him after that. If he'd have her.

Or else he'd regain his godhood. And then -- what? Would he go back to being his old self, the way he had after his first brief experience of being mortal, losing his

humanity in the intoxicating rush of power? Would he use her own emotions against her, use the vulnerabilities she had let him see in his next scheme or game? Would there be anything left of --

Xena took a deep breath and rubbed her forehead. Just a few hours left until daybreak, and she had yet to get any sleep.

She could go to bed, or --

She got up, went to the small window and pushed the shutters open, resting her hands on the wet windowsill. The night smelled of grass and damp wood; in the darkness, her eyes could just make out the clumps of the trees, the outlines of the houses and the stables. A gust of wind sprayed her face and arms with a thin mist of cold droplets, but the rain was already tapering off. She wiped her face and looked up at the pitch-black sky.

There was still time.

CHAPTER 5

As she unharnessed Argo, Gabrielle looked out at the blazing stillness of the river; Xena stood hip-deep in the water waiting for unsuspecting fish, her silhouette black on gold. The splashing of water, mingled with the murmur of leaves and the buzz of cicadas from the woods, added to the evening's quiet. This would be a good place to camp until they moved on to Megara.

"You're taking care of the horses, right?"

Jostled out of her contemplation, Gabrielle turned to Ares. She must have looked as nasty as she felt, enough for him to raise his hands in a defensive gesture.

"What, what? I'm off to gather firewood."

"Fine," she muttered, watching as he threw off his vest and headed into the woods. That was Ares all over -- to assume that just because she was taking care of Argo she was also going to take care of Dragon (*that stupid name!*). Maybe, under other circumstances, it wouldn't have been an unreasonable assumption -- but... Mechanically brushing Argo's warm flanks, Gabrielle wondered if there was any chance Ares would stay in Megara. Why not? He'd be much better off in a big city than wandering the countryside. She pursed her lips bitterly. *Because he's sleeping with Xena, that's why not.*

Dragon tossed his head and snorted in displeasure when Gabrielle began to undo his harness.

"Easy, boy," she said, trying not to show her irritation. Dragon displayed his by

stamping his foot a couple of times, barely missing her toes.

"Need a hand?"

Xena was striding out on the riverbank in her tunic, holding up three trout, rivulets of water sparkling on her strong graceful legs.

"I'll be fine."

"Look, you could clean the fish and I could -- "

"I *said* I'll be fine."

After brushing down Dragon, Gabrielle watered the horses and led them back to the edge of clearing where they could be left to graze. She snapped off Argo's bridle and was turning toward Clio when Dragon swung his tail and whipped it across her face.

It didn't hurt much, but it took her by surprise; Gabrielle stumbled and landed hard on her behind. Dragon snorted again and gave a short, gleeful neigh. She opened her eyes, spitting out strands of horse hair, and found herself looking at Ares, who was standing there with a bundle of sticks in his arms and -- was that a smirk? *That son of a --*

"Are you all right?" Xena called out.

"Fine." Gabrielle was taken aback by the shrillness of her own voice. She was *not* losing her temper over this. She scrambled to her feet, glared at Ares and stomped off toward Xena, who was almost finished gutting the trout.

"There, all done," Xena said brightly, shaking off her hands. "I can make the fire -- "

"No, you get some rest. I'll take care of it."

She couldn't resist sneaking a look at Ares. He had taken off Dragon's bridle and was patting the horse's muzzle.

"All right." Xena got up, her eyes shifting furtively from Gabrielle to Ares and back. "I think I'll go for a swim before it gets dark." *Obviously wanting some time to herself.*

"Have fun."

Gabrielle watched as Xena strode toward the water's edge, pulled off her tunic and waded in. She sighed and set about kindling the fire.

Ares came up and stretched out nearby, propping himself on an elbow. Gabrielle drove a spit through a fish and gave him a sideways glance. He was chewing on a blade of grass, gazing in the direction of the river where Xena splashed in the distance, hardly bigger than a dot on the glittering water.

She was about to skewer the second trout when she threw it down, turned toward Ares and blurted out, "How long do you plan to hang around with us?"

He jerked his head up, and she saw a flash of apprehension in his face before the mask of nonchalant amusement slipped into place.

"Don't tell me you don't enjoy my company anymore."

"Cut it out." Her voice shook slightly; she wasn't sure if she couldn't stop now, or didn't want to. "I'm serious. How much longer are you planning to hang around?"

"Who knows." Ares sat up. "Mortal life is short. One minute you're here and then" -- he snapped his fingers -- "you're gone." He glanced thoughtfully at his hands and then looked up at the gold-tinted clouds.

"You were supposed to travel with us for a few days until we found you a safe place."

"I guess we just haven't found the right place yet."

The knot of rage that had been building up inside her grew, pressing at her chest and her throat.

"Dammit, Ares! I want you to leave her alone."

Ares gave her a long stare. She had nothing to lose now; neither, it occurred to her, did he.

"Sure," he said. "The moment *she* wants me to."

That was too much.

"You know something?" Her voice was dripping venom, and she knew it. "All I have to do is say the word, and she'll kick you out."

His lips twitched and he swallowed convulsively; she'd gotten to him this time. A part of her -- the foolish, sappy part -- almost felt sorry for him, but Gabrielle quickly slapped it down.

"Then why don't you?" he snapped, momentarily leaving her speechless.

"Maybe I want to give you a chance," she said at last. "You could walk away with some dignity." She felt her cheeks flush, and wondered if he could tell she was lying.

Ares bit his lip and lowered his eyes. When he looked up again, his expression was defiant and sarcastic.

"You're not sure, are you?"

"Not sure of what?"

"Not sure she'll kick me out if you tell her."

"Xena loves me," she said fiercely. "We're everything to each other. She doesn't need

you. What can you give her that I can't?"

She watched with horror as a deliberate lewd grin spread across his face.

"Why, Gabrielle -- didn't your mother ever tell you about the difference between boys and -- "

"Stop it!" Gabrielle hissed. "Don't you even -- " She heard him chuckle, and noticed that she was ripping out clumps of grass.

"She doesn't *need* you," she said again.

"Maybe she does." Even without looking, she could tell that this time he was serious. "Maybe I'm the only one who accepts her completely, just as she is."

"What are you talking about? I accept her -- there was a time when I didn't -- but now -- "

"Do you really? What if I told you that one time, back in the old days, when she captured an enemy who had really pissed her off, she ripped off his balls and stuffed them down his throat until he choked to death?"

Gabrielle fought back the surge of nausea; she could feel herself turning a ghastly green.

"She didn't..."

He chuckled again. "As a matter of fact, no. Not that I know of." He sounded almost regretful, though she was not sure that it wasn't an act. "I've seen it done, mind you. Some of the Amazons -- "

"All right, spare me the details," she interrupted. He was trying to rattle her, and it was working. Shuddering inwardly, she wondered if Amazons really did such things.

"Anyway -- you should have seen the look on your face just now."

"What look?"

"Well, let's just say -- it wasn't an -- " he raised his voice -- "*oh, I love everything about Xena* kind of look."

"And you would have loved it if she *had* done that, wouldn't you."

"Would I..." He trailed off, looking into the distance. "I'd never judge her."

Gabrielle was silent for a moment. She had to think about this, to find the answer -- not just for Ares but for herself.

Finally, she said, "Maybe if I hadn't been willing to judge her sometimes, she wouldn't have stayed on her true path."

"Her true path," he repeatedly slowly, as if trying out a foreign language. "Oh yeah -- redeeming herself for her evil past." Once again, his voice went up to a mocking falsetto. "Oh, I killed so many people -- the pain, the pain..."

"So that's your idea of love. Making fun of -- "

" -- her guilt trip? Ever think that maybe it would be *good* for her if someone made fun of it once in a while? No, of course not. You're supposed to be her guiding light." He gave her a crooked grin. "You don't think your body count is getting a little too high for the part?"

The chill went straight through her, settling in the pit of her stomach. Gabrielle remembered what she had said to Xena in Africa, when the nomads wanted to put her to death for killing that boy: *You once prayed never to see the light go out in me. I just don't think there's much of that left in here.* It frightened her to think that Ares understood her well enough to know just where to hit. But she wasn't giving in that easily.

"I don't think you want to start comparing body counts," Gabrielle said quietly.

"Who, me? I'm not claiming to be anyone's guiding light."

"That's right -- you were the one trying to lure her back to the darkness all those years. To destroy everything she'd become." She had another thought. "What makes you think you deserve to be with her, Ares? After all the things you've done to her -- just because you did one unselfish thing in your whole existence..."

She expected him to argue that the one unselfish thing he had done was big enough to count for as many points as a mortal lifetime of good deeds; maybe even (she felt faint at the thought) to say something about the ways in which she herself had hurt Xena.

He got up and stared down at her. The orange sunset behind him made him seem even taller and darker than he was.

"No, I don't deserve her," he said gravely. "But as long as she wants to be with me..." He shrugged and bent down to pick up his vest, then looked at her again. "I belong here as much as you do."

"I was here first."

"Don't be so sure about that," he said, shrugging into his vest. "Remember, I knew her when you were still playing with your dollies in sunny Potadeia."

That was true, Gabrielle thought dizzily; she knew next to nothing about Xena's history with Ares.

"You know, I was wrong about you," she said. "I thought you were almost a decent human being now. But you're still a bastard."

"I'm crushed." For a moment, she could have almost forgotten that he was mortal; the cold nastiness of his smirk was all Ares, God of War. "If there was one thing I wanted

out of my mortal life, it was to gain your approval. Oh well -- can't win 'em all."

He walked past her and headed toward the woods, adding without turning his head, "Don't worry, I'll be back for dinner."

Gabrielle jumped to her feet.

"*Ares!*"

This time, he did turn.

"One of these days, you'll push me too far!"

"I look forward to that." Ares cocked his head, his eyes sliding over her. "Think you can kick my ass now that I'm mortal?"

"You sure you want to find out?"

"There you go, trying to solve your problems with violence." He clicked his tongue in mock disapproval. "See what I mean about that guiding-light thing?"

Gabrielle fought the impulse to scream and hurl herself at him. She sat down in the grass and glanced at her fists, then slowly unclenched them. Numbly, she watched as Ares walked away toward the trees.

* ~ * ~ *

When he was sure she couldn't see or hear him, Ares gave a frustrated yell and punched a tree. It hurt, of course.

He'd done it; he'd allowed Blondie to goad him into being nasty to her, and now it was an all-out war between them -- a war in which he was unlikely to fare very well. For all his posturing, he suspected that the little bitch was right; if it came down to a choice between him and her, he didn't stand a chance. *Stupid, stupid, stupid...* He wanted to bang his head on the tree but glanced at his bloodied hand and thought better of it. He sucked on his knuckles and walked on.

In the dusk, the woods were almost dark, with only the occasional patch of bright green where the sunlight touched the faded treetops. Ares walked along the narrow, grassy footpath, kicking the stones and sticks that got underfoot, his mind a jumble of anger and vague fear. At least he had kept his outward cool during his spat with Gabrielle, but it had cost him quite an effort, leaving him drained and battered inside. Was that what it took for Xena to maintain her self-control?

It was bad enough that he'd let the blonde get to him; some of the things he had said to her had gotten to him as well. *Mortal life is short...* He shivered. He had thought of it before, to be sure, but it was only occasionally that he really *felt* his mortality, and just then, that feeling had hit him at the worst possible time. *One minute you're here and the next...* He hadn't the slightest idea what had happened to Hades' domain, now that Hades was gone. Maybe the mysterious forces that had given Xena the power to slay gods had also taken over the afterworld. Maybe there *was* no more afterworld, just a

vast gray emptiness where one's spirit floated for eternity -- or nothing at all.

He rubbed his bleeding fingers, as if to prove to himself that he was still alive.

There was something else, too. While taunting Gabrielle with the notion of a gruesome death Xena might have meted out to an enemy in her dark past, he'd had an all-too-vivid memory of watching one of the Amazon queens of old do exactly that, and had barely managed to keep from doubling over or at least squeezing his thighs together. He found himself thinking about it again. Some of his many enemies, no doubt, had very nasty things in store for him if he ever got himself captured. Maybe he would die screaming the way that man had screamed, howling like an animal, nothing human left in his voice.

He picked up a crooked stick and swung it at the branches hanging in his path. Mortals made such a big deal of compassion, yet it was really nothing but another kind of selfishness; you felt for someone else's suffering because you could imagine yourself in the poor bastard's place -- what the hell was so virtuous about that?

Stopping at the edge of a shallow stream, Ares knelt down and splashed water on his face. He wondered if Xena was back from her swim, and if Gabrielle was talking to her. Maybe it was already over. He told himself that he should be thankful for what she had given him. It was more than he deserved; the blonde was probably right about that. Maybe she was right about something else, too: if he walked out on his own instead of waiting to be ditched, he would at least salvage what was left of his pride. Except that, if he left now, he wouldn't really be leaving on his own -- he'd be letting Blondie kick him out and savor her victory. No way. Besides, the thought of losing Xena now hurt far worse than watching her walk away those other times.

Ares picked up the stick again and poked idly at the pebbles at the bottom of the brook. He closed his eyes, his head and his limbs heavy with misery.

There was a faint sound behind him, a swish that was hardly audible over the ripple of the brook and the loud rattle of cicadas.

"Hey, Slick," said a lilting female voice.

With a start, he turned around and stared, his mouth hanging open.

He hadn't seen Aphrodite since the night Xena battled the gods. When it was all over, the Goddess of Love had wandered into the Great Hall of Olympus, looking dazed and sad, and gazed at him and at Xena, Gabrielle and Eve, and at the dead Athena and Artemis on the floor, and finally said, "Maybe I should get you all out of here." She had taken them to a grassy beach somewhere, just as the first blush of dawn was breaking out over the sea, and vanished after a quick good-bye. Back then she had worn black, in mourning for her husband Hephaestus; now she was in her usual pink, except for the sleek black elbow-length gloves she had kept from her widow's weeds. She was smiling.

Ares got up. Even in the half-darkness, which her presence seemed to dispel somewhat, he could see how completely unblemished Aphrodite's skin was, how clear her blue eyes, how perfect her golden hair. There was a lump in his throat. So this was

how it felt for a mortal to face a god.

"Sis," he said when he found his voice. "It's been a while."

"Oh, Ar -- I've missed you!" She came up and reached out to stroke his cheek. "You look good. I mean, for a mortal."

Her skin radiated a strange, steady warmth that wasn't quite of this world -- had Xena felt it too, touching him when he was still a god? The thought that his beautiful immortal sister might be checking out the lines on his face and the grey in his hair made him feverish with shame and resentment, and he backed away a little just as she held out her arms for a hug. Then it occurred to him that maybe this wasn't just a social visit. Maybe she was there to offer him his godhood back.

One bite of ambrosia. That would do it. The power would flow through his veins again. Mortal aches and afflictions -- he could feel each and every one of them now, from the hunger that was starting to tug at his insides to the stiffness in his muscles to the still-smarting scrapes on his knuckles -- all of that would be gone in a flash. Literally. Except --

Before he had a chance to think about what would happen to him and Xena, Aphrodite's voice cut into his musings.

"Hey, if you're thinking about ambrosia -- I'm sorry -- I'd give it to you in a heartbeat if it was up to me, but..." She shrugged and pouted a little. "Apollo and the others, they're still pretty pissed off at you, and you know how they are -- "

"That's all right," he said brusquely. "I don't want it. I'm fine, Sis." *He wouldn't have taken it anyway. Certainly not.*

Her face brightened in a delighted smile.

"*Of course* you are! You've got a thing going with the Warrior Babe. Well, it's about time, Bro!" She pinched his cheeks, ignoring his scowl. "That's, like, the best news I've had in ages! It's just *so* -- perfect!" She sighed contentedly at the darkening sky. "I'm so happy for you two lovebirds..."

Ares stared at her, chilled by a suspicion even more sickening than having his face scrutinized for traces of mortality.

"Wait a minute." He gripped Aphrodite's wrist hard enough to hurt had she been mortal. "Did you -- did you do something?"

"What are you talking about?" She frowned prettily.

"Did you do something -- so she would -- "

"Oh -- you mean, like zap her with a love bolt so she'd jump your bones?" Aphrodite giggled. "*As if!* Trust me, kiddo, she didn't need any divine intervention. Don't worry, it's the real thing. I know it when I see it -- give the Love Goddess some credit, will ya?"

Breathing hard, he let go of her wrist. She smoothed her glove and continued, "Of course, she loves her little bard too -- that kind of messes things up, doesn't it? I *adore* love triangles -- the drama... the excitement... the passions... ooh!" She squealed a little, then gave him a teasing nudge. "Now don't you let me down -- Cupie and I have a bet going about which one of you she'll end up -- "

"Dammit." He grabbed her shoulders this time, nearly choking. "This isn't one of your little games. It's my life."

"Hey, take it easy!" Aphrodite wriggled free, an affronted look on her face. "I'm on your side here -- my bet's on you. I mean, I'm awfully fond of Gabrielle and all, but you're my big bro, right?" She smiled again, a picture of dimpled perfection. He could push her down in the brook, but it wouldn't do any good; she'd just get up, shake herself with a tinkling laugh, and dry off in the blink of an eye.

"I want you to be happy, Ar. You know I care about you. Come here." She hugged him and pressed her impossibly smooth lips to his cheek. After a moment's hesitation, he put his arms around his sister rather awkwardly. There was really no point in getting mad at her.

"Awww ... it's good to see you again, Bro. And like I said -- it's *majorly* cool that you and the Warrior Babe are together."

If we still are, he thought gloomily.

"Good to see you too, Sis." Ares thought of asking how things were back on Olympus, but there was no point in that, either. He patted her silky hair. "I gotta go back."

"Have a great time, stud. I know you will."

Aphrodite held his hands for a moment, then scrunched up her face sympathetically and said, "Ooh.. look at that." She ran her palm over his scraped knuckles. Ares felt the warmth seep deliciously from her skin into his; in an instant the blood and the scratches were gone, and the pain too. So easy.

"Thanks, Sis." He squeezed her hands, hoping she wouldn't notice how wretched he was. She didn't.

"So long!" she sang out, stepping back. She blew him a kiss and was gone, just like that, in a dazzle of golden sparks.

Ares stood still for a while, watching the spot where she vanished. Then he began to walk back to the camp.

* ~ * ~ *

It was just a routine fight against a bunch of thugs who had waylaid an unlucky couple of travelers in a marshy part of the forest. In a few minutes, four of the bandits were down and two more were fleeing into the woods, with Xena in pursuit. The frightened travelers muttered quick thanks and scampered away as well.

Gabrielle was putting away her sword when she heard the noise. She turned around. One of the men, who had seemed just as dead as his pals, had sprung back to life and charged Ares. The two of them were wrestling now, panting and grunting, the man trying to grip Ares' throat, the former god trying to reach his dagger.

She stood still, watching.

The bandit managed to land a punch that sent Ares staggering backward, then picked up a sword and rushed at Gabrielle. She was ready for him with her sais, the twin daggers clanging against the metal of the blade, and it was over almost immediately.

She looked at Ares. He had lost his footing and stumbled into the swamp, where he was now more than knee-deep in the greenish muck, and sinking deeper as he struggled to pull out his legs.

"Gabrielle?" he said with fake nonchalance. "I could use a hand."

She went over and got a large coil of rope from Clio's saddlebag, then came up to the very edge of solid ground and stopped, no more than two paces from him.

"Funny, isn't it, Ares. I'm the only thing standing between you and the bottom of this swamp. And you're the only thing standing between me and the woman I love."

"Very funny." Underneath the bravado, she could hear the nervous note creeping into his voice.

"Don't you have a good one-liner for the occasion?"

"Dammit, throw me the rope," he said through clenched teeth.

"Is that the best you can do? I'm disappointed."

Ares was panting, his face drenched in sweat, his eyes wide with terror. He made another futile effort to free himself.

"You know, Ares," she said, "I told you that one of these days you were going to push me too far. You should have listened."

"You're just trying to scare me."

"I think it's working." She chuckled and twirled the end of the rope.

"You crazy little bitch," he snarled. "I saved your life!"

She wrinkled her nose. "That's right. What did you say it was? Oh yeah -- an afterthought. Well, Ares... remember how you told me I'd always be a goody-two-shoes? If I was, I'd probably be grateful. I must've gotten over that."

There was a pause, punctuated only by Ares' ragged breaths. Then he threw his head back and yelled, "Xeeenaaaaaa!"

Some startled birds flew up from the trees.

"I guess she's still out chasing the bad guys," Gabrielle said placidly.

The swamp had him up to his waist now. His lips were trembling, tears running down his face and mingling with rivulets of sweat.

"Gabrielle," he said in a rasping whisper. "Please. Please. I don't want to die like this."

She sighed in exasperation.

"Oh come on, Ares. Go out with a little dignity. You know, being the former God of War and all."

With a grunt, Ares lunged forward and somehow managed to grab the end of a long, vine-like branch of a fallen tree. Gabrielle watched as he started to pull himself up. She shook her head.

"Ares, Ares, Ares. Why do you have to make everything so difficult?" She looked around, picked up his sword and walked toward the tree. "I guess I'll have to give you a hand after all."

She tugged at the branch to make sure she had the right one and raised the sword.

"Is that what you're into now? Cold-blooded murder?"

She gave a high-pitched giggle.

"Now *that's* funny, Ares. Coming from you, I mean. And what you did to Eli -- that was what, a fair fight?"

Biting her lip in concentration, she hacked at the branch.

"No." He could barely force the word out of his throat. "No."

Gabrielle paused and tilted her head.

"Hmm. Maybe you do deserve a chance. Tell you what, let's try a little quiz."

"Huh?"

"I'm going to recite some lines of poetry and you tell me who wrote it. You get it wrong? - I take a whack at the branch. You get it right -- I let you pull yourself up a little. You make a move without my permission and -- " She made a chopping motion.

"You're nuts."

She giggled again.

"Sticks and stones ... What, you don't want to play? Then I can start right now." She

took a swing.

"Okay ... okay!" he gasped. "Go ahead."

"All right then. Let's see." She pressed a finger to her forehead. "How about ..." She recited in a dramatic sing-song:

"There is one race of men, one race of gods.
Although a common Mother gave us life,
Our lot is most unequal: Man is nothing,
And the Gods will dwell forever in their home
In the eternal skies as strong as brass.

Well?"

For a moment, rage flashed in his eyes, before fear set in again.

"I'm counting to five, Ares." She was poised to strike. "One -- two -- "

He licked his lips.

"Sophocles?"

Thwack.

"Wrong, Ares. The correct answer is" -- she smiled brightly -- "Pindar. Pindar of Thebes. Great stuff, isn't it? Well ... let's try something easier, okay?"

The whole village weeps at your funeral pyre,
O brave warrior,
For in the chaos and horror of battle -- "

"Anacreon," he broke in hastily. "Yeah. Anacreon."

"Huh-huh-huh." She wagged a finger. "I haven't finished yet.

For in the chaos and horror of battle,
Blood-loving Ares has never slaughtered a more fearless youth.

You're right -- that *was* Anacreon. Go on, pull yourself up. A little." She watched as he moved his hands, one and then the other, and made a desperate effort to free himself from the mire. "That's enough. Okay, let's see... ooh -- here's a *really* good one.

Some women may be timorous, and fearful
To even look at battle or cold steel;
But when the offense is to their marriage bed,
No mind can be more murderous than theirs."

"Stop it." He was wheezing, his voice barely audible.

She shook her head. "Sorry, Ares, I've never even heard of a poet named Stopit. For your information (*thwack*), that was Euripides."

The branch was annoyingly strong but it wasn't going to hold out much longer, and Ares' thrashing around wasn't helping him, either; he was submerged almost to his armpits. His hands were probably raw and bleeding by now. Just another whack or two and --

A hand came down on her shoulder and Xena's voice said, "Gabrielle?"

* ~ * ~ *

She blinked hard. "Uh, I -- Xena -- uh -- I -- what?"

"Whoa." Xena shook her head, spraying her with a fine mist of water. "Look at the fish."

Gabrielle rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath. It was almost dark now, the clouds in the west a deep purplish gray. The campfire was flickering low.

"I'm sorry, I was just -- I was thinking and..." Gabrielle trailed off and watched as Xena added more wood to the fire and removed the skewers with the charred remains of the trout. Just as she wondered if Ares was back, she heard the grass rustle, and Xena said, "Where were you?"

"Just walking around," Ares said casually and came closer. "Hey, is that what's left of dinner?"

"Yeah," Xena said.

"Oh great."

Gabrielle raised her eyes. There they were, standing shoulder to shoulder in the reddish glow of the campfire, inspecting her handiwork, united in their disapproval.

"That's right, it's all my fault," she snapped miserably.

"Hey, hey -- it's no big deal," Xena said. "We have bread and we've still got some of that salted beef. That will do just fine." She put a comforting hand on Gabrielle's arm. "Don't worry about it, okay?"

As they sat around the campfire, Gabrielle listlessly crumpled the stale bread, feeling faintly sick. She had meant only to vent her frustration by imagining a scene in which she could have Ares at her mercy and toy with him for a while -- and then, somehow, her fantasy self had turned into a monster, a person who would not only murder a rival in cold blood but torment him with a maniacal glee that was chillingly reminiscent of ... Callisto. Of course she could have never done anything like this in real life; still,

she it gave her goose bumps to think that an inner Callisto lurked somewhere in the depths of her imagination. Gabrielle bit into the leathery beef. She didn't want to think about it anymore.

"Hey Ares," she said. "Do you know any poetry?"

"Mph -- what?" He swallowed a mouthful and gave her a bewildered look. "Poetry? Why?"

"Just curious," she said. "There's this one poem that starts, 'There is one race of men, one race of gods,/Although a common Mother gave us life,/Our lot is --'"

With a start, she realized that on the last words, his voice had joined hers. She stopped as he continued in an oddly hollow voice, staring at the dying flames:

" -- most unequal: Man is nothing,
And the gods will dwell forever in their home
In the eternal skies as strong as brass."

His voice shook a bit.

"Yet we can bear some likeness to immortals
By the greatness of our mind or of our heart,
Though we know not, wandering by day and night,
What destination Fate has set for us."

There was a long silence after that, and the low crackling of the fire, and the river's lulling burble, and the harsh cry of a night-bird far away. The look in Ares' eyes was distant and unreadable in the fading firelight; then he met Gabrielle's stare, and his expression turned hard and bitter, his mouth tightening. Still in shock from the former War God's cultural literacy, she felt irritated at him and vaguely disgusted with herself. It was nothing like her nightmarish daydream, to be sure; but she had deliberately hurt him, and that was bad enough.

Ares threw down the rest of his bread and beef and got up.

"I'm going to sleep."

As he walked away and began to unroll his blankets, Xena turned to Gabrielle and shook her head. Taking his side, Gabrielle thought resignedly. But there was no anger or reproach in Xena's eyes, only sorrow, and something like a mute apology.

* ~ * ~ *

Xena couldn't sleep for a while. She lay on her back with her eyes open, staring at the black star-dotted sky. It was very dark, the ruby-tinged moon a mere sliver that soon slipped away under a cloud. Nearby, she could hear Ares' sharp, slightly irregular breaths; he was obviously pretending to be asleep, only he hadn't been mortal long enough to do it convincingly. A dull ache was tugging on her heart. That stupid poem had really gotten to him ... she wished she could crawl over and hold him close, or at

least hold his hand... only she could tell that Gabrielle wasn't sleeping either, quietly as she lay in her bedroll. Gabrielle had been so edgy the whole evening... and no wonder. *What am I doing to Gabrielle...* that thought, always present somewhere in her mind, surfaced for a moment and made her shut her eyes. If only there was some way to end it without destroying them all.

Eventually, her thoughts became a jumble of shifting words and images, dissolving into each other and into a thick haze, and she began to lose herself in restless sleep. Then she was on that hill by the Amazon village where she said good-bye to Ares after his run-in with the Furies, and she was touching his battered face and his deep dark eyes were smiling at her, as gentle as the farewell glow of the sun; he was safe from the Furies now, but her gladness was bittersweet because she knew she had to leave him. They were talking and smiling at each other, their hands clasped, and all of a sudden he was shaking her by the shoulder and saying in an insistent whisper, "Xena -- Xena!"

With a start, she opened her eyes in the darkness and felt the grip of a hand on her shoulder.

"Xena," Gabrielle whispered. "Wake up."

"Umm -- what?"

"We need to talk."

She sat up, fully awake. That was it; she knew it. She felt no pain, not yet.

Stealthily, Xena followed Gabrielle away from the campsite, under the cover of the trees. They stopped and hugged and stood still, Gabrielle's head nestled on Xena's breast, Xena's cheek resting on Gabrielle's warm hair. Then Gabrielle's shoulders shuddered slightly, and she pulled back and said in a half-whisper, "Xena -- I can't -- "

Xena cut her off. "I have to send him away."

Gabrielle exhaled sharply and slumped in her arms.

"I can't go on like this anymore. I just -- "

"I'm sorry." She kissed the top of Gabrielle's head. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. This is so wrong -- I should have never -- "

"Shh." Gabrielle lifted up her face and quickly pressed her lips to Xena's. "You don't need to explain ... I'm not blaming you. I just want things to go back --." She gave a small sigh that came out almost as a whimper. "I know it's not going to be the way it was -- but I want it to be just the two of us together..."

"I know... I know. It's going to be all right."

"He can stay in Megara. He'll be okay. Xena, I know you -- "

"Gabrielle." Xena took Gabrielle's face in her hands, touching the dampness of her

cheeks. "You always come first for me, remember that. No matter what. Forever." For a fleeting, delirious instant, she wondered if it was still true.

"I'll tell him tomorrow," she said abruptly.

They held each other, and Xena wanted to shut out everything except the warmth of Gabrielle's body in her arms, the feel and smell of her hair, Gabrielle's soft breath on her neck. She felt numb inside, except for a vague tenderness that hurt somewhere deep in her chest. She wondered if she should be relieved, now that she no longer had to make a decision. Somehow, they'd survive it -- they all would.

Their lips met again, and Xena felt Gabrielle's breaths grow husky as the kiss lingered. She stroked Gabrielle's hair and pulled away.

"Come on," she said, and they headed back to camp.

* ~ * ~ *

When the glare of the sun and the clanking of the cooking pot woke her up, Gabrielle had barely slept. Her body felt stiff, her skin crawling with nervous tension as they ate their modest breakfast and packed their things away in nearly complete silence. Ares looked glum and haggard; Xena's face was rigidly blank, but there were faint darkish circles under her eyes. It would be over soon, Gabrielle told herself, but the thought brought her no comfort.

She would feel better once it was over, she thought as she tugged irritably at the straps of Clio's harness. Clio shook her mane and looked at her sideways, then turned and nuzzled her shoulder. Gabrielle gave the mare a quick, mechanical pat on the neck and fastened the saddlebags. Would it really be over, or would Xena be looking for any excuse to visit Megara? Maybe that wouldn't be so bad. Maybe she could deal with Xena visiting Ares occasionally, as long as she had her day-to-day life with Xena back.

They rode away from the camp, taking a shortcut through the forest to reach the road to Megara. The trees were alive in the gentle breeze, the sunlight a scattering of silver on the leaves and the ground; but on this morning, the sights and smells and sounds of the woods did little to soothe Gabrielle's nerves as she rode behind Xena on the narrow path and felt Ares' eyes on her back. She wondered if he knew what was coming.

She didn't wish him ill; of course she didn't. He'd be all right in Megara. In a bustling city like that, anybody could blend in -- even a former god. *Blend in?* She snorted. One might as well expect him to get a job in an orphanage.

The edge of the forest was near, patches of bright blue sky already peeking through the trees. Ares being Ares, Gabrielle thought, he was liable to find some kind of trouble -- with no Xena to bail him out. What if some day, Xena returned to Megara and ...

Memory yanked her back to the awful night when they stood by two funeral pyres, and Xena said quietly, the wet streaks on her face glistening in the reflection of the

flames, "My son is dead because of you." *Because of me. My lie, my stubborn recklessness.* Miraculously, after being nearly destroyed by hate, they had found forgiveness; but would her guilt in Solan's death come back to haunt them if Xena lost someone else she cared about -- *because of her?* No, that was ridiculous. What were they supposed to do, babysit Ares for the rest of his life? Dying in battle was a risk she and Xena faced all the time; why should it be any different for him? Besides, he had survived just fine without them for nearly a year. He'd manage again.

They rode out into a sun-flooded field. Pale yellow butterflies wove over the tall grass laced with blue wildflowers; the air was filled with the whirr of grasshoppers and the ecstatic trilling of birds. The main road was visible in the distance, with a few toy-like riders and horse-carts going by. In another couple of hours, they'd be entering the city. Gabrielle wondered when Xena was going to tell Ares. Would she wait until they got to Megara? Until she was alone with him?

"Ares."

Xena's voice was quiet and flat, as expressionless as her face. Gabrielle glanced at her -- they were riding side by side now, with Xena in the middle -- and saw her upper lip quiver very slightly; her eyes were lowered and half-veiled, her hands clutching Argo's reins a little tighter than necessary. And then she felt Xena's agony, felt it physically and acutely, as a pang that ripped through her mind and her gut.

"Gabrielle and I were talking..."

Gabrielle closed her eyes for an instant. Then she glanced at Ares; he was staring at Xena, his lips slightly parted, his features sharpened by anxiety.

No, she wasn't going to lose Xena. But, but -- she had told herself before that if she ever put her foot down and told Xena to end it, something precious and irretrievable between them would end too. That hadn't changed. In some way, she was asserting a property right; and true love knew nothing of property rights. Xena had to make her choice freely, not be forced to rip out a piece of her heart. There had to be some other way out.

Xena was saying, "We were thinking that when we get to Megara, you should -- "

Gabrielle cut in. She spoke hurriedly, and it gave her voice a harsh edge.

"We think you should sell off some of your stuff."

Xena whipped around and stared at her in disbelief. Ares' jaw trembled; he took a few deep breaths, then said quietly, "What?"

Already, Gabrielle was cursing her own stupidity. Ares would have laughed his head off at her high-minded musings about love and freedom, and he would have been right -- the bastard.

"Sell some of your jewelry. It's worth a lot of money, you know. If you're going to travel with us, you ought to start paying your way."

"Oh really." He glowered at her. "Well, I have an even better idea. Why don't you take me down to the slave market -- I bet I'd fetch a fair price." He kicked Dragon in the sides with an angry "Yah!" and took off at a gallop, riding toward the road.

Gabrielle lowered her eyes and let out a long breath.

"Gabrielle..."

She looked up. Xena's eyes were shiny, either with agitation or with tears.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle twitched her lips, trying to smile. Xena leaned forward, reached out and touched her face, and her smile was so tender, so wistfully luminous that Gabrielle's heart swelled with love and longing. Xena's thumb brushed her cheek, and Gabrielle realized she was crying.

"Xena -- I don't want to force you..."

"But I can't force you to go along with this."

This time, she did smile, shaking her head and taking Xena's hand. "You're not forcing me to do anything. It's my choice. I know we'll work it out." She sighed. "I love you, Xena."

Xena's fingers squeezed hers.

"I love you too."

Gabrielle wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, holding hands, looking into each other's eyes. Then, they rode ahead to catch up with Ares.

CHAPTER 6

"You'll never guess who I met at the scroll market today," Gabrielle said.

Ares eyed her absent-mindedly, taking a sip of wine. They actually served decent wine here at the inn -- well, half-decent. Or maybe he was just in a good mood.

For a moment, in that field on the way to the city, he had really thought that it was over, that Xena was about to tell him to stay in Megara. Now, a day later, he had it all figured out. Gabrielle must have told Xena to dump him; Xena had refused, Blondie had started bitching about how he wasn't paying his way, and to appease her, Xena had agreed to ask him to sell his jewelry. It was so obvious that Xena didn't want to say it; of course it was the blonde's idea. Baiting him with that damn poem, telling him to sell his things ... all part of the same tactic: rub it in his face that he had gone from god to nobody. Clever girl.

He had been tense for the rest of the day after they'd arrived in Megara -- anxious, perplexed, annoyed, even after his anger had mellowed. He and Xena hadn't spoken much, despite some reassuring tender looks from her, and he had been wondering if she'd come to him that night.

Xena kept him waiting for a while; long enough for him to start wondering once again if it was worth it, this half-life with her, this humiliation of having to wait for her favors. He promptly forgot all about it when she showed up. She was still wearing her tunic when she straddled him, and Ares ripped it off her, lifting up his head to press his face between her breasts, reaching down to stroke her. Every sound she made, every incoherent word she breathed sent a jolt of heat through him, but somehow he managed to stay in control, even when she shook and arched on top of him; he held her for a few moments, forcing himself to stay still, and then rolled her over, drawing those intoxicating sounds from her again, kissing her neck as she drew up her knees to let him in deeper, so deep that there may have been a hint of pain in her cries. Finally she bit into his shoulder to muffle her scream, and this time her spasms took him with her. Afterwards, they exchanged quick breathless kisses, pressing still-hungry lips to each other's faces and necks; and then there was more, and when she left him at dawn he was exhausted and happy and completely in love.

Now, sitting in the tavern at the inn, Ares felt his arousal stir again at the memory. Slipping his fingers under his vest, he touched the still-tender mark Xena had left on his shoulder; too bad the purplish bruise was hidden from view, or the little bard would have been in for quite a shock. He watched Xena finish the last of her stuffed grape leaves and run her tongue over her lips, and his fist clenched as he imagined licking her fingers and stroking her thigh under her leather skirt. If only they had been alone at the table...

But there was no point in dwelling on the negatives. Things were going well; right now, it looked like he had a pretty good chance of winning Aphrodite's bet for her. Sure, it was still annoying to think that his ditzzy sister and her namby-pamby kid were treating his unusual predicament as a horse race for their entertainment, but it didn't rankle nearly as much as before. It was the kind of thing you'd expect from Sis. She could have done something much worse just for fun: for instance, cast a love spell to make him enamored of the blonde, and then, if Xena didn't chakram his brains out, he'd die of embarrassment once he recovered his wits.

"I give up," Xena said with an indulgent smile. "Who did you meet?"

"Virgil. Can you believe it? It turns out he's here in Megara."

"Really."

"Yeah." Gabrielle took a grape leaf from her plate. "He's going with me to the poetry reading."

Oh yeah -- another reason to be in a good mood. Gabrielle was going out after dinner for a reading by some poet at the city library, and he and Xena would have the whole evening to themselves.

"Really," Xena said again. Her look of polite indifference was a little too blank, and Ares wondered if there was something going on that he didn't know about.

"Yeah. And you know something else?" Gabrielle's hand with the grape leaf remained suspended halfway to her mouth. "Virgil has just published his own poem. He was at the scroll market delivering some copies to a vendor. A long, epic poem."

"Did he say anything about how Meg was doing?"

"Yeah ... she's coping. She's opened a new tavern in Athens." She finally put the grape leaf in her mouth and continued, even before she'd swallowed it completely, "The kids are in school... Anyway, Virgil's poem -- it's beautiful." Gabrielle beamed. "I always knew he'd become a real bard, and let me tell you..."

She continued to carry on about Virgil and his poem, and Ares realized one more thing that irritated him about the blonde. Unless she was in a very rotten mood, she yapped like this at every damn meal, only occasionally pausing to eat, and when he was already done with his food and usually still hungry, he had to sit there staring at all the stuff on her plate.

Xena reached over, picked up a grape leaf from Gabrielle's plate and casually stuffed it in her mouth. He wasn't sure why that irked him even more.

He took another sip of wine, put down his goblet with a clank and cut her off in mid-sentence.

"Jerkster's son can write. Who would've guessed."

Gabrielle turned to him abruptly.

"Don't," she said in a choked voice. "Don't you dare talk about Joxer like that."

"Well, *excuse me!* Somehow, I never noticed that you were so fond of the guy."

Her eyes narrowed to sharp angry slits.

"I may not have always treated Joxer right. And he may not have been much of a warrior. But he was my friend and he was a good man. He was kind and brave and caring and" ?- her voice trembled, breaking for a moment as her eyelids drooped -- "loyal."

"Wonderful. You should have married him."

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the quick look Xena darted toward him. *Damn. That was not a smart thing to say.*

"Maybe I should have!"

Gabrielle didn't actually scream, but her words seemed to shatter the tavern's stale murky air and then to linger for a few moments, like a cloud of smoke from an explosion. She looked terrified. Xena's face changed only for an instant; her hand,

which had been creeping toward Gabrielle's, froze and then closed a little jerkily around the stem of her goblet. They sat very still, all three, as if trapped with a dangerous beast that could be provoked by a single word or movement. Rescue came in the form of a serving girl who came by and inquired if they wanted sweets, in a tone implying that it would be an insult if they didn't and a hassle if they did.

Somehow, they got through the rest of the meal, barely speaking. Ares wanted to kick himself, and half expected Xena to do it for him. Finally, Gabrielle got up and said, "I have to go."

Xena looked up. "Want me to come with you?"

"Oh, come on, Xena," Gabrielle said with a mirthless little snort. "You don't have to. I know it's not your kind of thing at all. I'm going to change and then I'm leaving."

"Change?" Xena's eyebrow twitched up.

"Yeah, I'm wearing a dress. You know, the blue one. Xena, it's a poetry reading, not a wrestling match."

"All right." Xena drew an arm around her waist, reached up and kissed her cheek. "Have fun."

After Gabrielle had walked away, Ares sat staring into his almost-empty goblet, ridiculously afraid to look at Xena.

"What do you think you're doing?"

She sounded almost stunned, not angry as he expected -- and when he looked up at her, her face was shadowed with fear.

"You're trying to drive us apart, aren't you," she said.

"That's crazy." He caught himself before he could say, *She's the one who's trying to drive me away* -- sounding like a whiny little boy.

"Well, don't even think about it."

Ares said nothing. She gazed past him, her blue eyes gold-flecked in the reflected light of an oil lamp. Then she spoke again, as if to herself.

"This is wrong..."

Dammit, don't beg. Maybe it was better to end this at once: A quick stab to the heart, instead of dying piece by piece and always hoping for a reprieve.

"I could leave," he said. It didn't come out as firmly as he had wanted, but it would have to do.

Xena's upper lip quivered slightly in response.

He wasn't going to make it that easy for her.

"I'll -- " He choked on his words and paused to swallow, a heavy bitterness filling his mouth. "I'll always love you. But I could leave."

Time stopped, or maybe only his breath did. Finally, she gave a small, almost imperceptible headshake and moved her hand closer to his. Their fingertips touched, and he breathed again. They sat still for a while; then Ares stroked the back of her hand with his fingers, and after a moment she turned her hand, ran her thumb across his palm very gently, and curled it around his thumb.

The heat in his body was spreading again; he moved closer to Xena and brushed his lips against her hair, closing his eyes, savoring the faint herbal scent.

"Not now," she said softly.

Someday this woman would drive him insane.

"There must be some other way to have fun in this town," Ares said. "Want to catch the bull-dancing show at Demeter's temple?"

"Sure. You haven't lived until you've seen half-naked girls leaping over a bull's horns." Xena chuckled, but her eyes were grave. After a pause, she said, "Maybe I should go to the library and join up with Gabrielle and Virgil..."

He stared incredulously. So much for an evening together.

"*Why?*"

"It's been such a long time since I've seen Virgil." She turned away. "I should go have a chat with him."

Then it hit him: By Tartarus, she was *jealous*. Was there something -- ? As he recalled, this Virgil was a pretty good-looking guy, though he had only seen him once, right after Joxer died at Livia's hands -- and Ares' memories of that time, the last days of his life as a god, were something of a blur, vague shapes floating in a fog of rage and love and fear. Was Xena worried that Blondie might run off with Virgil? As his sister would have put it -- as *if*.

"I don't think there's any point in my tagging along. Guess I'll just stay here and ?- catch up on sleep." He gave Xena a crooked little grin.

She stared at him for a moment, or maybe past him, and then smiled faintly.

"I have a better plan."

He frowned. "I thought you were -- "

"I'm not. That was a bad idea." Xena pushed the chair aside. "Stay here -- I'll be right back."

Not sure what to make of this, Ares watched her disappear. He rose from the table and walked over to the bar, leaning on it. He briefly considered getting another cup of wine but decided against it.

"You lucky son of a bitch."

He flinched and turned to see a scraggly-bearded, pink-faced man seated at the bar, leering at him.

"What?"

"You're doing them both, aren't you." The man winked. "The little blonde and the one with the -- "

Before the man could complete the description, Ares' hand was at his throat, clamped down on his collar. His fist was itching to connect with the idiot's suddenly not-so-pink face, but he was stopped by the thought that Xena might come back to see him fighting, and find out why.

"Watch what you say," he growled.

"Hey!" the barkeep called out. "Is there a problem?"

"Is there?" Ares gave the man's collar a discreet but meaningful jerk.

"Uh... no!" the offender squeaked, making a valiant attempt to shake his head. "No problem at all. I'm -- I'm sorry, okay?"

Ares snorted and let go of his shirt, shoving him back a little to reinforce his point. The man gulped for air.

"Sorry," he mumbled again, rubbing his neck. "I just, you know -- saw that you're traveling in the company of two beautiful women, so I -- "

"Stuff it," Ares grunted.

"So who's the blonde?" the man inquired hopefully.

"She's -- " He had no idea what to say; no one had ever questioned him about their arrangement before. "She's ... my wife's friend." He hadn't meant to elevate himself to the rank of Xena's husband, either -- in fact, even thinking the words "Xena's husband" felt as startling as speaking the words "my wife" -- and wasn't quite sure why he said it. He glanced at his new acquaintance, ready to teach him another lesson about the perils of being nosy if he saw so much as a lewd hint in his expression.

"Hey." Ares turned to see Xena, a sly smile on her face, and barely had time to react when she said "Catch!" and threw his swordbelt and sword at him. Her own sword was strapped to her back.

"What's that for?"

"We're going for a little workout." Her eyebrow arched a little. "If you're up to it."

"Where?" he asked, putting on the belt.

"A training ground -- it's just a short walk from here. Come on."

Ares could feel the fellow's envious stare on the back of his head as he and Xena headed toward the door and she squeezed his shoulder. They stepped outside, into the velvety golden warmth of the evening sun.

"I'm up to it." Ares squinted a little at the sunlight. "As long as you remember that you shouldn't run me through."

She smirked at him. "If you behave."

* ~ * ~ *

"Gabrielle! Over here!"

Gabrielle craned her neck and saw Virgil waving at her from the other side of the crowded hall. She wasn't sure if her heart leaped with joy or sank a little.

She had been thinking about Virgil on her way to the library, and these thoughts had left her feeling confused, guilty, and vaguely agitated.

At first, walking through Megara's busy, dusty streets, she had casually wondered why Xena -- who might enjoy the occasional night at the theater if the play had enough action but was otherwise quite indifferent to all things literary -- had volunteered to accompany her to Sappho's reading. Then she realized that Xena hadn't offered to come along until the mention of Virgil. Was Xena jealous? The very idea made her bump into a bundle-laden donkey, earning her an outraged "Watch where ya going, lady!" from its driver.

It was absurd to think that Xena could be jealous of Virgil ... or was it? Suddenly, Gabrielle found herself pondering her feelings toward him. She had liked him from the moment they met, when she was still grappling with the idea that she had spent twenty-five years on ice, that her friend and hapless admirer Joxer now had a son who looked about the same age as she. Tall and broad-shouldered, Virgil had such an open face, such kind, curious, sparkling eyes, such an infectious boyish smile. And he turned out to be not only an able fighter but an aspiring bard -- someone with whom she had a lot in common. Then Joxer was killed, and their shared if not equal grief brought her and Virgil closer as she tried to ease his pain and calm his rage. Once the crisis was over and the dust had settled, their friendship had endured; Virgil had helped rescue her niece from Gurkhan, and had joined her and Xena on a few other adventures. He was a good friend. She suspected that he felt something more for her, the way Joxer had, but she hoped it would never go beyond a mild crush.

There was, however, one memory Gabrielle didn't especially like revisiting. A few months earlier, she and Xena had gone to Rome to take on Caligula, the new emperor whose cruelties were becoming a gruesome legend and in whose dungeons Eve had wound up along with hundreds of other Eli followers. It seemed that stopping him

might require Xena's special skills, since rumor had it that the emperor had become a god.

As part of Xena's plan, they had to attend a bacchanalia at the palace. The evening went on and the wine flowed, and the guests shed more and more of their inhibitions, often along with their clothes. In order to blend in and keep drunken and lecherous courtiers at bay, she and Virgil pretended to be together, and they finally ended up embracing on a pile of cushions, he with his shirt off, she in a skimpy green-and-gold silk tunic. Gabrielle felt intensely uneasy, particularly when she realized that her pretend caresses were having a very real effect on Virgil. Meanwhile, Caligula himself made the rounds of the banquet hall, encouraging with ribald remarks the men and women cavorting in various combinations. The emperor stopped close to Gabrielle and Virgil; the show had to go on, and she slid down and ran her tongue over Virgil's nipple. He made a strangled sound in his throat and squeezed her behind through the thin fabric, pressing her closer to him. She felt his hardness against her stomach, and with a shock, she also felt the familiar warmth between her legs. It was the first time since she and Xena had become lovers that somebody else had made her feel that way. Her cheeks on fire, she moved away a little and whispered, "I'm sorry," and Virgil gave her a searching look, then nodded and said quietly, "I'm sorry too."

There was a bit of awkwardness between them in the next few days before their mission was over, with Caligula dead -- his godhood, in the end, had proved to be nothing more than a madman's boast -- and the Elijans freed. A couple of times, Gabrielle noticed Virgil looking at her oddly, as if on the brink of saying something; she considered telling him about herself and Xena but, in the end, did not. They had never made a conscious decision to keep their relationship a secret; it was simply private, too precious to expose to others.

She and Virgil hadn't seen each other since then, until earlier that day at the scroll market. Everything seemed back to normal. They were good friends; that was all.

Or was it? Climbing up the slope of one of Megara's twin hills, toward the ornate building of the city library, Gabrielle wondered for the first time if Virgil could have been something more to her than a friend. What if she had been ... on her own when they met?

When she reached the library's marble steps, Gabrielle stopped abruptly in her tracks, oblivious to the people walking past her and to their puzzled or irritated glances. Was she thinking of having an affair with Virgil to get back at Xena, and trying to justify it to herself? No -- impossible -- absurd. She didn't think such thoughts. Glancing down, she realized that the gilded bracelet she was wearing was the same one she'd had at that bacchanalia in Rome, and a scalding heat spread over her neck and face. She yanked off the bracelet, nearly hurting her wrist, and slipped it into her satchel. How low would she sink next? Flirt with Virgil just to make Xena jealous?

No more of that, she told herself as she walked up the steps. She was going to spend an evening with her good friend. Nothing else.

And there he was now, making his way toward her, his face lit up with that irrepressible grin.

"Gabrielle." They hugged and he kissed her on the cheek. "Great to see you. That's a very pretty dress."

"Thanks."

"You look a little tired. Come on" -- he took her elbow -- "I'll buy you a lemonade to celebrate my new wealth."

"Wealth?"

"Yeah." He grinned again, propelling her toward the refreshments stand by the wall. "Two of my scrolls were sold at the market today."

"Virgil, that's wonderful!"

"So," Virgil said a few moments later as they looked around for a seat, sipping honey-flavored lemonade, "what's up? We didn't have much of a chance to talk before. By the way, I spoke to somebody who ran into you and Xena in Elaea, just over a month ago..."

"Oh yeah -- we were there running a couple of greedy cults out of town. You know how it is -- a Warrior Princess's work is never done ..."

"And neither is a Battling Bard's?" Virgil smiled at her affectionately. "Anyway -- this person said you two were traveling with some man now?"

"A man -- oh, that's not a man. That's Ares," she said, almost breezily. "Remember, I told you he's mortal now -- he gave up his godhood to heal Eve and me --"

"What do you mean -- 'not a man'?" He gave her a puzzled, slightly amused look.

She felt herself blushing. "Well, he's a man of course" -- she laughed nervously -- "it's just that I'm so used to thinking of him as a god..."

"And he's traveling with you and Xena?"

"Just for a while. Some warlords were after him, trying to settle old scores -- so we thought it would be safer..." She trailed off.

After a pause, Virgil asked, "Well, what about you? Any new scrolls? I'm always looking for them at the vendors' ..."

"It's been a while since I've had anything published."

"That's too bad. You're such a wonderful writer, Gabrielle -- have I ever told you it was reading your scrolls that made me want to be a bard?"

"Only every time we've met."

"Your stories always made me feel like I was really there. And you know something else? It's great how they always have a moral but you don't beat the reader over the

head with it... Are you writing anything now?"

She sighed. "Not really."

"Why not?"

After a brief silence, she said, "Maybe I'm just not sure what the moral of the story is anymore."

"What do you mean?" Virgil turned and looked at her, frowning a little. "Gabrielle, is something wrong?"

To her helpless dismay, her eyes were filling with tears.

"Look, there's two empty seats -- let's go over or there won't be any room left to sit."

"Gabrielle." He pressed his fingers to her cheek, gently turning her head toward him. "Talk to me. We're friends, aren't we?"

"Of course we are..." She blinked and managed a lopsided smile. "It's nothing."

"Come on." He steered her toward a side door and out into the hallway.

"What are you doing? They're about to start -- "

"We're going to talk about whatever's troubling you so much."

Virgil looked around and led her into one of the small reading rooms, closing the door behind them. Gabrielle dabbed discreetly at her eyes. She couldn't even begin to tell him...

"Go on." They sat facing each other now, and his hand was on her arm -- gentle, strong, warm. "Please, Gabrielle. You can talk to me. What did you mean about not knowing the moral of the story?"

She couldn't tell him what was going on with her and Xena and Ares. But there was something else, another reason that she often felt she had lost her way, and she *could* talk to him about that. In fact, she realized, it was all part of the same thing: the price she had to pay for being with the person she loved more than anything in the world.

"Remember I told you that after we left Rome, Xena and I went to Northern Africa?"

"Yeah."

"When we were there -- something awful happened. No, not *happened*. I did it. I did something awful."

"What?"

"I... I killed someone. An innocent man." Gabrielle shook her head. "A man ... he was just a kid, really."

"Oh, Gabrielle... It was an accident -- "

"Well, it was. But it didn't just happen... Xena and I were caught in a sandstorm, and I saw someone coming up behind her -- he had a thing in his hand, I thought it was a dagger... so I stabbed him. Twice. I killed him, Virgil. And it turned out that the thing in his hand was just a scroll ... and then I pulled off his cloak and -- it was Korah." The tears were coming back.

"You knew him?"

"Yeah... we were guests of his family, Xena and I." She sniffled and chuckled bitterly. "You know, he admired me. He looked up to me as a warrior... he wanted me to teach him."

"Gabrielle, I'm so sorry." Virgil put his arms around her and she let the tears flow, leaning against his chest.

"And I taught him, didn't I." Then she was laughing and crying at the same time, her teeth chattering, her shoulders shaking. "Oh, I *taught* him all right."

Virgil brought the cup of lemonade to her mouth, made her take a few sips, and held her until she calmed down. She sat up straight, her hands folded in her lap.

"You thought you were defending Xena," he said softly.

"Virgil, I could have stopped him some other way. Knocked him down, tried to disarm him. Instead, I just -- lost it. I thought Xena was in danger and I went straight for the kill. All those years ago, when I left home to go off with her, I wanted to be a warrior. You know what I am now? A killer."

"Every warrior is a killer."

"I thought I could be different. I thought I could fight and still have reverence for life -- still do everything in my power not to take life if there was any other way. Foolish, huh?"

"You've always tried to do the right thing -- you and Xena."

"The right thing." Gabrielle gave another short laugh. "You don't know what happened after I killed Korah."

She told him the rest of the story: how Xena lied to the nomads and tried to blame Korah's death on the Romans who were trying to subjugate the natives in the region; how, after a captured Roman soldier was nearly executed on the spot for the boy's murder, she finally confessed against Xena's wishes, and was herself sentenced to death; how, in order to rescue her, Xena engineered a Roman attack on the nomad tribes. True, Xena also helped the nomads fight back and win the day, partly through sheer luck; still, it went against everything they believed in.

"Gabrielle." Virgil gently took her hands in his. "If Xena was willing to do that, it just

shows how much she cares about you."

"For a while out there, I actually wanted to die." She looked down, watching as he stroked her hands. "It was better than to live knowing I killed that poor innocent boy. And sometimes I think -- what about all the other people who died by my hand? How guilty were they, really? Roman soldiers who only fought because they were conscripted, or had families to feed, or thought they were defending their country... temple warriors who fought for their gods just like I fought for my faith... what gave me the right to take their lives?" Gabrielle raised her head, staring into Virgil's kind hazel eyes. "I don't know, Virgil. I don't know anymore. Sometimes I'm really proud of what I've become. Sometimes, I feel like -- I'm losing myself."

"Then maybe it's not for you. Being a warrior, I mean."

"Maybe. But there's nothing I can do about it. I can't travel around with Xena and let her do all the fighting."

Virgil lowered his head for a moment and sighed.

"Then maybe you shouldn't -- "

"No. My path is with Xena."

He gave her a strange look. "Why?"

She gaped at him, suddenly at a loss.

"I don't understand," he said. "I admire Xena. She's a great woman. But you're your own person, with your own path -- you're smart, talented, brave -- "

"It's hard to explain... Virgil, we're connected in such a deep way... sometimes I don't understand it myself. But it's like -- somehow, our souls sustain each other -- like sunlight and water sustain living things ... Or maybe that's not it. It's like she has half of my soul and I have half of hers..." *But did that mean she couldn't have her own path?*

"That's great." Virgil sounded a little dubious. "I just hate to see you so unhappy."

"I'm not unhappy," she said quickly.

"Gabrielle." He squeezed her hands and fidgeted. "I know you and Xena have a wonderful friendship, but do you think you'll ever have room in your life for -- a different kind of relationship?"

Her heart was beating wildly.

"Oh Virgil -- I -- I..."

"You don't have to say anything now. There, I got it out. I've been wanting to tell you for a while... Just think about it."

Gabrielle rubbed her still-damp face and smiled as best she could.

"We should go back in -- it's probably already started. Do I look like a total mess?"

"You look beautiful." He gingerly touched her cheek. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

They hugged and held each other for a moment, and he gave her a comforting pat on the back. Then she pulled back a little; they were staring at each other now, their faces so close that she could feel the warmth of his breath. He leaned closer and his lips touched hers.

Gabrielle closed her eyes. Maybe this was right. Maybe, with Virgil, she could have the life she wanted.

She opened her mouth and slipped the tip of her tongue between his lips, and heard his husky sigh.

* ~ * ~ *

Other people went out dancing; this was their dance and their music -- the leaps, the kicks, the thrusts, the blocks, the harsh cries and grunts, the song of blade meeting blade. Xena flipped in the air and landed behind Ares just as he spun to face her and parry her blow.

"Oh you're good," she breathed hoarsely.

"Years of practice..."

The thrust of his sword was only a distraction -- the real move was an attempt to kick her legs out from under her, which she dodged.

"Not as a mortal." This time she managed to plant her foot on his midriff and almost push him back when he grabbed her ankle and yanked it upward, making her lose her balance and land on her backside. Before he could hold her at the point of his sword, she rolled away and was on her feet again in a single leap.

The training ground, an inner courtyard at a combat school, was empty except for a half-dozen teenage students and their teacher, who had stopped their exercises to watch; the lone girl in the group seemed particularly riveted.

"There's more to it than" -- their swords clashed again and Ares raised his voice so that she could hear over him the clang -- "godhood."

He was, in fact, doing better than Xena had expected; his mortal reflexes were now sharpened to the point where he didn't need to rely on god powers to use his moves, and he certainly had the moves. Still, she wondered if she was at the top of her game, in full possession of the single-minded focus that Ares himself had once taught her was so important to a warrior. A tiny part of her was elsewhere, worrying about Gabrielle. Gabrielle and Virgil -- they were good friends, of course. Back at that

bacchanalia in Rome, though, Gabrielle had been so flustered, and had glanced so nervously at Virgil... in fact, there had been a certain awkwardness between her and Virgil afterwards... She was barely able to deflect Ares' blow as he moved on her; for a few moments she had his blade pinned down, flashing him a teasing grin, and he creased his eyebrows in concentration and then grinned back at her as he yanked his sword away with a metallic screech.

As they continued to spar, Xena could see that Ares was getting tired. Perhaps he still wasn't quite used to the weaknesses of the mortal body after all; beads of sweat were rolling down his face and neck, and his breathing was hoarse and jerky. Fully focused now, she advanced, forcing him to put all his energy into defensive moves. She wasn't going to spare his feelings; she owed it to him to give him all she had. Finally, spotting a moment when his grip on his sword weakened, she took advantage of it to kick it from his hand. It landed only a few short steps away but definitely out of Ares' reach as he stood panting, her blade pointed at his throat, a mix of admiration and pique in his gaze. Her heart raced with excitement.

"Give up?" she purred.

Still trying to catch his breath, Ares smirked at her. "What are -- your terms?"

"Let's see... Unconditional surrender?"

"Ooh... I like the sound of that."

His eyes fixed on her, he spread out his arms, his palms turned outward, and sank slowly down on his knees. How theatrical -- or was he up to something? Xena lowered her sword, keeping its tip no more than a finger's length from Ares' chest.

"Unconditional surrender," he said huskily and leaned forward, keeping his hands at his sides. Still wary, she pulled the sword back a little.

"So?"

Bending lower, he kissed the tip of her boot. Xena chuckled; she was starting to relax, her body tingling pleasantly. "I didn't ask you to grovel."

"You know me. I don't do anything halfway." His lips traveled up to the skin just above the top of her boot, jolting her with a different kind of excitement. She became aware of the kids watching them across the yard.

"Ares -- " She gasped, then laughed. "Stop it!"

Even as she was saying it, her ankles were gripped as if in a vise and jerked forward violently; the grayish brick wall of the training school lurched before her eyes and gave way to the pale soft blue of the sky. Xena sprawled on the ground, feeling its hard slam to her shoulder blades and the sting of the sand on her bare skin. She let go of the sword long enough for Ares to push it away as he pinned her down.

"I never did say I gave up, did I?" He grinned. Not that he would mind losing to her, but still... He was about to ask if she wanted to reconsider the terms of his surrender

when he heard her moan slightly and saw her eyelids flutter and close. She couldn't possibly be hurt -- she had taken far worse spills than that --

"Xena?"

Her head lolled to the side, and Ares felt frightened. He pulled himself up. "Xena," he said again, tapping her cheek with the back of his hand.

In the next instant, he found himself flipped over and pinned down, Xena's knee planted firmly on his chest. He should have seen it coming, of course. She reached for her sword and picked it up.

"Two can play this game," she said with a smug little smile.

She was incredible, smiling like that, her eyes sparkling, cheeks flushed, hair damp with sweat.

"You are -- *so good...*"

Momentarily lightheaded with desire, Ares wanted to grasp her hips, pull her forward, tug at her undergarment with his teeth. He watched, with an acutely physical sense of loss, as Xena rose to her feet in a sharp, graceful motion. He imagined whisking her off to the Halls of War in a swirl of light, making their clothes vanish, ending their contest the way all their contests were meant to end, with a match in which surrender and victory were the same. Xena held out her hand and helped him up, to a burst of applause from the small but enthusiastic group of (*damn them to Tartarus!*) spectators.

"Come on," Xena said. "Let's go wash up."

"Wait." He slipped his sword back in the sheath at his belt. "Let's *really* show them."

Before she had a chance to say anything, he pulled her into a long, slow kiss, and after a moment's hesitation she responded. There was more clapping from the kids, and whooping cheers; Xena tensed in his arms and broke away all too soon. She gave him a wry look and said, once again, "Let's go."

* ~ * ~ *

When Gabrielle and Virgil came out of the reading room, a middle-aged white-clad librarian gave them a stern look, and Gabrielle felt herself blushing so deeply that it undoubtedly confirmed the woman's worst suspicions, if she had any -- even though nothing had actually happened except for a kiss.

A clear, melodious, resonant voice could be heard coming through the open doors of the main hall; the reading had already started. By the time they got back inside, there were no seats left. They tiptoed toward the front of the room and stood by the wall.

The woman on the raised platform was short and slender in her dark blue gown with a touch of gold; she had a slim, spirited face, and a halo of fine brown curls. Gabrielle had read and admired some of Sappho's poetry before, but she had never imagined

how much lovelier the verses would be when spoken, almost sung, by the woman nicknamed the Tenth Muse. She sang of the pleasures of the senses, of sun-drenched orchards, of rose-garlanded maidens dancing in the moonlight, of wildflowers and dusky meadows, of friendship and love. She sang of lying in a lonely bed as the night rolled by and the moon and the stars faded.

Gabrielle felt Virgil's warm, firm fingers curl around her own, and her heart fluttered as she remembered their kiss. Could she love Virgil? It was strange to imagine herself with anyone but Xena, to think of lying in someone else's arms, of falling asleep by someone else's side -- of living by someone else's side. But it might be possible. She liked Virgil, cared about him, enjoyed his company. Perhaps she could learn to love him, too.

With a shock, she realized that she was thinking of leaving Xena. Well, why not? Perhaps the shocking part was that she hadn't seriously thought of it before, when it was so clear that she couldn't go on like this. Besides, did Xena still need her? Over the years, she had gotten used to thinking of herself as the keeper of Xena's conscience, the person who helped Xena fight the darkness, the rage, the violence inside her and around her. But maybe Xena was more than capable by now of fighting the darkness on her own. And maybe... With a shudder, Gabrielle remembered her confrontation with Ares, trying not to think of the horrific daydream that followed it. Maybe Ares had been right: the way she was now, she was no longer qualified to be anyone's guiding light. As for love -- well, Ares was a son of a bitch, but he adored Xena, and would happily die for her and live for her; there was no denying that.

Sappho was reciting a long poem about the wedding of the Trojan hero Hector and the noble Andromache, and Gabrielle's mind drifted back to her half-stifled earlier thought: what if she hadn't been with Xena when she met Virgil? In some ways, she and Virgil had much more in common than she and Xena. They shared a passion for literature and the arts, and an interest in spirituality; they were both warrior bards, and could have helped each other reconcile the two. With Virgil, she wouldn't be feeling -- the way she had for some time -- that the bard in her was losing to the warrior and slowly wasting away from neglect. With Virgil ... and this was something she could barely say even to herself: *With Virgil, she could have children*. Except that there was another thought, even more forbidden, hiding somewhere in a tiny nook in her mind. *Virgil would be faithful*.

Gabrielle tossed her head slightly and tried to focus on Sappho again, in time to catch the last lines of a fragment about Kleis, her golden-haired daughter. Sappho paused, her amber eyes looking out at the audience and locking for an instant on Gabrielle. Then she began to read again:

"Equal to the gods he is, I think,
When he sits near you, hears that voice
And velvet laugh, which make my heart
Tremble so wildly.

For there are times I look at you,
If only for a moment's span,
The words break silent on my tongue

And leave me speechless.

Thin fire runs beneath my skin,
And thunder pounds against my ears,
Chill sweat breaks out all over me,
My eyes see nothing,

My body shivers head to foot,
And I grow paler than the reeds
Until I'm lost -- and then it seems
That death is near me."

Her last words quivered and died in the stillness of the hall, and Gabrielle became aware that she was trembling. She felt it all, the thin fire under her skin, the pounding in her ears, the chill sweat, the sudden unseeingness of her tear-dimmed eyes. Virgil was speaking to her in a low voice, and it took an effort to break through the fog and hear him.

"Gabrielle -- are you all right?"

She nodded, squeezing his hand. "The poem... it's -- it's ..."

It's about me.

She struggled to breathe.

It's about Xena.

Gabrielle realized that Virgil was still holding her hand; but now it was stiff and cold in his grasp, like a dead thing, and after a moment he gently let it go.

* ~ * ~ *

The lilac haze of twilight had almost turned to night when Gabrielle and Virgil came out on the library portico. They were among the last to leave. After the reading, Gabrielle had wanted to talk to Sappho -- who, it turned out, had heard of the Bard of Potadeia and read a couple of her scrolls, which somewhat brightened Gabrielle's mood, though it didn't thrill her to the core as it would have once. Now, she was clutching a precious gift from the Tenth Muse: the scroll with the poem, "Equal to the gods...", which she had asked Sappho (reddening slightly as she did so) to inscribe on the back, "To Gabrielle and Xena."

The evening's soft breath cooled her bare skin, making her hunch her shoulders. She put the scroll into her satchel and looked up at Virgil. The torch fixed to a column behind him made the air shimmer and the shadows sway, deepening the darkness that veiled his face.

"I'm sorry," she said.

His eyes flickered. "You don't have to apologize."

"Virgil..." Gabrielle put her hand on his and sighed deeply. "I just want to explain... I love someone else."

He stared at her intently, leaned a little closer and said, "It's Xena, isn't it..."

Her throat dry, she nodded. There were other people with whom she had more in common, with whom, perhaps, she would have had a better life. But... *Why do we love the people we love? We just do.* That was what she said to Joxer once...

"Please believe me," she said imploringly. "If things were different -- if I could -- you're the kind of person I'd want to spend my life with."

When she let go of his hand, Virgil stared down and shifted his feet. He seemed to tense up, as if trying to muster the courage to ask her something. Finally he raised his head.

"I hope" -- he stopped for a moment, as if suddenly out of breath -- "I hope you're happy, Gabrielle."

She wished the torchlight weren't on her face; she didn't want him to see that she was fighting back tears as she smiled. "We'll always be friends, right?"

"Of course."

Virgil stooped slightly to hug her, and they stood still for a moment, her chin resting on his shoulder, his large hand pressing warmly against her back.

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Virgil turned and stared after Gabrielle. She had sweetly refused his offer to walk back with her, pointing out that his inn was on the other side of town. By now, her shape was nothing more than a grayish blot that grew smaller until it blended into the night.

The dark, nearly deserted street was lined with lemon trees whose murmurings lingered in the air, their tangy scent mixing with the occasional whiff of chimney smoke and a mercifully faint horsy smell. Virgil walked on, thinking wistfully about Gabrielle. His mind relived once again the moment of their kiss, the frightened tenderness in her eyes before she closed them, the soft uncertain touch of her lips and tongue, the throbbing of his own heart. And then, the moment when he felt her hand go rigid in his... She hadn't meant to toy with him, of that he had no doubt; but his bewilderment lingered. He recalled his chat with the wine merchant who had seen Xena and Gabrielle in Elaea; the woman had seemed quite sure that Xena and her male companion (whose appearance she had described in highly enthusiastic terms) were in love. There was, too, the way Gabrielle had reacted to that poem, with its expression of helpless jealousy in the opening lines... Was her passion for Xena unrequited, perhaps unspoken? Of course, it was possible that the two women were lovers but Xena was attracted to Ares and Gabrielle was worried about it ... though surely Xena was far too honorable to be unfaithful.

So the mystery man was Ares. It made Virgil wince a bit. Gabrielle's scrolls had not formed a flattering image of the War God in his mind; he knew that Ares had killed Eli, and had been Livia's patron when she murdered his father. Then again, Ares had given up his godhood to save Gabrielle and Eve, apparently out of love for Xena. There were things Virgil knew he'd never understand. He just hoped Gabrielle wouldn't get hurt.

Back there outside the library, he had almost asked Gabrielle what was actually going on between her and Xena; but he was glad he hadn't. Perhaps, if things weren't well... no, whatever the women's relationship was, it wouldn't be right for him to get between them. Gabrielle had to sort it out, and if the time was ever right, she would come to him. For now, her heart obviously belonged to Xena.

Virgil's chest and throat tightened with a quick wrench of pain. Some time after his father's death, the realization had hit him that Joxer had been deeply, hopelessly in love with Gabrielle. Maybe it was a family curse, Virgil thought with a wry chuckle.

Heaven only knew when he'd see her again. Tomorrow, he would be leaving Megara and moving on to Corinth, to take more of his scrolls to the vendors there. He had almost forgotten that he had to stop by the library again in the morning and deliver a copy to them; the head librarian had been interested, and it was certainly an honor.

He hoped that Gabrielle would like his poem, and that he'd have a chance to discuss it with her sometime. What a wonderful life it would have been, to show her what he'd written at the end of each day, to be the first to read her new scrolls. Maybe there was still a chance... But it was best to accept that this wasn't going to happen; best for both of them, and for their friendship.

In his room at the inn, packing his modest belongings for the next day's journey, Virgil thought of his father again. Yes, Joxer had loved Gabrielle his whole life; yet he had married Meg, and all in all they had been happy together -- in spite of their bickering, in spite of the quiet longing that Virgil had sometimes noticed in his father's face when Joxer was looking at Gabrielle's scrolls or at some of the memorabilia in the tavern. Gabrielle wasn't the kind of woman one got over. But life would go on.

As he climbed into the too-narrow bed and rested his head on the pillow, the tears came without warning. He wasn't sure if he was crying over his father -- *God, I miss you, Dad* -- or over Gabrielle. After a short while he wiped his face and took a few deep breaths. He would be all right. He hoped Gabrielle would be, too.

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The small brass statue over the inn's entrance, lit by two sputtering torches on the sides of the door, advertised the name of the establishment: The Huntress and the Hound. Both hound and huntress grinned evilly at Gabrielle -- or so the wavering shadows and the reflected gleam of the torchlight made it look. Gabrielle shivered, wishing she could laugh at herself. In the dark, lost in her sad thoughts, it was a wonder she'd actually made it back to the inn. As she pushed the creaky door, the flesh-and-blood hound dozing by the threshold opened a lazy, glittering yellow eye at

her.

The door snapped shut behind her as she stepped into the stale air of the inn. She felt tired and drained. The smell of food drifted her way from the still-open tavern. Maybe she would feel better if she ate something. Besides, she wasn't ready to face Xena just yet.

A short while later Gabrielle sat at a table, poking distractedly at her vegetable stew. The whole way back from the library, nearly an hour's walk, she had felt sick with misery. She had acted like a cheap tease toward a good, caring, loyal friend -- only to realize with a terrifying finality that there was no one for her but Xena, there couldn't be anyone else. And where did that leave her? She had tried to think of some solution, and kept stumbling into the same answer: There was no way out -- not unless Xena chose to send Ares away, unless it was *her* decision ... and even if Xena did make that choice but only as a sacrifice for her, how much of a solution would it be?

Now, she thought back to the day her life changed -- that day on the farm when she went to try to get Ares' dog back, and something happened while she was gone, and then Ares stormed off to drown his sorrows in wine. *Drown his sorrows in wine...* For the first time, Gabrielle understood why people could want to get away from themselves so much that they would do that.

The serving girl stopped at her table and asked irritably, "Anything to drink?"

And why not?

"I'll have wine," she said.

The girl brought her a cup of wine and Gabrielle sipped the dark red liquid, wrinkling her nose at its heady, spicy taste. Its warmth settled into her body, bringing some comfort.

Maybe it was madness to stay. But there was a reason. *For there are times I look at you, if only for a moment's span...* No one else would ever make her feel this way. Only she wasn't sure anymore if that feeling was a blessing or --

Gabrielle gulped down the rest of the wine so quickly that it made her cough, burning her throat. Then she motioned to the serving girl and asked for more wine.

"Make it a pitcher," she said, her voice a croak.

She pulled the scroll with the poem out of her satchel and unrolled it on her lap.

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Long past midnight, Xena thought as she looked at the blue flecks scattered on the night sky. She walked away from the window and sat down on Gabrielle's bed.

There was still no sign of Gabrielle. Well, Gabrielle and Virgil could stay up all night talking about his epic poem, or the theater, or Eastern religions. But ... Xena imagined Gabrielle looking up at Virgil, her greenish-gray eyes wide and bright, her lips parted,

her beautiful face so open, so trusting, so loving. She imagined Gabrielle standing before Virgil and letting her dress crumple in a soft heap at her feet, in a gesture less of seduction than of bold innocence and complete vulnerability, baring all of herself, body and soul. She bit down on her lip.

Of course, she was hardly in a position to object if Gabrielle took a lover on the side ... not when every fiber of her flesh still held the memory of Ares' touch. She hadn't meant to make love to him that evening; but somehow, when they went to bathe in the indoor tub at the school after their sparring, when his arms encircled her from behind and he pressed into her, shuddering wildly, his breath hot and ragged on her neck, she couldn't deny him -- couldn't deny herself. She broke free from his embrace but only to turn around, to smile as the momentary disappointment fled from his face, to touch his half-closed eyes, his lips, his cheek. Maybe it was knowing that she had nearly lost him, or knowing that one of these days she *would* lose him, but she wanted to hold him, all of him, and never let go.

No, she couldn't begrudge Gabrielle a fling; but Gabrielle wouldn't *have* a fling. If she went to bed with Virgil, she would leave with him. It was that simple. Xena bolted up and walked around the cramped room, as if she could escape the swelling, surging tide of panic.

She needed Gabrielle's love, but it wasn't just that; she needed Gabrielle's faith in her, needed to see herself through Gabrielle's eyes -- as a good person, as someone who would always strive to do better. How did Gabrielle see her now? She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

A noise in the hallway drew her attention: the sound of shuffling, stumbling feet, and another person's heavy steps. "This way, missy," said a male voice Xena recognized as belonging to the inn's proprietor, and then the door was pushed open. There stood the stocky balding innkeeper, with a disheveled, sleepy Gabrielle leaning on his arm.

"What is going on?"

"Beg pardon, ma'am..." The innkeeper nodded nervously toward Gabrielle. "Your friend ?- she, uh -- "

Gabrielle lifted her head and stared sullenly at Xena.

"Hello, Xena." Her voice was thick, her face puffy. She let go of the innkeeper's arm and swayed a little.

"... she, uh, fell asleep in the tavern..."

"All right," Xena said coldly and waited for the man to leave. Her initial shock had given way to a familiar pain, so unbearable that it was numbing. *I'm destroying Gabrielle*. Only now, it was less a fear than a certainty.

Gabrielle flung her satchel into a corner and kicked off one of her shoes. The violent motion made her totter; she would have fallen if Xena hadn't been there to catch her. Her breath reeked of wine fumes.

"Come on." Xena sat her down on the bed, knelt before her and moved to take off the other shoe.

"I can do it," Gabrielle said. She yanked her foot out of Xena's hand and swung it, making the shoe thud dully against the wall.

Still kneeling, her head down, Xena said softly, "I was worried about you."

"Worried -- about -- what?" Gabrielle spoke slowly and carefully, but her voice now had a shrill edge. "That I got run over by a horse? Or that I slept with Virgil?"

Did you? In the tense silence that followed, a voice in Xena's head repeated those two words again and again, until she couldn't stand it anymore.

"Did you?" She paused. "Get run over by a horse, I mean."

Gabrielle made a sound that was something between a giggle and a snort. "Yeah, I did. A *big* one." She made that sound again, only this time it was a sob.

"I'm sorry," Xena whispered. "I'm sorry."

She took Gabrielle's foot, cradling it gently in her hands, and pressed her lips to it. After a moment she looked up.

"I'm sorry," she said again, her eyes aching.

With a sigh, Gabrielle leaned forward, and they embraced. Still holding back tears, Xena buried her face in Gabrielle's neck, kissing the delicate warm skin, running her hand over Gabrielle's hair. She felt Gabrielle's feverish breath and the wet touch of her mouth -- and then, so suddenly that she nearly cried out, the sharp jolt of pain as Gabrielle bit into her shoulder.

She jerked back. "What are you doing?"

"That's what you want, isn't it?" The smile on Gabrielle's face was a grimace, an almost evil taunt. She squeezed Xena's breasts, twisting them through the leather tunic. "Isn't this what ?- "

Xena's mouth covered hers before she could finish. *No, not Gabrielle... Gabrielle wasn't like this ...* Gabrielle bit again, drawing blood, and Xena didn't resist, just held her in a strong tender hug, softly, so softly caressing Gabrielle's lips with her tongue. The thick aftertaste of wine in Gabrielle's mouth reminded her of how Ares got drunk in the tavern that day, after she told him she and Gabrielle were lovers -- how she kissed him and his anger ebbed away -- and she wasn't sure if her heart was hurting for Gabrielle or for Ares, or for both of them.

Gabrielle's hands slackened and slid down to Xena's waist.

"Lie down," Xena said. "Lie down."

Easing her on the bed, she pulled off Gabrielle's dress, then took off her own tunic and

put out the lamp. As Xena lay down next to Gabrielle, it occurred to her dimly that making love wasn't going to solve anything -- it was like giving a wounded man a painkiller when the wound was left untreated -- but it was the only thing she could give Gabrielle, and herself, right now. It was best not to think about the fact that only hours earlier she had made love to Ares, or about whether she would ever make love to him again. Gabrielle flinched almost convulsively in her arms and tried to push her on her back, crushing her lips against Xena's; but this time there was something tentative about her violence.

"Shh." Xena pulled back a little, stroking Gabrielle's hair and face, pressing a finger to her lips. "You don't need to do this. It's okay. It's okay."

She caressed Gabrielle's shoulders, kissed her neck, then slid down to kiss her chest, swirling her tongue over each nipple, trailing her lips over the moist underside of each breast. As Gabrielle squirmed and her breathing came faster, turning to little moans, Xena felt her own desire rise and spread through her, and at least for now the pain and doubt and confusion melted away in that warm rush.

Xena pulled up again and brushed her lips against Gabrielle's, and gasped as she felt Gabrielle's hand slide between her thighs.

"Gabrielle... please..."

"Hmm?"

She wished she had kept the light on; she wanted to see Gabrielle's face like this, swept with tenderness and passion.

"Don't ever leave me," she murmured, covering Gabrielle's face with kisses, knowing that she had no right to say it. "Don't ever..."

* ~ * ~ *

Whatever had kept them up late last night, he was not going to starve waiting for them to come down for breakfast.

Dressed in his leathers, with the absence of sword and gauntlets his only concession to leisure time, Ares looked around the crowded tavern once again; seeing no trace of Xena or Gabrielle anywhere, he headed toward one of the tables. The serving wench sashayed up to him with an unusually friendly look on her snub-nosed vacuous face.

"Good morning," she said brightly. "Your, um, friends aren't here?"

"Sleeping late." He smiled back at her. "What do you say we go ahead and start without them?"

The girl giggled. "Okay. We've got honey-flavored wheat porridge, we've got pancakes and we've got baked apples."

"Hm ... not exactly the food of the gods, is it."

"Can't say as we get too many of those 'round here." She giggled again.

When the girl brought his breakfast -- porridge, pancakes and milk -- and set it down on the table, she said, "You know, I almost forgot. One of your friends, the blonde -- she lost something here last night."

"What?"

The girl showed him something she had been holding under her arm. A scroll. Now this could be interesting. Something from Blondie's quill? An opportunity for a little bard-baiting? He still owed her for that stunt with the Pindar poem, not to mention the business about selling off his things.

"Between you and me" -- the girl gave him a conspiratorial smirk -- "she had a few too many last night. Almost a full pitcher of wine. Passed out right at the table. I guess she dropped this thing on the floor."

"What does it say?"

The girl made a face. "Do I look like I can read?"

"All right," Ares said thoughtfully. For some reason, the image of Blondie drinking herself senseless wasn't as vastly amusing as it should have been. "Give me that."

Gulping down a mouthful of somewhat stale porridge (the "honey-flavored" part was very exaggerated), he unfurled the scroll and started reading. *Equal to the gods he is* ...

When he was finished, he slowly put down the scroll and realized that his other hand was still frozen on the spoon he had dipped into the porridge. Had Blondie actually written this? Ares tried to remember what her handwriting looked like. He really should have read a few of her scrolls.

Whether it was her poem or not, she was *not* going to be happy once she realized she had lost it. And if she knew it had ended up in his hands... *ow*. He could lay the trap for her on some quiet evening at the campfire: make a casual remark about finding a scroll, recite the poem, and watch her squirm. Except that something in him recoiled from the thought of making fun of this little piece of verse; besides, if he did try reading it aloud, whatever he had felt while reading it just now might come over him again, and show in his voice. Better to drop a hint -- work some phrase from the poem into everyday conversation and give her a meaningful look to let her know it was no accident. *Oh, that would sting*.

Ares looked at his trophy again. The words stared back at him, stark and black on the yellowish papyrus. *Until I'm lost -- and then it seems that death is near me...*

He rolled up the scroll and pushed away his half-eaten breakfast.

A few moments later, still not knowing for sure why he was doing this, he was knocking on Gabrielle's door.

"Xena?" Even with the door between them, he could tell she sounded nervous.

"No. It's me."

There was a short, puzzled pause, and then a brusque, "What do you want?"

"Open up," he said.

Another pause, and then finally -- "Come in."

He pushed the door open. Gabrielle was kneeling on the floor, with an open saddlebag in front of her. Her face worried and pinched, she looked awful, though it was hard to tell how much of it was from the hangover and how much from the coarse gray half-dark of the room.

"Lose something?" He held up the scroll.

She gasped and jumped to her feet.

"What are you ..." She pressed her fingers to her temples and closed her eyes for a moment. "You took -- "

With an animal-like cry, she flung herself at Ares so fast that he didn't have time to say anything or to deflect her blow. She might have been aiming for his face but her punch connected with his neck. The pain was excruciating, and when he tried to breathe the air suddenly wasn't there. As he clutched at his throat, barely aware of the scroll landing on the floor with a soft tap, it occurred to him dimly that maybe Xena had taught her the pinch and this was it.

"I hate you." Her voice was low, vibrating with venom; then, it rose to a shriek. "I *hate* you!"

He managed to take a small breath, and when she charged him again he grabbed her wrists. They struggled silently, panting and grunting like wrestlers. She kicked at his leg, making him lose his balance; he stumbled forward, and they both went down hard. A short, harsh gasp pushed out of Gabrielle's throat as he landed on top of her.

"Get *off* me," she hissed, wriggling under him, her face taut with rage.

"You're" -- his voice broke off and he coughed -- "dangerously insane." It still hurt to breathe, let alone talk, and keeping her pinned down took quite an effort.

"I hate you," she said again. He caught the sour smell on her breath.

"Oh, big deal. I hate you too."

"I'll *kill* you for this." She sounded like she meant every bit of it. "It was mine -- and you took it -- "

"Dammit. You left it in the tavern last night."

Her face collapsed. She stopped struggling and stared at him blankly, her eyes very big, her mouth lax.

"What?"

"You dropped it on the floor in the tavern. I brought it back."

"Oh," she said softly. Her lips trembled and he was afraid she was about to cry. "Oh."

Ares finally managed to steady his breath. At that moment, he became aware that his vest was open and he could feel her breasts pushed up against his chest. He also realized that he was aroused. Gabrielle was still staring at him, only now there was something shocked and vulnerable in her look, and he was almost certain that she was aware of it too.

With a shudder, he rolled off her and sat up. Gabrielle remained sprawled on the floor, her top askew, exposing the pale pink around her left nipple. He turned away, scrambled to his feet and rested his forehead against the fly-specked wall.

"Did you write this?" he said after a while.

She gave a short laugh. "I wish. I'm not that good." She paused and then added, "It's by Sappho. You know -- the reading, last night -- "

"Yeah."

He heard her get up, then sit down heavily on the bed.

"I'd better go," he said.

"The poem -- did you like it?"

He turned around. The wondering, almost-sympathetic look on her face annoyed him more than her earlier violent outburst.

"If you think we're going to have a warm and fuzzy little bonding moment over this -- *thing*" -- he chuckled -- "then you're *really* insane."

She lowered her head and said quietly, "Please go."

When his hand was already on the door handle, he heard her murmur almost inaudibly, "Thank you."

He threw the door open and almost collided with Xena.

Oh shit.

They stood silently, staring at each other. He hoped he didn't look too guilty.

Xena's eyes narrowed slowly.

"What are you doing here?"

"I, uh -- Gabrielle lost something at the tavern last night and I brought it back."

"She -- lost something?"

"Just a scroll I was reading," Gabrielle said hastily. "It's nothing important."

Xena stepped inside, looking back and forth from Gabrielle to Ares. Then she shook her head and sighed, the wariness in her face giving way to worry. She held up a scroll which Ares only now noticed in her hand.

"Bad news," she said. "This is from Varia. The Amazons have Eve and they're holding her for trial."

CHAPTER 7

The situation was simple enough. Eve, banned from Amazon lands on pain of death for her crimes as Livia, Champion of Rome, had gone to the Amazons on some kind of mission from the new Roman emperor, and was seized on the orders of Queen Varia. Varia's terse letter, addressed to both Xena and Gabrielle, stated that Eve's trial was being postponed until their arrival -- to let Gabrielle participate in the meeting of the council and cast a vote, and to allow Xena to attend in recognition of the services she had rendered the Amazons.

"There's more." Xena looked up from the scroll and turned to Ares, who stood slouching by the wall. "Varia says that if we know where you are, we should bring you as a witness at Eve's trial."

He stared back at her, still in the same casual posture.

"Okay," he said slowly.

Gabrielle shook her head and ran a hand through her hair. She was still shaken by everything that had happened that morning, and trying to sort out her jumbled but discomfiting memories of the night before. And now, this.

"What was Eve thinking?" she said, mainly because she had to say something.

Xena gave her a hard look.

"Maybe she was thinking that if she risked her life to bring peace to the Amazons, she would make up for some of what she did before." Her eyelids quivered and her voice fell to a near-whisper. "Maybe she was thinking that she deserved to die."

She was silent, and it seemed that the small room, crowded enough with three people in it, was suddenly teeming with ghosts.

Xena rolled up the scroll and looked at Ares again.

"What do you know about this?"

"About what?"

"Eve -- Livia's raids on the Amazons."

Ares lowered his eyes and mumbled something.

"What was that?"

He looked up. "It was my idea. You know that, don't you. You just wanted to make me say it."

Xena didn't seem too shocked, yet her voice was choked when she finally asked, "Why?"

He shrugged. "I thought it would be fun to have Livia go up against the Amazons."

"Fun," Xena said heavily.

Ares uncoiled himself from the wall and stood up straight, scowling.

"I wanted a good fight."

The sudden reminder that she was looking at the God of War made Gabrielle shiver, and then stiffen with resentment.

"You mean, you wanted slaughter," she said.

Ares glared at her as if she were an intruder.

"I didn't think it would *be* a slaughter." He spoke slowly and deliberately. "Maybe I overestimated your Amazons. I didn't expect them to fold like a bunch of schoolgirls."

Xena's mouth curled downward. For a moment Gabrielle felt absurdly elated. She and Xena, united against Ares. That felt right. That felt ... good.

Ares turned back to Xena. "Look, if you expect me to apologize for what I am..." He stopped for a moment, and some of the cockiness seemed to fade from his face and his voice. "For what I was... What did you expect me to do when you were gone? Take up chicken farming as a hobby?"

"How about stay away from my daughter?"

Ares lowered his head, his shoulders sagging a little. Gabrielle felt disgusted with herself. Xena's daughter, *their* daughter, was in mortal peril, and she was gloating because Xena was angry at Ares.

"I told you," he said, "I didn't know..."

"Listen," Gabrielle said, a little too loudly, "we have to think about how to get Eve out of -- "

"And if you *had* known?" Xena cut in.

Ares straightened up again, meeting Xena's stare with a kind of desperate defiance.

"What, you're going to blame me for corrupting your baby? I didn't make her who she was, Xena. How do you think she got my attention? The first time I saw her was when she was leading the Roman troops in Gaul, the day she got that scar on her back. Let me tell you" -- he sneered crookedly -- "it was quite a number she did on those Gauls ... three villages wiped out in one day. And she was just twenty years old then."

It hurt even to look at Xena's face.

"And you just loved it, didn't you," she said, her voice hard and brittle.

"I was the God of War. You told me once that I was right for the job, remember?"

"I suppose you also told my daughter to sell the Amazons she had captured into slavery. All in a day's work, huh?"

"I told her that the Amazons would make excellent gladiators -- that if she brought such fighters back to Rome for the gladiatorial colleges, it would be great for her reputation. But don't blame it all on me, Xena. I wasn't the one who told your little girl how to dispose of damaged goods. That was all her."

"Damaged goods..." Xena's voice was a faint echo of itself.

"Yeah. The ones whose injuries were so bad they wouldn't be any good in the arena."

Stop it, Gabrielle wanted to scream, *can't you see you're tearing her apart?* But she had the bizarre feeling that they wouldn't hear her, as if she were watching them through an invisible yet solid wall.

"She threw them overboard," Ares spat out. "She was taking them back to Rome by boat, and she gave the orders. They still had their shackles -- "

"All right," Xena said, her voice drained of anger, drained of life. She sat down on the bed next to Gabrielle. After a moment Gabrielle drew an arm around her shoulder, and Xena leaned against her a little. Ares looked confused.

"Xena..." he started, and trailed off.

Finally, Xena sat up.

"Does Varia know about this?" She looked as neutral and businesslike as she sounded.

He shrugged. "How do *I* know?"

Xena nodded thoughtfully, and then said, "We'll leave today -- if we make good time, it shouldn't take us more than a week to get there." She glanced at Ares. "You should stay here."

"Stay here? What are you talking about?"

"It's for your safety. I know Varia. She's ambitious. She'd like nothing more than to make her reputation by bringing down the God of War." She snorted and shook her head. "Even the former God of War."

"And you think I'm going to turn tail and run?"

"Ares, this isn't about your pride."

"Obviously, you don't think I have any," he shot back. "You can't keep me from going."

"I'm asking you not to go."

"I said I'm going."

Xena gave him a grim look. "Do you want me to promise that I ... we'll come back for you?"

Come back ... Gabrielle felt the words sink in like lead weights.

"You think that's the only reason I want to go? That I'm scared you'll dump me? I told you, I'm not going to hide from Varia."

"Look, can we just stop bickering?" Gabrielle snapped. Listening to this would be bad enough anywhere; here in this small, stuffy room, it was almost unbearable.

"Fine," Xena muttered through clenched teeth. "Do whatever you want. We're leaving right after breakfast."

* ~ * ~ *

Over the next few days, they rode a lot, slept and ate little, and spoke even less.

Several times on that journey, Ares wondered if he was going mad as his emotions plunged him by turns into fire and ice: scalding hot anger, the coldness of the distance between himself and Xena, the feverish chill of the fear that he had lost her.

At first, his anger was directed mostly at Xena. What did she want from him? He had already given up being a god for her; did she expect him to give up being himself as well, to beg forgiveness for being the God of War? He had told her from the start that he didn't know Livia was Eve, had tried to explain himself, and it still wasn't enough. What had he done, really? He had spotted a young woman brave enough, skilled enough, ruthless enough to be his special warrior ?- took her under his wing and to his bed -- nothing he hadn't done many times before.

Except that sometimes, when he thought about it, it wasn't anger but something else burning inside him. He remembered how Xena looked when he told her those things about Livia, her face unflinching, the way it would be if she were being whipped. There was another time -- another lifetime, it seemed -- when he had seen that look on her face. She stood very still looking at rows of crosses -- her daughter's bloody harvest -- and he taunted her about it, wanting her to hurt as he was hurting, unerringly hitting the spot where it hurt the worst: the fear that she had an evil inside her which she had passed on to her child. *She's my daughter, you sick bastard. -- Why do you think it was so easy to turn her?*

He had other memories, too, while riding by her side or trying to get comfortable in his bedroll at night: memories of warm smiles and tender looks, of the feather-soft touch of her hands on his face, of her delight in the pleasure they gave each other. Thinking about that made it worse. After all the pain he had caused her, she had given him a chance, and so much else... and he had hurt her again, hurt her so cruelly, for no reason at all, except that her anger frightened him and he struck back.

He had to talk to her, he knew that; only, of course they were never alone. It was bad enough that Gabrielle was always there -- he was used to it -- but a couple of times, he caught her staring at him and blushing, and found himself looking away too quickly. That was the last thing he needed right now, to let *her* get to him.

Finally, waking up at daybreak one morning, he saw that Xena wasn't in her bedroll; he looked around in the bluish-gray haze of dawn and saw her slipping into her tunic at the edge of the small stream by which they were camping. He got up, stiff and achy all over -- he had fallen asleep in his leathers the night before, exhausted from a full day of riding -- and hobbled toward her. She stood up straight and looked at him, her face rigid.

Ares knelt down, splashed some water on his face and neck and swirled it around in his mouth; it was wretchedly cold but at least it snapped him into full consciousness. He rose and forced himself to look at Xena. He wasn't sure if the chill he felt was from the water or from being near her.

After a few moments she turned away and moved to walk back to the campsite.

"Wait," he said hoarsely.

"What?"

"I -- " he paused to clear his throat. He could barely hear himself speak over the pounding in his ears. "I guess I really messed up, huh?"

Xena stared at him thoughtfully; then, the corners of her mouth curved up a little.

"Is that your way of telling me you're sorry?"

"Uh-huh." He fidgeted, tugging at his vest. "Those things I said -- I -- "

She sighed. "Were they -- true?"

"Yeah ... they were."

"Then why should you be sorry," she said flatly. There was no anger in her voice this time, just a dull pain.

"Xena. It wasn't your fault. I'm -- dammit -- " He fumbled for words, and as she watched him, her eyes seemed to soften. "I'm ... I'm sorry for -- everything, okay? Sorry about being such a -- "

" -- bastard?"

He glanced at her quickly -- was she angry again? -- and saw that almost-smile coming back.

"Uh ... yeah. Look -- I'm doing the best I can here -- okay?"

Xena shook her head, a *what am I going to do with you* kind of headshake, and then reached out and stroked his cheek. Her hand was cold from the water but her touch still made him feel warm, and he breathed easier. He put his hand over hers, then slowly turned his head, closing his eyes, pressing his face into her slightly damp palm.

"Okay," she whispered.

They stood like this for a while, until she gently pulled her hand back, smoothing his hair, and said again, "Okay...."

His heart skipped a beat and his mouth was dry. Still, he managed to smile, and so did she; at least it was the closest to a smile that he had seen on her face since the morning she had received Varia's message. Then she squeezed his arm and said, "Come on. Let's go gather some firewood."

* ~ * ~ *

As always, the Amazon patrol appeared out of nowhere; or rather, the women who swooped down on the narrow forest path seemed to have been born of the trees themselves, as if the thick dark foliage had woven itself into four slender, muscular shapes.

After an uncomfortably long moment, a brown-haired, olive-skinned woman who looked vaguely familiar said, "Queen Gabrielle," bowing her head. The women lowered their spears.

Gabrielle had stayed ahead of her two companions ever since they had entered Amazon lands. For hours now, they had been riding through these woods, where even the day was dusky and the damp smell of mushrooms hung in the air; the path, overgrown and strewn with skeletal branches, was barely wide enough for a single rider.

"Xena," the woman said with a slight nod, then paused as her eyes lingered on Ares, and finally looked back to Gabrielle. "Greetings, Queen Gabrielle. We'll take you to Varia."

As they moved on at a slow trot, their escorts walking by their side, Gabrielle noticed that one of the Amazons, a curly-headed blonde, was dressed according to the custom of Cyane's tribe, in a long-sleeved, fringed tan shirt decorated with criss-cross strips of brown leather; yet another, a tawny woman with multicolored beads in her braids, didn't look like any Amazon she had seen before. Xena was evidently thinking the same thing, because she asked, "You're from the Northern tribes, aren't you? What are you doing this far south?"

"The tribes have united." The woman paused and added, "Under Varia's leadership."

Gabrielle was shocked and, somehow, stung by the news. Who would have thought Varia had it in her? And why had Varia never bothered to send her word of this? Or maybe it was her own fault, for neglecting the Amazons while drowning in the mess her life had become.

After a while the path widened and the trees become more sparse, letting in the pale sky and the fading sunlight, and then they rode out of the forest and onto the slope of a hill. The Amazon village lay below, its thatched huts surrounded by a vast encampment of tents, wisps of bluish smoke floating up from the bonfires.

As they rode downhill, Gabrielle wondered, wearily and fleetingly, if she might have been better off here.

She looked at Xena, whose calm appearance was belied by the tightness of her jaw, and felt a familiar pang at the thought of what Xena had to be going through. Unable to stop her gaze from drifting over to Ares, she noticed his fingers tapping on the hilt of his sword. In the next instant, she intercepted a glance -- unfriendly if slightly awed -- directed at him by the dark-haired woman who had greeted them. The woman had probably been around when Ares' army attacked the Amazons in his mad quest for ambrosia. Did Varia really, as Xena suspected, have something unpleasant in store for him? Well, it would be nothing he didn't deserve... at least Eve had genuinely repented, while Ares ... well, Ares was -- Ares.

Disconcertingly, the memory of that morning when he brought Sappho's scroll back to her surfaced again. She remembered the odd way he looked at her; not with sympathy, maybe, but at least with understanding. *Damn*. She didn't want his sympathy or understanding, or anything else that would make it harder to dislike him. That was probably why he had brought her the scroll in the first place, to worm his way into her sympathy like the manipulative bastard he'd always been. Not for the first time, she felt herself flushing at the thought that he had read the poem, had guessed what it meant to her. It was as if he'd seen her naked ... *No*. That was one place where she was *not* going.

They rode through the camp under the curious, somewhat nervous stares of hundreds of women, and then down the main street of the village until they reached the square. Varia, in a feathered ceremonial headdress that made her face look small and almost ratlike, stood waiting for them on a waist-high platform under a wooden painted statue of Artemis, with several other queens at her side. A cluster of young pines rose behind them, their narrow tops gilded by the sunset. The banners of the Amazon tribes, mounted on wooden poles over the platform, billowed gently in the breeze.

"Gabrielle." Varia inclined her head with a respectfully neutral air.

After a moment's hesitation, Gabrielle dismounted, with Xena and Ares following her example, and stepped up toward the platform.

"Varia."

"And Xena. Good to see you again."

"I wish I could say the same." Xena's voice had the cold sharpness of a blade. "I want to see my daughter."

"All in due time."

"Well, that due time better be sooner than later, because I'm not leaving here without her."

Gabrielle felt a dizzy rush of panic.

"Xena..." she whispered, gingerly reaching out to touch Xena's hand. "I know you want to save Eve, but these are our friends -- so let's keep it that way, all right?"

For a moment she wasn't sure Xena had even heard her. Then Xena nodded, never turning her head.

"Livia was banished from our lands under threat of death." Varia's voice rose, her mask of composure slipping momentarily.

"Eve," Gabrielle said. "Her name is Eve."

"Changing her name does not change her crimes."

"Queen Marga already passed judgment on those crimes," Xena retorted.

"And decreed that she would be executed if she ever returned to Amazon lands. She did ?- with a guard of Roman soldiers, no less."

Xena was about to say something else when one of the queens standing next to Varia, a swarthy woman with almond-shaped eyes and a wide flattened nose, spoke up. "This is an Amazon council, Xena. You have no prerogative to be heard here."

Gabrielle flinched. "Now, wait -- "

"We recognize *your* right to speak, Queen Gabrielle," said another queen, a statuesque redhead in a kilt.

"Xena is here with me. She has a right to defend her daughter before the council."

"Fine," Varia said. "We're ready for the trial. We'll start..." She glanced at the glowing orange disc floating low over the hills. "... as soon as the sun has set. That should

give you time to rest and get ready for your defense. Thanais" -- she nodded toward the brown-haired Amazon who had met them in the woods -- "will show you to your quarters."

"I'll see my daughter first."

"You'll see her at the trial. You do not give the orders here, Xena."

"I'll see her *now*." Xena's hand went to the chakram on her belt. There were scattered gasps, and some of the Amazons standing by the platform reached for their swords or spears. Gabrielle felt as if she were watching the world crumble around her, helpless to do anything about it.

"Xena..." Imploringly, she grabbed Xena's elbow. "Xena, please, *please* -- "

Xena took a deep breath and looked down, her fists clenched. Finally, she said, "All right."

Some of the tension lifted tangibly from the crowd, as if it had breathed a huge, inaudible sigh of relief.

"Come with me," Thanais said imperturbably.

Gabrielle was about to turn and follow her when Varia said, "Take him."

By the time Gabrielle realized that she was talking to the Amazons and referring to Ares, the former God of War was already staring incredulously at several swords and spears pointed at his chest.

"You've got to be kidding," he said.

Xena looked at Varia, her eyes narrowing.

"What is this?" Her voice seethed with barely controlled rage.

"Ares will be tried along with Livia for his crimes against the Amazons."

"You *said* you wanted me to bring him as a witness."

"Oh, he'll be a witness all right."

"Varia..." Xena paused. "This isn't right."

"Our sisters were slaughtered and enslaved; that wasn't right, either." Varia's voice shook on the word "sisters" but then picked up, ringing clear through the square, and Gabrielle heard an approving murmur from the Amazons. "With your talents, Xena, I'm sure you can defend two murderers as well as one."

Ares, whose hand was frozen less than a finger's length away from the hilt of his sword, looked questioningly at Xena. She stood still and straight, her own hands rigid, as if it took a supreme effort to keep them off her weapons. Gabrielle wanted to say

something, do something, but it seemed as if the least noise or movement could make the dense, taut silence explode into disaster. Then, with a sigh, Xena shook her head almost imperceptibly. Ares' lips twitched slightly, and he lowered his hand.

Varia looked on, a little smugness creeping into her smile. Her quiet voice broke the silence.

"Take him away."

* ~ * ~ *

Ares was barely able to suppress a shudder as the manacles snapped shut on his wrists. There was something about that sound, about the cold heavy feel of the iron bracelets, that made one aware of one's mortality in a special and very nasty way.

He had to trust Xena, he told himself as he was marched off the square, two women at his sides, three more behind. Humiliating as it was to be taken like this without a fight -- and especially to let the bitches take his sword, dagger and gauntlets ?- it was the smart thing to do under the circumstances. Xena would have a plan; everything would be all right.

The Amazon on his left clamped her hand on his arm, startling him out of his reflections; without thinking, Ares turned his head and snapped, "Don't touch me," and the woman shrank back, a flicker of apprehension in her eyes. That made him feel a little better.

They walked up to a cabin on the edge of the village, obviously meant to serve as the jail ?- with not one but two massive grimy bolts on the door and a barred window; the bars must have been intended mainly to make a point, since the window was so tiny that only a very unusual prisoner, say a child or a midget, could have possibly used it to escape. The two guards who sat by the door, their spears rested against the wall, looked up from some board game they were playing and eyed him with a rather disappointing indifference. Then, one of them lifted an eyebrow.

"What, we put him in with *her*?"

"It's only 'til sundown," said one of the women escorting Ares. "They both go on trial tonight."

The guard nodded, rose to her feet and pushed the bolts aside with a loud grating sound. As he stepped toward the door, Ares realized, with a queasy anxiety, that the "her" they were talking about was Eve. He stopped abruptly.

"What, you need a special invitation?" the guard jeered. The other women laughed, though somewhat uneasily. The thought of being shoved or hauled inside was unpleasant enough to propel him through the door. It shut behind him with a hard clang.

The smell of food that hit Ares' nostrils reminded him that it had been hours since his last meal. A spasm of hunger clutched at his stomach, even though the smell wasn't particularly appetizing and the surroundings even less so; the stale air inside carried,

among other odors, the unmistakable whiff of a latrine. The room was bare except for a pallet by one of the walls, and a jug and a couple of dishes next to it.

Then he saw the girl standing by the window, wearing an olive-green top and a long skirt. She seemed thinner than the last time he had seen her, her hair unkempt; when she turned to him, her face looked almost ashen in the shadows.

Looking away would be too cowardly.

He expected to see some shock in her expression, but her eyes remained dull.

"What are you doing here?"

He wasn't sure why her question made him feel such a violent surge of anger; or maybe it was the listless, barely audible voice in which it was asked.

"You know, I could ask you the same question."

She sighed and moved a strand of hair away from her face, then walked to the pallet and sat down, hugging her knees.

"Is Mother here?"

"Yeah," he said, leaning against the wall.

Eve sighed again. "So they're putting us both on trial. Tonight."

"Were you crazy, coming here?"

"The Emperor Claudius was looking for someone to send as a peace envoy to the Amazons," she said in a flat voice, as if reciting a history lesson. "Caligula had threatened them. Claudius wanted them to know that Rome no longer means them any harm."

"And Claudius couldn't find an envoy who hadn't been banned from Amazon lands under pain of death?"

"I volunteered."

He rolled his eyes. "What part of 'come back here and you're dead meat' don't you understand?"

"I'm prepared to die for my crimes."

"Oh. Well, excuse me if *I'm* not."

Eve sat up, her features suddenly animated.

"You could make peace with it," she said. "If you accepted the God of Love into your heart ..."

Surely she wasn't going to start with this crap? That was all he needed ?- to have his ex-protégée ... or whatever ... preaching at him. He got a vivid image of Livia in her dazzling armor and blood-red cloak, smiling as she yanked her sword out of some fool unlucky enough to be in its way. At least she wasn't a sniveling twit back then.

"Hey. Did they whack you on the head a little too hard when they got you? This is me, Ares -- does 'God of War' ring any bells? I don't think you want to talk to *me* about your God."

"His love has room for everyone. Even you."

He had a strong desire to grab those bony shoulders and shake her until her teeth rattled and her brain got unscrambled.

"You know, maybe you got a point there." He continued as she gave him a wary look, "You keep carrying on like this, and I probably *won't* mind dying too much. Hell, I may beg them to put me out of my misery."

Her shoulders sagging, she turned away with another dramatic sigh. Maybe now she'd shut up and let him get a little rest before this damn trial.

There was no place to sit except on the wooden floor; it was slightly damp and smelled of mold, just like the pockmarked wall he leaned back against, but it would have to do. He stared into the ceiling, trying not to think about Eve, or about food -- or about the trial.

"You can sit here."

Her voice gave him a start.

"Huh?"

"You can have the pallet. You can sit here. Or lie down if you want."

Ares considered the offer, weighing the disadvantage of sitting on the cold hard floor against the disadvantage of sitting in close proximity to Eve. Finally, he got up, walked over to her and sat down. His eyes fell on the dishes next to the pallet, a plate with a large piece of flat bread and a bowl half-full of some kind of stew.

"I'm not going to finish it," she said. "You can have that too if you're hungry."

She was probably just trying to impress him with her newfound spirit of love and forgiveness -- besides, it galled him to know that she had noticed him looking hungrily at her leftovers -- but dammit, it was tempting.

A few moments later he had finished the bread and was cleaning up the last of the stew; actually, slop was a more fitting word, but at least it quelled the pangs in his stomach. The chain of his manacles left him some freedom of movement but, holding the bowl on his knees, he had to crouch over it so that he could lift the spoon up to his mouth. He looked at Eve, her slender profile sharp against the darkening window. It occurred to him that he should probably thank her.

"Are you sleeping with my mother?"

The question nearly made him choke. With some difficulty, he swallowed the lump of stew stuck in his throat and grabbed the jug to wash it down; the abrupt movement caused the chain on his hands to swipe the now-empty clay bowl and sent it crashing to the floor. Eve didn't even flinch at the sound.

"What the hell sort of question is that?" he rasped.

Eve turned to him, and he noticed a strange glitter in her eye, as if a bit of Livia had come back for a moment.

"I think it's a pretty simple one. Are you -- "

"Yeah, yeah, I got you. I just don't see why I should be discussing it with you."

"So you are," she said quietly.

He took another gulp of water.

"It doesn't matter, you know," she said. "Gabrielle will always come first for her."

Damn -- they didn't call her the Bitch of Rome for nothing. Glancing at Eve again, Ares expected to see gloating over a well-aimed hit, but she wasn't even smiling; she stared into the distance, her face full of sadness and longing, though he wasn't sure for what. There was no use trying to figure her out. The girl was nuts.

She shivered and looked at him.

"Did you ever love me?"

Oh shit -- not that too. Love? What love? There had never been any question of love between them, just business. Well, business and pleasure. He'd been a little fond of her in a way, and proud of her as a star pupil -- but --

"You know what?" he said. "I think I'd rather talk about your God."

She snorted. "Cut the crap, Ares." After a long pause, she shook her head. "I know the answer, anyway. I've always come second." She hugged her knees again, burying her face in her stained, tattered skirt.

Then it hit him. It wasn't about him at all, it was about Xena; everything came back to Xena in the end.

"Yeah," he muttered. "I know the feeling."

Ares wasn't sure that she heard him, or that he wanted her to. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

After a while he said, "She'll get us out."

Eve remained silent, and when he opened his eyes she still sat huddled in the same position, her face hidden.

* ~ * ~ *

Gabrielle had wondered why Varia had decided to hold the trial at night -- maybe because the proceedings had a more solemn air, almost like a sacred ceremony, in the wavering torchlight that flooded the main square. She sat on the platform with Varia and the three other queens: Gwyn-Teir, the redhead; Cyane, her namesake's successor, with a kind round face and silvery-blond tresses; and Kanae, the dark-skinned, flat-nosed woman who had earlier admonished Xena about speaking at an Amazon council.

"... and more than two hundred were taken as slaves," said Varia, who was taking her time reciting the catalogue of Livia's misdeeds. Eve, who had been brought from the jail with Ares, stood below; the shackles on her thin wrists made her look fragile and almost waifish -- too frail to bear the weight of these chains, the weight of these crimes. It was hard to tell from the expression on her haggard face whether she was determined to bear it bravely, or was simply resigned to her fate. Ares didn't seem to be paying much attention to Varia's indictment; his eyes kept wandering about the square and then back to Xena as he mechanically fingered his manacles and poked at the dusty ground with the tip of his boot. Xena stood next to Ares and Eve -- it was unsettling to be separated from her like this, to be above her and not by her side at such a time -- but she wasn't looking at either of them, or at Varia. Her eyes were hooded, her arms folded on her chest. The torchlight gave her hair and her leathers an eerie orange sheen and made the chakram at her belt gleam scarlet.

Gabrielle lowered her head and sighed; she couldn't forget Xena's quietly stricken look when she first saw Eve. At least, she reflected with relief, Varia hadn't mentioned anything about captured Amazons being thrown overboard during the transport, so she probably didn't know about it. Or maybe Ares had made it up. Maybe he was trying to make himself look better, to downplay his role in goading Livia to her evil deeds by inventing a crime she had supposedly committed without his instigation. That would be just like Ares.

"There is not one woman in my tribe," Varia went on, "who has not lost several loved ones in Livia's raid. We've lost mothers, daughters, friends, *sisters*." She paused, bracing herself. "My own sister, Tura, was cut down by Livia's hand before my eyes..."

So it wasn't just the good of the nation for Varia, it was personal. With a sinking feeling, Gabrielle looked at Eve and saw a grimace of pain cross her face. A gasp ran through the assembled crowd.

"This woman admitted her crimes before, when she was banished by the late Queen Marga. She has admitted them again, when she returned to Amazon lands in violation of Marga's edict. She has confessed that she wanted to capture Amazons to bring to Rome as gladiators, and profit from their blood." Varia looked out at the hushed crowd and, after a moment, resumed. "But Livia didn't act alone. She had the help of her patron god --" her voice rose triumphantly -- "Ares, God of War."

Varia paused again, somewhat longer than required for dramatic effect, and addressed Ares -- who, at the moment, looked tired, disheveled and very un-godlike, with dark circles under his eyes from the swaying shadows.

"Ares. Did you order Livia's raids on the Amazons?"

Ares shrugged. "I gave her the idea."

"You *gave* her the *idea*," Varia repeated loudly enough for the crowd to hear, causing murmurs to ripple through the square. "And what did Livia say? Did she object? Was she reluctant?"

A corner of Ares' mouth hitched up, as if he were about to sneer ("Livia? Reluctant? Yeah, right"). Gabrielle tensed. It occurred to her that Ares had a chance to save his own hide by making Eve out to be as blameworthy as possible -- and that Xena's best chance to save Eve was to make Ares look guilty. Poor Xena, having to choose between her daughter and... It would have been so much easier if Ares had been a god, beyond the reach of the Amazons' vengeance; she and Xena could have easily argued that it was all his fault. *And lied to bail out Eve?*

Eve's voice cut into her jumbled thoughts. "No. I did not object."

Focusing on the trial once again, Gabrielle saw Xena look almost helplessly back and forth from Eve to Ares.

"She didn't," Ares said quietly.

"You were once a patron god of the Amazons. Our foremothers sacrificed to you; some of our greatest queens were your own daughters. Yet you betrayed us. You -- you sent your *whore* to slaughter and enslave our people!"

"Now, wait just a minute -- " Xena growled.

"Mother -- don't." There was a sudden firmness in Eve's voice. "She didn't say anything I don't deserve."

"Why did you do it?" That was Varia, still addressing Ares. Gabrielle caught herself hoping he wouldn't use the word "fun."

"The Amazons are a nation of warriors. They hadn't had a real war in a long time. I thought it would do them some good."

There was a distinctly hostile rumble in the crowd.

"So when you had us attacked by an army that outnumbered us three to one, you were doing us a *favor*." Varia's voice was too shrill to be sarcastic.

Xena shot Ares a warning look.

"I believed that -- the Amazons were strong enough to take on Livia."

"*Really.*" Varia glared at him. "But that's not all. A year ago, when you were already mortal, you came here with an army here to attack us -- to destroy our forests, to kill our sisters, for no reason at all. Was that for our own good as well?"

Ares stared back silently, with glum defiance. Gabrielle wasn't sure what would feel worse for him, to be held guilty of those acts or to admit that he, a former god, had been driven to babbling insanity.

"You know very well that Ares wasn't himself then," Xena said. "The Furies had driven him mad."

"So you say." Varia raised her voice again. "Amazons! Both Livia and Ares admit their crimes against our people; all that remains is to determine the proper punishment. But first, the council must vote on their guilt -- even if it isn't really in doubt."

She stepped back, took her seat in the center of the semicircle of queens, and looked at the other members of the council.

"How do you vote?"

Once again, Gabrielle had the dizzying sensation of the world coming apart around her and the broken pieces floating away. Was there any way that she could, in good conscience, vote not guilty?

"Before we start," Cyane said quietly, "Queen Gabrielle, you know what the rules are, don't you?"

For a moment her tongue refused to move. "The -- the rules?"

"If the accused is found guilty, only those council members who voted guilty are allowed to vote on the penalty."

"No," Gabrielle whispered. "No, I didn't know."

Now, she had no choice. That felt better.

"How do you vote?" Varia repeated.

"Guilty," said Gwyn-Teir.

She was echoed by Kanae and Cyane, and then all eyes turned to Gabrielle. She felt Xena's stare as well, and realized that Xena wouldn't know -- at least not immediately -- why she was voting this way. She couldn't resist turning to look at Xena, and then, to her horror, found herself unable to tear her eyes away; and so she and Xena were still staring at each other when she forced herself to say, "Guilty."

Xena's eyes widened, first in anger and then in hurt.

"Guilty." Varia was the last to speak. She rose again and walked toward the edge of

the platform. "The judgment is made. By the unanimous vote of the council, Ares and Livia are both guilty as charged."

Xena blinked, as if coming out of a daze, and turned away. Gabrielle was finally able to shift her eyes to Eve, who looked like she wanted only for all this to be over, and to Ares, who was darting worried glances at Xena.

"Xena, you speak in their defense," Varia said. "Can you show us a reason why these two should not be put to death for their crimes?"

"Yes." Xena paused, her hands clasped together. "Yes, I can. Varia -- queens of the Amazon Nation -- you know that my daughter is not who she was when she committed those crimes against you. You want to put Livia to death? Livia is already dead. This is Eve. For the past year, she has dedicated her life to bringing the message of love and peace to people -- she has risked her life to do it. She came here, knowing that she was risking her life, to bring *you* a message of peace. And Ares... Varia, it was Ares, God of War who sent Livia to attack you. *That* Ares is just as dead as Livia." Ares flinched and stared down; his manacles jangled slightly as he clenched his fists. "*This* Ares is -- just a man. Killing them will be revenge, not justice."

Varia laughed harshly. "So that's your defense? They're both dead already? I wish *our* dead were so dead."

"Kill them!" cried out a voice somewhere in the square, and another low rumble rolled over the crowd. With a satisfied smile, Varia waited for it to die down, and then resumed.

"Xena, you can tell us all you want that they're what they were. They still haven't paid for what they did to our people."

"You think so? Varia, every day, my daughter lives with the knowledge of what she did. That's a high price to pay."

"And Ares? Don't tell me *he's* consumed with remorse."

Xena lowered her eyes. "Ares will live the rest of his life as a mortal. Think about it, Varia. Imagine what it's like after you've been a god -- to feel pain and hunger and sickness ..." Ares shifted his feet and twitched his shoulder, as if a part of him wanted to stop her. "... to have to struggle for survival from day to day..."

"It's how we all live," said Gwyn-Teir.

"So he lost his powers," Varia said. "That doesn't atone for anything he's done."

After a brief silence, Xena said, with an obvious effort, "Ares didn't just lose his powers. He gave them up to -- do a good deed."

The look on Ares' face was one of near-panic, and Gabrielle wondered if he would rather die than have the story of how he became mortal told before an audience.

"What good deed?"

Xena met Ares' frantic, almost pleading stare and turned to Varia again. She sighed.

"He -- he did it to right a wrong he had done. I can't tell you more than that."

Gabrielle saw the queens exchange skeptical glances and realized that she had to speak up.

"It's true," she said. "Xena's telling you the truth."

"Even so," Varia said, "it wasn't to right any wrongs he had done to the Amazons. So maybe he's done something good, and so has Livia, or whatever she calls herself these days. That doesn't bring back any of the people we lost."

"Killing them won't bring back your dead, either," Xena said.

"No, it won't -- but it's just retribution for their deaths. To hear you tell it, Xena, letting these two live is punishment enough. If that were true, would you be trying so hard to keep them alive?"

Xena took a deep breath and looked away, the rigidity of her features softening into a quiet anguish.

"Varia," she said, turning back to the queen, "let me ask you one thing. Is there a single way in which killing Ares and Eve will benefit the Amazon nation?"

"Yes, there is." Varia's voice rang with triumph, as if she'd been waiting for this question all along. "If we punish them to the full extent of our law, it will send a message to anyone else who would lift a sword against the Amazons: harm our own -- and this is how you'll be dealt with." As a new wave of murmurings surged in the square, she went on, "For generations now, we've been a nation in decline, no longer feared, no longer respected. But that will change -- once the entire known world learns that the Amazons brought down the Bitch of Rome and the God of War!"

The rumble exploded into a deafening roar. Xena tried to say something, but even a town crier could not have made himself heard over this noise.

When some semblance of quiet was restored, Varia said, "We'll vote on the sentence."

Gabrielle looked on, feeling as if she were trapped in a nightmare, and the shimmering of the torches was a thick fog that wouldn't let her move. She closed her eyes -- and then, in a burst of light, saw something that should have been in front of her all along.

"Wait," she said, her voice unexpectedly strong.

When she opened her eyes, the four queens were staring at her.

"Well?" Varia said.

"There's something all of you need to know. We have been judging Eve by the laws that apply to outsiders who commit crimes against Amazons -- isn't that right?"

"Of course," said Cyane. "How else should we judge her?"

"As an Amazon," Gabrielle said. "Because she is one."

This was followed by the predictable splash of gasps and cries, and the ripple of whispers as the astonishing news was passed along to those in the back of the crowd. Xena's eyes flashed with hope, while Eve's look of passive acceptance gave way to one of utter horror.

Varia, her face tight, was the first to speak. "What are you talking about?"

"Twenty-six years ago -- when Eve was just a baby -- Xena and I stayed with the Northern Amazons for a while," Gabrielle said. "Cyane, it was during your mother's rule."

"Yes, my mother told me."

"While we were there, Eve was given an Amazon baptism, according to the rites of your tribe. Not only that, but I gave her my own right of caste."

"So now she's an Amazon *princess*?" Varia jeered. "Do you have any evidence to support this story?"

Gabrielle felt the blood rush to her face. "Are you saying that I'm lying?"

Kanae shook her head. "Queen Gabrielle, I'm sorry if we can't take your word for it -- but we know that you want to save your friend's daughter. Is there anyone other than you and Xena who can confirm this?"

"I can."

Everyone turned toward the speaker, a stocky woman in the colors of Cyane's tribe who stood in the front row of the crowd.

"I was there," the woman said. "I was just a kid myself then, ten years old. But I remember."

After the noise had died down, Varia said angrily, "So what? What does it change? If anything, it makes her crimes *worse* -- the Amazons she butchered were her own people!"

Eve swayed and would have fallen if Xena hadn't rushed to her side. She leaned on her mother's shoulder and sobbed quietly while Xena stroked her matted hair.

"But the law is different, Varia," Gwyn-Teir said hesitantly. "Amazons have killed other Amazons before. Our law says that the guilty one must be given a chance to make restitution to the tribe -- and only if she refuses can she be punished with death or banishment."

"Restitution? What restitution? She and her army killed hundreds!"

"I know a way." Xena looked up, her hand still resting on Eve's head. "She could bring back the Amazons she enslaved. Eve..." She pulled away and gently lifted Eve's chin, so that her wet face shone softly in the torchlight. "How many Amazons did you sell to the gladiatorial colleges?"

Eve shook her head. "I'm -- I'm not sure" -- she sniffled -- "about two hundred?"

Xena turned to Varia again. "Most of them must still be alive; there aren't many gladiators in Rome who could beat fighters like that. If you let Eve live and claim her place among you, she could lead a mission to Rome -- to bring them back."

After a long pause filled with the hissing of torches and the hum of the crowd, Gwyn-Teir spoke up. "I would agree to that."

"So would I," said Cyane.

"I'm not sure there is forgiveness for what she did," Kanae said thoughtfully. "But if we can free our sisters..."

Varia threw her head back. "We can free our sisters ourselves!"

"Varia," Gabrielle said, "to go up against Rome would be suicide."

Varia gave her a look filled with raw hatred. "So you are all prepared to spare her life?"

The response from the other queens, and from the women who filled the square, was an uncomfortable silence that evidently meant assent.

"Very well then -- there is one more thing you should know. Something that I didn't want to mention unless I had to -- because it was -- too horrible." Before she said another word, Gabrielle knew, hopelessly, what was coming. "One of our sisters who was taken away in Livia's raid made her way back to us. Terpi! Come up here."

As the crowd parted, Gabrielle forced herself to look at Xena. Her face was rigidly impassive again, her mouth frozen in a straight line, her arm stiff around Eve's hunched shoulders. The woman who emerged from the throng, tall with red-tinted brown hair, gave them both a look of undisguised loathing as she passed by. Her right arm hung awkwardly at her side.

"Tell us what you know," Varia said as Terpi mounted the platform and turned to face the Amazons.

"Some of the Amazons Livia had captured," Terpi said, "were injured in the battle. I was one of them; a Roman spear had shattered my arm, just above the elbow. On the ship, when they were taking us to Rome, a physician came to examine the wounded, and to determine which of us would be unfit to fight again." She paused, lowering her head.

"Go on."

"Then, an officer and some soldiers came and took all those who'd been pronounced unfit -- about a dozen of us. They brought us up to the deck and then..."

"What did they do, Terpi?" Varia was clearly making an effort to speak gently, but the anger and impatience in her voice broke through.

"They ... " Terpi let out a hoarse sob. "They started throwing the women overboard!"

There was a hush, and then a long gasp from the crowd that turned into a groan.

"You saw this with your own eyes?" asked Gwyn-Teir.

"I saw it. I heard them scream as they hit the water -- still in chains -- "

"Yet you survived," Gwyn-Teir said doubtfully.

"I did." Terpi's gaze hardened into defiance. "I won't hold anything back. I'm alive because an officer who was there decided I was good enough to keep as his whore until the ship got back to Italy. 'Shame to let the sharks have such a nice piece of meat,'" she spat out. "Those were his words. Once we had landed, I managed to escape."

"Was Livia there?" Gwyn-Teir asked. "Do you know that she ordered this?"

Terpi shrugged. "I didn't see her on the deck. But one of the soldiers said, 'We've got orders.' Who else could have ordered it?"

Xena's face never moved, but her eyes sparkled with tears. Eve stood up straight, as if knowing that she was doomed had given her resolve.

Varia spoke up. "Amazon or no Amazon -- there is no forgiveness for this. This wasn't killing in battle; it was brutal cold-blooded murder. The only proper penalty is death."

The other queens nodded.

"Are we ready to vote?" Varia asked.

"Hold on."

At the sound of Ares' voice, Gabrielle looked up with a start.

"She didn't give those orders," Ares said. "I did."

The dreamlike fog thickened around Gabrielle again, and it was through this fog that she heard the cries of the Amazons -- and saw the stunned expression on Xena's face and Eve's look of dismayed confusion, and the hint of a strange smile on Ares' lips as he looked at Xena -- and watched Terpi come down from the platform and spit in Ares' face before disappearing back into the crowd -- and listened as five voices, one of them her own, voted to let Eve stay with the Amazons and lead a mission to Rome

to bring back her former captives. Even Varia went along, though her "Yes" had a distinctly sour note.

"As for Ares," Varia said. Xena, who had squeezed Eve in a tight hug, raised her head sharply. "There are two options. Death or banishment."

"Death," said Cyane.

"Death," said Gwyn-Teir.

"Death," said Kanae.

Xena's eyelids flickered at each repetition.

Gabrielle shook her head feebly and muttered, "I -- I abstain."

Varia glanced at her scornfully.

"Death," she said, and then took a step toward the edge of the platform. "Ares, former God of War. You have been tried and sentenced to death for your crimes against the Amazons..."

"Varia." Gabrielle found her voice again. "He -- he confessed of his own free will -- doesn't that deserve some mercy?"

Varia glared at her with exasperation.

"Mercy? All right." She turned back to Ares. "Your death will be quick and painless and ?- honorable. Tomorrow at noon, you die by beheading."

Ares shook his head, as if he too were trying to wake up from some foggy nightmare.

"Take him back to the jail."

As two Amazons led Ares away, the silence was so complete that every step they made and every clink of his chains seemed to echo through the square. He turned back once to look at Xena.

Varia spoke again. "This is over."

"Not yet," Xena said. "I know Amazon law, Varia. A challenger is allowed to fight you for his life."

The crowd stirred again.

"So who's going to challenge me?" Varia asked.

Wearily, Gabrielle rose; she knew exactly what Xena had in mind, and she really had no choice but to go along.

"I am." She paused. "Xena will fight as my champion."

"No, she won't. She's not an Amazon."

Xena's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? The first time Gabrielle and I met your tribe, I fought Queen Melosa as Gabrielle's champion for the life of a centaur named Phantes -- "

"That was a long time ago," Varia said. "A lot has changed since then. Under the law, Gabrielle, you either fight yourself or ask another Amazon to be your champion." She snorted. "I doubt you'll find many volunteers. Or else forget the whole thing."

Xena stood very still, obviously pondering her next move. Wind gusted through the square, flapping at the Amazon banners over the platform, making the flaming tongues of the torches lap at the night air.

Gabrielle looked at Xena. The fog had cleared, and now she knew what she had to do. She wasn't sure why, as yet, but the reasons would come to her later.

"Varia," she said. "I use my right to challenge."

CHAPTER 8

"He lied to save me."

It was the first time Eve had spoken since the trial.

Xena, who had been combing her daughter's hair, still slightly damp from her bath, paused and exchanged a quick glance with Gabrielle; then her hand moved again, drawing the wooden comb through Eve's brown tresses in long mechanical strokes. She had suspected as much; something told her that Ares wasn't lying that morning by the brook when she asked him if the things he had said about Eve were true. She didn't want to think about what it meant to her that he told the truth. *My daughter did this...*

Eve twisted the long wide sleeve of her robe and gave a short, almost shrieking laugh.

"He must have *really* wanted to impress you."

The words cut deep. How had it not occurred to her before that Eve could be ... well, jealous? She had been so quick to assume that whatever feelings Eve might have had for Ares had been *Livia's* feelings -- as gone, as dead as Livia herself. But it was still Eve who lived with the knowledge that she had been dropped without a second thought, for her own mother. Yet another reason this thing between her and Ares should never have happened. Only it was too late to think about that.

All she could say was a soft, pleading, "Eve..."

Then Eve turned her head up, her face suddenly earnest, and all of Xena's concern about her daughter's feelings was swept aside for something more immediate: Eve wasn't out of danger yet -- she was about to put herself right back into it.

"I have to tell the truth," she said.

"No." Throwing the comb aside, Xena came around to stand in front of Eve. "You are *not* doing this."

"Yes, I am." She began to rise from her chair, but Xena grabbed her shoulders, pushing her down.

"I said, *no*."

Eve's eyes flared, and at that moment Xena could see her own fire in those eyes. Her fire, her guilt... what a strange legacy to pass on to her daughter.

"You forget, Mother -- it's my life. It's my death. It's my choice."

"No, *you* forget." *You forget that I already lost one child and I am not going to lose another, no matter what.* "I am your mother -- I would die before I'd let them touch a hair on your head."

"You can't protect me forever. I'm not a child."

"You're *my* child." *And I wasn't there to protect you when you were small.* "I'll protect you as long as I can."

"By letting -- someone else die for my crime."

"He's *not* going to die," Xena said vehemently. She got down on her knees and grabbed Eve's hands almost violently. "Eve, listen to me. Nothing you say or do is going to make any difference to Ares. You go in and confess right now, and Varia will have you both killed if she can. She wants to go down in history as the Amazon queen who executed Ares, God of War -- you think she'll stop just because you tell her that it wasn't Ares who ordered the Amazons thrown overboard? Even without that, they had enough to sentence him to death. You go in there and hand yourself over to Varia, and I'll ... Gabrielle and I will have to worry about saving two people instead of one."

"He's not going to die, Eve." Gabrielle, who had been busy making dinner -- either because Eve hadn't had a decent meal in weeks, or because she wanted to keep her mind off other things -- finally spoke up. "I'm going to fight Varia."

Xena's heart gave a guilty wobble: In her anxiety about Eve, she had almost forgotten about *this*. As if she hadn't pushed Gabrielle far enough...

"You don't have to do it," she said softly, trying her best to mean it.

"Yes, I do."

"Gabrielle -- I could find some other way. After everything that -- "

"Let's not talk about it anymore, okay?" Gabrielle got a tray of baked apples out of the oven and winced a bit, maybe because the tray was hot. "I'll do it."

Eve lowered her head and sighed, her resistance wilting. When she spoke again, it was in a quiet, hollow voice.

"So you're going to cover up a lie to save me."

Gabrielle put the tray down with a bang. Eve jerked her head up, and Xena threw a sharp look back at Gabrielle, who pursed her lips and turned away.

"Eve." This time, she held her daughter's hands gently, the way she wished she could have done years ago. "There is no justice in what they're doing."

"Why shouldn't I pay for my crimes?"

"How can you pay for anything if you're dead? You can do so much more good alive... If you lead that mission to Rome, and bring home the Amazons you enslaved -- then you'll pay them back." She squinted, fighting the tears. "Listen to me, Eve -- I've always believed that no matter what someone has done, they can still turn their life around -- and they deserve a chance if they do. Do you think I'm going to make an exception for my own daughter?" She reached up and cupped Eve's chin. "Trust me on this one, okay?"

Eve sighed again and nodded, blinking a little. Then her face crumpled and she started to cry, slumping into Xena's arms, dropping her head on her shoulder.

"I love you ... Mother," she mumbled through big childlike sobs.

"Shh ... I love you too." Xena stroked Eve's fluffed hair and kissed the top of her head. "I love you too. It's going to be all right."

* ~ * ~ *

After trying to find a comfortable way to lie down, Ares gave up and sat leaning against the wall, wrapping himself in the thin, worn-out blanket. In the near-darkness, which the checkered square of moonlight on the floor did little to dispel, he groped awkwardly for the jug of water and drank the little that was left. He was getting hungry again, but it was better to endure hunger and thirst than to ask the guards for anything. It was already bad enough to sit in this stinking jail, weaponless and chained, waiting for his girlfriend to rescue him. Of course, it was even worse to think that she might *not* rescue him and... He shuddered and clutched tighter at the blanket, acutely aware of every discomfort of his mortal flesh: the gnawing emptiness in his stomach, the stiffness in his legs, the hard lumps in the pallet under him, the stale and slightly acrid smell invading his nostrils, the chill of the night. His wrists were sore from the manacles, a heavy numbness seeping into his hands.

In his very long existence, he'd seen plenty of executions. He used to observe, with a detached disappointment, how some of the bravest warriors could falter when having to face the executioner's sword or rope, and disgrace themselves in their final

moments -- put up a futile struggle, or blubber like children, or lose control of their legs -- or, worse yet, piss on themselves or ... his mouth tightened in disgust. He reached for the jug again and realized that his hands were shaking.

Not like this -- please, not like this. Let me die in battle, with a sword in my hands -- with her at my side. She would cradle him in her lap, a single tear rolling down her cheek, and wipe the trickle of blood from his mouth and claim his last breath in a long, sweet kiss ... Then, as if in mockery, his mind filled with far less glorious images of death in battle. As if he, of all people, didn't know how ugly it could be... With his luck, he'd probably end up with his guts ripped out or half his head smashed to a pulp. Throwing off the blanket, he got up abruptly, the floorboards creaking fretfully under his boots, and stalked to the window to take a few gulps of fresh air, as if to reassure himself that he was still alive. The stars winked at him, as chilly and distant as his former fellow gods.

Gods... It occurred to him that he could try calling on Aphrodite. Maybe she'd hear him... But no, he hadn't sunk that low, not yet. Even having Blondie save him would be less humiliating.

To think that once, not so long ago, he had been safe from ever having to worry about such things -- and he'd given it up, because ... well, because the thought of a world without Xena in it was unbearable. What if he'd had time to think about the consequences, back then? Would he do it over again? Ares lifted a hand to wipe the sweat that had broken out on his forehead; he had forgotten about the manacles for the moment, and flinched back when the chain hit him in the face. He wandered back to the pallet and slumped down. He tried to think of the night he'd spent with her in Megara, the feel of her kisses, the firm yet pliant warmth of her body in his embrace, the way she held his face in her hands -- only to have his imagination conjure up a vision of Xena holding his severed head. When the painful dry convulsions in his throat subsided, he thought that maybe he should ask the guards for some water after all.

Dammit -- snap out of it. He wasn't going to die. Amazon law allowed a challenger to fight the queen for the life of the condemned; Xena could kick Varia's ass five times over before breakfast. The memory of Gascar's taunt stirred in his mind, making him wince: *Even if you survive, you'll never be anything more than a pathetic loser -- relying on Xena to bail you out...* So he'd have to depend on her to save him, yet again; but he'd be alive, and with her, and after a few good fights he'd be able to get the bad taste of his present helplessness out of his mouth.

Taking a few deep breaths, Ares lay down again and pulled the blanket over himself. He wasn't sure how much time had passed before he heard voices outside. *Her* voice.

He sat up. *Oh thank -- whoever.*

The bolts screeched heavily, and the door swung open with a groan, and there she was. She walked toward him, holding up a lantern; its light gave her dark hair a soft golden shine and made her eyes glitter. She squatted in front of him and said, "Hey..." -- and he knew he'd do it all over again.

Putting down the lantern and the basket she carried in her other hand, Xena reached

out to stroke his face, and he touched his lips to her wrist. Through half-veiled eyes, he watched her lean forward, and waited to lose himself in her kiss; but instead she pressed her cheek to his and rested like that for a moment, holding his hands, and only then tilted her head and kissed him.

When she pulled back, she said, her voice almost casual, "Here, I got you some bread and cheese and wine..."

She sat down next to him on the edge of the pallet. As he ate, Ares felt Xena's eyes on him and caught himself wondering if he looked completely pathetic -- his hands hampered by the chains, his hair messed up from all that tossing and turning, bits of straw from the pallet stuck to his vest and probably to his hair and beard, too. He glanced cautiously at Xena and saw the look on her face -- not pitying but thoughtful, almost puzzled.

"What?"

"Why did you do it?" she asked quietly.

He took another bite of bread, then sipped from the wineskin. "Do what?"

"Take the blame for Eve."

He eyed her curiously. "What makes you so sure I *didn't* give those orders?"

Xena looked away. "Eve told me." Her voice was so low he could barely hear her. "Besides -- it isn't -- wasn't your style."

Why did he do it ... he hadn't thought about it, really. It had just felt like the thing to do at the moment. Maybe it was as simple as seeing the excruciating pain in Xena's eyes, the same pain that had been there when she was looking at those crosses in the Elijan village, and wanting to make it go away. Maybe a part of him felt that he *was* responsible, having goaded Livia to go after the Amazons... *What in Tartarus was that -- Xena's guilt complex rubbing off on him?*

He leaned over to nuzzle her shoulder, and then looked up at her and grinned.

"Maybe I just wanted to surprise my girl."

She shook her head, smiling, her eyes shiny.

"Besides, it's not so bad," he said. "Hey, I'm kinda looking forward to watching you kick the crap out of Varia."

Her smile withered, and something in her face gave him a chill.

"What's wrong?"

"Not me," she said. "Gabrielle."

Ares stared in disbelief.

"Please tell me you're joking."

Xena slowly shook her head, keeping her eyes on his.

"Under Amazon law, only an Amazon can challenge a death sentence by fighting the queen. It wasn't this way before -- but it is now. Ares" -- she put her hand on his shoulder -- "I wanted to fight Varia as Gabrielle's champion, but they wouldn't let me. So Gabrielle will fight her instead."

His dismay must have registered fully in his features, because Xena gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Don't worry. You've seen Gabrielle fight. You know she's good."

Yes, she was -- but ... but somehow, hearing this news had felt like listening to his death sentence all over again. His and Xena's twin shadows swayed on the walls, huge and black, a pair of mocking ghosts; the dankness of the jail was settling into his bones. Ares grabbed the wineskin and raised it to his mouth, but his hands jerked violently, making his manacles clang and spilling the dark red liquid on his chest.

"Damn," he muttered hoarsely, trying to stop his teeth from chattering.

"It's okay." Xena turned toward him and put her hands on his arms. "You'll be okay."

"Xena -- dammit..." He lowered his head, trying to steady his breath. Something wet fell on his hand, and for one awful moment he thought he was crying ... no, it was a drop of sweat. "Xena..." He wanted to say something but the only words that came to mind sounded -- well, they sounded irritatingly like things most likely to be said by Gabrielle. *Xena -- there's so much I haven't told you yet... Xena -- this time with you has been the only time I've been really alive...*

He picked up the wineskin, and this time managed to keep his hand firm and take a few sips -- and then, turning to Xena again, to shape his mouth into something like a smile.

"Well -- we had a good run..."

"Don't." Her eyes were suddenly hard, her grip on his arm so tight that it hurt. "Don't you *dare* give up. I won't let *anyone* kill you. I promise. *Anyone.*"

The ferocity in Xena's voice snapped him out of his misery; not so much because he was entirely reassured about his chances for survival, but because he had picked up the part she had left unspoken: *You're mine*. Ares nodded, and watched her face melt back into tenderness.

"I promise." This time, her voice was soft. "You'll be okay."

She knelt behind him and hugged him, folding her arms around his neck. Ares leaned back, breathing her in, resting his head on her shoulder; as she ran her palm over his chest, wiping off the spilled wine, he was pierced by an acute, hot shudder of desire

that made him moan aloud. Awkwardly twisting his body around, he pressed his face to her neck -- *gods, how maddening not to be able to take her in his arms* -- and hungrily kissed the soft skin, then trailed his lips higher, shutting his eyes. She opened her lips to his kiss and held him close; but as his tongue moved inside her mouth and his hands fumbled at her thighs, he felt her tense slightly and knew that they were *not* going to make love, not in this filthy jail with the guards just outside -- not when it would feel like a last, hopeless good-bye.

He drew back, catching his breath. Xena's mouth creased as if she were on the verge of either tears or a smile; finally she smiled, running her fingertips across his cheek. Then she put her palms on his shoulders and pushed him down gently until he was lying on his back, and moved around so that his head would rest in her lap.

"Get some sleep," she whispered.

He closed his eyes again, and felt the touch of her lips on his eyelids, one then the other. He didn't think he could sleep, not with his body still aching for her, not with worry about his possible doom still burrowing about his mind; but eventually the warmth of her hand on his forehead began to soothe him, making his jumbled thoughts dissolve into an almost peaceful haze.

Xena watched as his face relaxed, his eyelashes fluttering softly, his breath growing calm. After a while she whispered, "Ares"; he sighed but didn't move. She sat there a bit longer, and then tasted something salty on her lips. With a start, she lifted a hand to her cheek and realized it was wet. She jerked her fingers away. *Get a grip; you just lashed out at him for giving up, and now you're going to sit here crying?* There was no time to mope; she had to think of a backup plan in case Gabrielle lost to Varia.

Very carefully, she lifted Ares' head up, laid him down on the pallet and pulled the blanket over him. Then she got up and tiptoed toward the door, leaving the lantern on the floor by the pallet.

The Amazon who let her out made to slam the door, but Xena's hand shot out to catch her wrist.

"Don't wake him."

The guard snorted and glared at her; Xena glared back, and the woman shrugged peevishly and closed the door as quietly as it could be closed. When Xena looked in through the small window, Ares was still asleep.

* ~ * ~ *

"Why are you doing this?"

Gabrielle flinched a little and bit her lip. She had expected this question when she went to see Varia, but she still had trouble answering it.

She fidgeted in her bearskin-covered chair, looking uneasily around the queen's hut. It was austere and sparsely furnished, the feathered Amazon masks on the wall and a few trophy weapons the only decorations, unless one counted a motley beaded curtain

that separated the private quarters. The sun was bright outside, a slanted beam of silvery-white mist leaving a bleached patch on the brown rug on the floor. Gabrielle could hear the usual sounds of morning in the village: the squealing children, the teenage girls chattering and laughing at the well, the splash of water and the clang of the bucket and chain; and, in the distance, the shouts and grunts of warriors doing their exercises.

Shifting her eyes back to Varia, Gabrielle wondered vaguely why she had come here. To try to talk Varia out of the fight and the execution, of course... as if there was any hope of that.

The prospect of the fight unnerved her, and not because she doubted her skills. She had been awake most of the night, dozing off fitfully a few times. After Eve had fallen asleep, Xena had gone off with a curt "I'll be back," taking a food basket and a wineskin with her. There was, of course, no need to ask where she was headed. Lying in the dark under too-heavy fur covers, watching as the shimmering embers in the hearth melted slowly into black, she was past caring what Xena did with Ares in that jail. There was too much else, too much... She had lied ... or at least helped cover up a lie ... to protect Eve. No, *lied* -- to her own people. On top of that, she was going to fight Varia, her queen, for the life of Xena's lover, for the life of the man who was ruining *her* life. It couldn't get much worse than that.

Then Xena came back, and it was worse. She undressed quietly and lay down on the pelts that served as their bedding, and as they lay next to each other, Xena on her back, Gabrielle on her side with her back to Xena, the silence between them thickened into something almost palpable, a hard thing pushing them apart. After a few moments Xena turned, and Gabrielle thought she could sense her hand move closer; a clammy panic enveloped her at the thought that Xena was going to wrap an arm around her, or even touch her, and she wouldn't be able to keep from flinching. Finally the furs rustled softly and Xena turned away, settling on her side.

They had barely spoken or even looked at each other since the trial -- except for a brief moment while Eve was taking her bath, when Gabrielle frantically began to explain why she had voted guilty, and Xena nodded, staring intensely at her boots.

And now she was sitting here with Varia, meeting her expectant, irritated stare.

She couldn't possibly explain why she had to fight for Ares. She couldn't tell the truth about Eve; she couldn't say that if Ares died for Xena's daughter, he would divide them in death more than he ever had alive; nor could she give voice to her fears about how far Xena would go to protect Ares. There was only one thing she *could* say, and she made herself say it.

"Varia, he saved my life." She paused, and knew she couldn't leave it at that. "He gave up his godhood to save -- Xena and me." It was best not to mention Eve.

Varia's eyes narrowed warily.

"Why?"

"What does it matter?" The passion in her own voice shocked her. "We owe him our

lives. I can't let him die."

"I suppose it was because he has a thing for Xena, wasn't it." Varia snorted. "And for that -- you're willing to overlook all his crimes against our people."

"Varia... It's -- it's not the same for gods. To them, mortal lives are -- like toys. You can't really judge him for that ... not now that he's mortal." She almost believed it, too.

"You and Xena -- you've got a good excuse for everything, don't you," Varia said. "Livia isn't what she was, Ares isn't what he was... I have to watch half of my tribe being slaughtered, and when I get a chance to avenge them -- you tell me that those who did it don't exist anymore. Oh, they're not dead -- just different." She shook her head with a bitter smirk. "I wish they'd changed *before* they did what they did to us."

"But don't you see ... vengeance changes nothing."

"It does for me. A warrior can't just let it rest, Gabrielle." She paused and looked away, her voice suddenly hushed. "I could have changed it all."

"What do you mean?"

"When -- " Varia's voice broke off and she was silent for a moment. "When Livia's troops overran my village, my sister and I were out scouting." She looked turned her head to face Gabrielle again, her face soft and hesitant. "When we came back, the battle was raging, and the Romans didn't see us. I was able to sneak up on Livia from behind, with a sword in my hand. I had the perfect chance." Her voice hardened. "I could have rid the world of Livia. But it was my first battle -- I had never killed before. And so I hesitated -- long enough for her to turn around. I'll never forget the look in her eyes."

Gabrielle shuddered inwardly. *Rid the world of Livia ... Eve ... Eve would have been dead.* She didn't want to ask herself how that made her feel.

"I thought she was going to kill me," Varia went on. "Just then, Tura screamed and rushed toward me, and Livia ... Livia ran her through." She was silent again, a faraway look in her eyes, her fingers going toward a beaded bracelet on her left wrist.

Her throat tightening, Gabrielle forced herself to keep her eyes on Varia's.

"And you?" she asked in a small voice.

"I was knocked out and left behind. Maybe she left me for dead; maybe she thought it would be worse for me to live with the memory. To live knowing that if I had killed Livia, I would still have my tribe *and* my sister." She rose from her chair, walked to the window and stood still for a moment, looking out. Then she turned, her face now cold and set in determination. "I can't undo the past. But we can redeem it with justice."

Gabrielle got up as well. There was no point in arguing with Varia about justice; it was, she realized, as much about Varia's own guilt as about Ares' or Eve's.

"Varia," she said gently, "it wasn't your fault."

Varia thrust out her chin. "You're right, it wasn't my fault. It was hers. His."

"Then stop blaming yourself..."

Gabrielle thought she saw the queen's dark eyes soften; but perhaps she had only imagined it, because in the same instant Varia raised a hand, cutting her off.

"No, *you* stop wasting my time. Why don't you go get ready for the fight." Her lips twisted in mockery. "See you at noon."

With a curt nod, she walked toward the curtain, signaling that the conversation was over.

"Varia!" Gabrielle called out.

Varia stopped and gave an exasperated sigh. "What now?"

"I wanted to say that I'm not fighting for your queenship ... just -- his life."

Varia gave her a pitying look, and then turned and disappeared behind the curtain.

A moment later Gabrielle stepped outside, raising her hand toward her face as the sunlight slashed at her eyes. Two coltish, still baby-faced girls who were walking away from the well, water spilling from their buckets and leaving a dark trail in the dust, stopped and gaped at her; one whispered something to the other, probably about her upcoming contest with Varia. Gabrielle's eyes slid over them blankly. She felt no disappointment -- she hadn't had much hope for a different outcome -- only an expected, dull sadness.

There was less than two hours left until noon.

Bracing herself for her next conversation, she headed toward the jail.

When they let her in, Ares sat up abruptly on the pallet by the wall, his face scrunched up as daylight flooded the cabin for a moment before the door closed again. After a night in jail, he looked nearly as shabby as his surroundings.

"Oh it's you," he said, his voice ragged. She realized that when the door opened, his first thought had been that they had come for him.

"Yeah." She walked toward him, twitching her nose at the smell of this place, and sat down on the floor. She wasn't quite sure how to start, and finally asked, "So -- how are you?"

He snorted. "Ask me again in a couple of hours."

Her cheeks burning at the stupidity of her own question, she looked down at the grimy floor and sighed. "Ares ... it was very brave and unselfish -- what you did."

"I can't tell you how much that means to me." Then, his habitual sarcastic expression turned to an almost sheepish one. "Look, I, uh -- " he squirmed a bit -- "I do appreciate what you're -- you know -- "

She smiled in spite of herself.

"What would it take for you to actually thank me?"

"Let me get back to you on that."

The next part was going to be difficult.

"Ares, if I win... I want to ask you to do something -- for me."

After a short pause, he asked warily, "What?"

"I want you to promise me that when it's over -- you'll go away."

Gabrielle forced herself to look at him. His look of open-mouthed shock darkened into a scowl.

"Go away," he repeated.

"Leave us alone." She paused and added, "I can't go on like this anymore," and then wanted to kick herself -- why did she have to explain herself to him at all? "Listen" -- she looked away again, a pleading note creeping into her voice -- "if you want to see her sometimes, I -- "

A strange sound jolted her, a clap accompanied by a metallic jangle. With a start, she turned her head and watched as Ares slowly applauded her, each clank of his chains making her flinch.

"Congratulations."

"What -- "

"You've learned to play hardball. You know," he added with a crooked grin, "there was a time when, if you had been my student, I would have been *very* proud."

She felt the blood rush to her face again, the heat spreading to her neck. "What are you talking about?"

"That little offer you just made me. I promise to clear out, you make sure my head stays attached to my shoulders."

"It's not *like* that! I already challenged Varia... Ares -- dammit -- I'm just *asking* you!"

"And what if I say no? You could always lose, right? Listen, kiddo, you don't have to tell *me* how the game is played."

Gabrielle was silent, her mind whirling. She hadn't meant it that way, really she

hadn't, couldn't have -- and yet she was taking advantage of his predicament -- there was no denying that.

"Anyway, the answer is no. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

The bastard -- when she was going against her own people to save him...

"Maybe I *could* always lose," she snapped. By the time she regretted those words, it was too late.

"I suppose you could. And then Xena could get a little upset and do quite a number on your beloved Amazons. Or you could stand by and watch them lop my head off, knowing that you let me die just because you wanted to have your girlfriend all to yourself ... oh, and to save little Evie, of course." The corner of his mouth twitched into a nasty little smirk. "Ready to live with that? Here's a free tip. If you're going to blackmail someone, you'd better be prepared to make good on your threat -- 'cause, see, I don't believe you are. And even if I did..." He shrugged, the look in his eyes suddenly grave and distant. "Forget it, Gabrielle. I'm not leaving."

Gabrielle felt an overpowering surge of disgust; whether at herself or at him, she wasn't sure. She scrambled to her feet.

"You know," she said in a near-whisper, "I didn't want it to be like this."

He gave her a bitter, mocking look. "You think *I* did?"

She walked briskly to the door and banged on it so the guards would let her out. As the door swung open with a loud angry noise, she glanced back at Ares and saw him grab the wineskin next to the pallet. Their eyes met again, and for one unmasked moment she saw how scared he was. Like a fool, she felt sorry for him.

She shouldn't have come here, she thought. It was as useless as talking to Varia.

Behind her, the door slammed shut. Gabrielle stood still for a moment, wincing a little at the bright blue sky, ignoring the curious stares of the guards. Ares was left behind that door, locked up and sentenced to death, yet she was the one feeling trapped.

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They marched him past the silent crowd, under the stares of hundreds of curious eyes. Back in the jail, the Amazons who had come to get him had freed him from the shackles, rather to his bewilderment, but only to yank off his vest -- it took Ares a few moments to realize, with a sickening chill, that this was done to expose his neck -- and tie his hands behind his back.

As they approached the platform, where Varia stood next to a wooden block with a long sword propped up against it, Ares saw Xena in the front of the crowd. Eve was there too; she shuddered when she saw him, and visibly fought the impulse to avoid his eyes. Xena's face was rigidly impassive, just as he had expected. He tried to smile at her but wasn't sure he managed anything other than a grimace. Then he saw Gabrielle, standing in a clear space in front of the platform next to a large yellow-and-

blue circular mat. She looked like someone about to get her ass kicked. Dammit, he should have trained the girl when he had a chance.

His eyes shifted back to the platform, to the grey block and the sword gleaming painfully in the sun. The solid, inescapable reality of these objects suddenly made Xena's impassioned words the night before -- *I won't let anyone kill you* -- sound like ... words. These could be the last things he'd ever see in this world: this crowd of women hungry for his blood; the tops of the huts behind them, their thatched grey roofs almost white in the sun; the stupid statue of a dead goddess with its skin painted a gaudy pink and its hair a bright coppery brown. It was enough to make his knees feel weak and his mouth go dry; when he tried to swallow, his throat clenched in a spasm. *Steady. Steady.* He managed not to stumble as they hustled him up the steps to the platform.

"On his knees," Varia commanded quietly. The two women at his sides pushed him down, and he couldn't help grunting with pain as his knees slammed into the wooden boards. He looked up at Xena and saw her jaw quiver.

"Amazons!" Varia's voice rang clear through the crowded square. "This man -- Ares, the former God of War -- has betrayed our trust and committed crimes against our nation. He is responsible for the slaughter of hundreds of our sisters. Today, justice will be ours." She paused. "To a strong Amazon Nation!"

To a strong Amazon nation. Gabrielle's lips moved soundlessly as a disjointed chorus echoed the pledge.

She dared not look at Ares, or at Xena. She now knew for certain that Xena had a backup plan in case she failed; she wasn't sure if this made her feel better or worse.

Earlier, when Gabrielle had returned to their hut after seeing Ares, they had talked about her conversation with Varia; and then Xena put her hands on her shoulders, looking at her with a familiar, agonizing, timid tenderness, and said, "Good luck, Gabrielle" --- and, even more quietly, "Thank you." Gabrielle's "I love you" froze in her throat; she nodded, trying her best to smile, and managed a strained "It's going to be okay." Then Xena's expression turned almost businesslike. "If you lose -- be prepared to get out *fast*. I'll have the horses ready." Gabrielle stared at her, horrified, and finally asked what she was going to do. "Get him out," Xena said briskly. "I promise no one's going to get hurt, okay?" So there *was* a plan; but when Gabrielle pressed Xena to tell her what it was, she hesitated, and just then Eve came in, and Xena shot Gabrielle a warning look and said again, "Good luck."

So this plan involved something of which Eve would disapprove... well, Eve, in her present state, would disapprove of anything that meant flouting Amazon law.

"As our law allows," Varia continued, an unmistakably sarcastic note entering her voice, "a challenger has come forward to defend this man -- one of our own queens, Gabrielle." As murmurs welled up in the crowd, she pointed to Gabrielle, who, at that moment, would rather have been in the deepest pit of hell. "If she wins, Ares receives my pardon and is free to go. If I win" -- she tapped on the hilt of the sword -- "I carry out the sentence."

She came down from the platform and walked to the circle where Gabrielle stood waiting. Then she turned toward the two Amazons standing next to Ares and added, "Blindfold him."

The words knocked the breath out of him -- and, at least for a moment, the hope. *That's it.* Now it really felt like the end. The thought flashed through his mind that he was going to miss his last chance to see a good fight. *Xena -- there she was -- her face tight as if she were about to cry.* His heart throbbed violently. *The sky -- the sky was blue ... and the pines were such a soft green ... maybe he was losing his mind.* A strip of black flashed before his eyes; with a snarl, he wrenched his head away, frantic to get one more glimpse of Xena, and bit down hard on his lip to keep from calling out to her. Then his head was gripped as if in a vise, and the blackness came down over his eyes.

"Let's go!" said Varia's disembodied voice.

There was a harsh "Yah!", and the sound of flesh crashing into flesh, and then a dull thud as somebody went down -- and cheers and shouts of "Varia!" from the crowd. This was not good.

Please, Gabrielle... please. Xena winced as she watched Gabrielle get up and swing at Varia, and watched Varia dodge the blow and kick Gabrielle in the midsection, making her stumble back and nearly fall. The Amazons cheered again -- "Bring it on, Varia!" "Get her!" Gabrielle's next kick connected, but her moves were haphazard and unsure; Varia's punch caught her full in the face, making blood gush from her nose. *Gabrielle...* Xena closed her eyes for a moment. *I'm sorry...* Then she looked at Ares and saw him crane his neck, arms straining against his bonds, as he obviously tried to figure out what was happening. She would make it up to him, somehow. She couldn't afford to think about what he was feeling right now, or about how much Gabrielle was hurting; she had to focus on what she had to do next. It had to work. If only she'd had a chance to tell Ares about it...

Next to her, Eve gasped as Gabrielle was knocked down again. Glancing at her daughter, Xena lightly squeezed her arm. If Gabrielle lost and they had to make their getaway, Eve would have to come too -- it wouldn't be safe for her to stay with the Amazons after this. Eve would hate it ... maybe would hate *her* for it. But there was no other way. She prayed to any god who could hear her that, if things looked bad, Eve wouldn't decide to save Ares by coming forward and making a full confession. All she'd do is get them both killed.

If only she didn't have to go through with this plan... *Come on, Gabrielle -- you can do it.*

Gabrielle got up and coughed, wiping the blood that dripped down her chin. Her face was burning, every muscle in her body hurt, and she was losing. Would Xena think that she might have lost on purpose? What if Ares -- if he survived -- told her about their conversation? No, he wouldn't do that ... wouldn't run to Xena to complain. But still ... Dammit -- she wished she knew what Xena was planning to do. *No one's going to get hurt...* Except that Ares could get hurt or killed in the escape ... or Eve ... or Xena ... and it would all be her fault because she let Varia beat her. One way or another, she would lose -- everything.

With a hoarse shout, she blocked Varia's kick. Something dark and ugly and powerful was rising inside her, swelling in her chest, pressing up against her throat; she remembered the prison yard at Mount Amaro, and Xena crawling on the ground, wounded and crippled -- remembered the moment when she picked up the sword, and threw away all the principles of non-violence she held dear, and went at the Roman soldiers, striking them down, hacking and stabbing at human flesh and bone -- for Xena.

Gabrielle spun and kicked, and saw Varia reel as the impact of the blow shot through her own body. She had fought by Xena's side so many times since that terrible day, shed so much blood ... had given up her own way for Xena's love ... had let the violence destroy her slowly from inside ... and for what? To have Xena carry on with Ares under her nose ... to be treated like a meek little fool who'd put up with anything for a few sweet words and tender kisses... like the meek little fool she *was*. Her hand shot out and she felt the hard slam of fist against face. *Damn it all*. Her fist flew out again, and Varia staggered and fell back, a look of shock on her bloodied face. More blood ... Varia got up and charged her, and she aimed another kick -- *damn Ares for following them here -- for forcing himself into their lives -- for making Xena fall in love with him... Damn herself for being such a fool. Damn Varia for getting in the way as her life was careening to hell like a chariot with the wheels coming off*. She wasn't feeling pain anymore; her body had become pure energy, the dark mass inside her driving her on as she hit and kicked and punched, again and again and again and --

"Gabrielle!"

Xena's cry pierced the air, and everything crashed to a halt. She stood still, breathing hard, suddenly aware that every breath was slicing into her throat, that her hands and feet were aching, and that there was blood, a lot of blood, splattered over her neck and chest and hands... She became aware, too, of the now-silent crowd watching her uneasily -- of Varia lying curled up on her side, dark strands of hair spilling on the yellow and blue of the mat that was now dotted with red -- of Xena, her face contorted in horror and pity.

"It's over," Xena said.

Varia stirred and slowly sat up; with a shaky hand, she pushed aside her hair, slick and shiny with blood. There were gasps at the sight of her face, reddened with marks that would later turn purple and blue, one eye swollen almost shut, the mouth a shapeless red splotch, as if she were wearing a very bright, grotesquely smeared rouge.

Xena watched as Gabrielle took a couple of steps toward her, her feet moving stiffly as if of their own accord, and then stopped, her arms hanging at her sides, frowning a little as if trying to figure out what was happening. She looked so small and lost.

Oh, Gabrielle...

She rushed toward Gabrielle and pulled her away, hugging her tightly, stroking the hot sweaty skin of her back, resting Gabrielle's tousled blonde head on her chest. Then she drew back and ran her fingers over Gabrielle's face, wiping off smudges of blood and dust. Gabrielle looked up at her with an almost puzzled expression, and Xena found

herself blinking, eyes blurring with tears. She saw another face before her, the bright-eyed face of a funny village girl in a blue dress who said, gesturing rapidly in excitement, "You've got to take me with you... Xena, I'm not cut out for this village life -- I was born to do so much more." And there was another memory: the time they fought the Horde and Gabrielle insisted on giving water to the enemy wounded. *You understand hatred but you've never given in to it*, Xena had told her then. Maybe that was the moment she had truly fallen in love with Gabrielle... And now, to see her like this -- to see the girl whose light she had wanted so desperately to preserve pummel another human being in frenzied rage ... that was bad enough -- but to know that she had done this to a fellow Amazon -- while fighting for Ares...

Ares.

Oh no...

He was still on his knees -- tied up -- blindfolded -- probably not even knowing who had won --

Her eyes darted over to him. She saw the tension in his body, his chest shaken by hard shallow breaths, his head tilted as if he were trying to pick out, in the cacophony of hushed voices, something that would tell him what was going on.

Gabrielle caught her gaze and sighed.

"I should go and -- talk to Varia," she said, nodding toward the queen as Cyane and Gwyn-Teir helped her to her feet. "I'm all right."

"Gabrielle -- "

"Go on. I'm all right."

Ares strained to listen. He thought he had heard Gabrielle's voice, but he wasn't sure. For a moment, Xena's scream had made him think that Varia had killed the girl, or at least messed her up pretty badly, and the hollow fear he'd felt had turned to a surge of choking terror. The cheering for Varia had stopped sometime before that, but it was hard to tell what that meant; all he could do was listen to the blows -- which sounded, at that point, more like a beating than a fight -- and the grunts and raspy cries. *That damn blindfold...* He tried to shift a little; his knees hurt and his arms were numb, the rope cutting into his wrists, but at least the pain was a tangible reminder that he was still alive. The fight was clearly over and Varia hadn't stepped up to declare victory? -- that was a good sign. Where in Tartarus was Xena?

There were steps coming up the platform, getting closer. It sounded like -- *Xena -- please let that be you please please --*

Something touched his face -- *her hand -- yes, that was her hand all right...* It felt like his heart was trying to smash through his ribcage. Her fingers tugged at the blindfold, and as it came off the sun nearly blinded him but he made an effort to keep his eyes open. She was kneeling before him, his love, a little misty-eyed and beautiful, beautiful --

"It's over," she said.

He winced, still getting used to the daylight, gasping for breath. "Gabrielle won?"

Her "Yes" was strangely grim, but he wasn't about to puzzle over that. All strength seemed to have drained instantly from his limbs, and he slumped against Xena, dropping his head on her shoulder, shuddering. She drew her arms around him and pressed her lips to his neck.

"You're okay -- " There was a catch in her voice. "You're okay."

Ares' eyes tingled treacherously as she reached down to cut the rope. His arms free at last, he clutched her in an almost convulsive embrace, closing his eyes, unable to suppress a groan. She held him, and her hair was warm on his face, and her lips and her breath grazed his neck again, and there was nothing else, no Amazons, no Gabrielle, no Eve, nothing.

Then she pulled back, gently extricating herself from his arms.

"Come on."

She rose and extended her hand, but he wanted to do it on his own; it took a concentrated effort, and he almost stumbled but managed to stand up. She put a hand on his arm and gave him an encouraging smile.

Coming down into the square, where the crowd was starting to thin out, they were confronted by Varia. Her face was -- *whoa! Blondie did that?* Then he noticed Gabrielle standing behind the queen, looking as wretched as if she was the one who'd been thrashed.

"Xena." Varia's swollen lips moved with obvious difficulty, her speech slurred. "Who gave you permission to release him?"

Xena frowned. "You said that if Gabrielle won, he was free to go."

"On *my* pardon." She paused to wipe the blood that had welled up again on her mouth. "I'm still the queen, Xena. Not you." For a moment she sounded less like the queen than like a fretful child. Then again, it was hard to be regal when one couldn't even speak clearly.

Xena's lip curled as if she were about to deliver a sharp retort; then she paused briefly, her eyes flickering toward Gabrielle, and said, "Sorry."

Varia attempted a glare that came out as a squint. "Get him out of here -- *now*. I don't want him on our lands. Or you. You have an hour to get out."

"All right." Xena was silent for a moment. "Varia... I'm sorry -- it didn't have to end this way..."

Varia's puffy lips trembled a little; when she spoke again, her voice was softer. "Xena -- I thought you were our friend."

"I *am* your friend. Varia -- what you were doing wasn't right -- you let your guilt and your hatred blind you -- maybe one day you'll understand..."

This time, the silence was long and awkward. Varia sniffled and dabbed at her nose, wincing in pain. Then she said, bitterly but not quite with the same conviction as before, "Save it for some other time."

"Yeah." Xena sighed. She glanced at Ares, then, somewhat hesitantly, back at Varia. "He's going to need his things back."

Varia nodded toward one of the Amazons who had brought Ares from the jail. "She'll bring them to your hut."

As the woman walked off, Xena said, "Come on, Gabrielle."

"Queen Gabrielle," said Cyane, who was standing nearby with the other queens. "Please don't leave yet. You should stay for Eve's initiation; after all, it's from you that she received her right of caste. It wouldn't be right not to have you at the ceremony."

Varia's one good eye glittered angrily -- Eve's initiation was obviously a sore point -- but she said nothing.

"What about Xena?" Gabrielle said. "She's Eve's -- "

"*No*," Varia snapped. "Xena is not an Amazon."

Gabrielle glanced uneasily at Xena, who lowered her eyes and murmured, "It's up to you."

To be away from Xena right now -- or to be with Xena, so soon after everything that had happened ... what would be worse? She wasn't sure. Eve ... Eve needed her; she could hold on to that.

"I'll stay," Gabrielle said, turning to the queens.

She watched as Varia walked away slowly and stiffly across the square, leaning on the arm of one of her guards. In a few moments the other queens dispersed as well. Two Amazons came over to roll up the mat.

Everyone was gone now, except for herself, Xena, Ares, and Eve -- who stood to the side, staring at the ground, hugging herself as if trying to ward off a chill -- and a few onlookers still lingering in front of the huts. The square seemed smaller somehow, without all the people. Birds chirped overhead and landed on the softly swaying furry branches of the pines behind the platform; somewhere, a dog barked, and a baby wailed, and Gabrielle wondered if all these ordinary sounds of life had been suspended during the past hour.

Xena enveloped her in a tight hug; closing her eyes, she felt Xena's cheek rest on the top of her head and, just for a instant, surrendered herself to the comfort of this embrace, as if there were nothing to divide them. In that moment, she wished she

hadn't agreed to stay. Then it all came back, and the cold weight in her chest hurt worse than the bruises on her body. She pulled away.

As they started to walk back to the hut, Ares' voice behind her made her stop. "Uh, Gabrielle -- "

She turned. He shifted his feet and cleared his throat, his eyes darting this way and that, and then looked up at her and muttered, "Thank you."

Gabrielle hadn't expected it to matter to her at all; yet, hearing him say it, she wasn't sure if she was more irritated or pleased.

"You're welcome."

He grinned and added, shaking his head, "Looks like I missed one hell of a show."

The wave of sickness Gabrielle had felt right after the fight rolled over her again. Dimly, she saw Xena give Ares an exasperated look and heard her say, "Let's go."

* ~ * ~ *

"I could put some ointment on that -- "

"I told you -- I'm all right." Gabrielle leaned back, away from the touch of Xena's fingers on her swollen lip. The tepid water in the tub rippled a little, tinged pink from the blood. "I'm done, anyway."

She got up, the water rolling down her body, a thin sheen on her bruised skin. *Bruised...* Her mouth rigid, Xena stepped back from the tub to pick up a sheet and hand it to Gabrielle. *Bruised inside and out, for her, and anything she could say or do to make it better would only make it worse.*

"Just tell me where to meet you," Gabrielle said, wrapping herself in the sheet.

"You know the lake where we camped the night before we got here? We'll wait for you there."

We. She shouldn't have said that.

Gabrielle got out of the tub, her movements slow and deliberate. "I think I'll stay an extra couple of days," she said. "Maybe I can help Eve -- ease into things." Xena met her stare and nodded silently, and then the deadness lifted from Gabrielle's eyes as she added softly, "Xena, I *will* come back."

When Xena held her close, Gabrielle's body was cool and still in her arms, her hands lingering stiffly in the air before resting on Xena's back. Finally, Xena mustered the courage to breathe "I love you," and waited forever, unbearably, until Gabrielle mumbled into her neck, "I love you too." They stood like that a while longer; then Gabrielle broke away and said, "You should go..."

"Yeah," she said. Everything was ready for their departure; Ares was outside with

Argo and Dragon. "I'll just say good-bye to Eve."

In the main room of the hut, Eve paced around, still hugging her shoulders, wearing the same olive-green outfit in which she had spent her captivity (only scrubbed clean and somewhat faded). After the initiation, it would be replaced by Amazon garb.

"Eve," Xena said softly.

Eve stopped and turned toward her, a distant, wistful look on her face.

"You're leaving?"

"Come sit with me a minute." She walked over to the cot and sat down, looking at Eve, trying to think of what to say. *Why couldn't she talk to her own daughter?* Eve came up and sat next to her.

"I hope you find a new life here," Xena said.

"Among people whose sisters and friends I butchered."

Xena turned and put her hands on Eve's slender arms.

"You know you're not that person anymore. Livia is gone."

Eve chuckled bitterly. "I'm not so sure about that."

"What do you mean?"

"It's still inside me, Mother," Eve said quietly, looking away, and then Xena understood. While watching Gabrielle fight Varia, some part of Eve had felt fascinated by the spectacle -- as much as the rest of her had felt repelled and horrified.

"Look at me, Eve," she said urgently. "It's not what's inside you that matters -- it's what you do with it. I know you're going to do good. You'll bring back those Amazons you captured. Someday the Amazons will forgive you. Maybe you should think about forgiving yourself, too."

Eve gave her a probing look. "Have you? Forgiven yourself, Mother?"

"Ah... good point." *If only all the unforgivable things had been in her past...*

"Thank you for -- everything." She paused. "I know I've been a disappointment to you..."

"A disappointment?" Xena felt raw despair, as if, no matter what she did, she couldn't claw through the wall that separated her from her daughter.

"You wanted me to have a different kind of life -- to find a way beyond killing. Instead, I've ended up..." -- she sighed -- "bearing a burden just like yours ... and adding to your own burden."

"Eve, Eve..." *How could she make her understand when she really didn't understand this herself?* "You will find a way. Please believe me -- you could never be a disappointment." She wrapped her arms around Eve and pulled her close. "I love you."

They sat together, Eve leaning on Xena's shoulder, Xena stroking Eve's hair, and they could have been any mother and child saying good-bye for a while.

"So where will you go now?"

Xena chuckled. "Wherever there's trouble, I suppose. That's how it usually works out."

Eve sat up straight and studied her hands. Then she said, "You care about him a lot ... don't you."

Xena cringed; it was probably inevitable that Eve was going to bring this up. She wondered what Eve actually knew about her and Ares, or about her and Gabrielle. The thought of Eve being aware of what her mother did in bed with anyone would have been rather alarming before; now, it was -- frightening.

"Eve..."

"It's all right." Eve looked up. "I'm completely over ... all that. It's just -- hard to understand."

"A lot of things are."

Eve smiled thinly. "I'm glad you're with people you love. You deserve to be happy."

It was strange, to hear her daughter say that. She wondered if she could ever bring herself to believe it.

"Eve -- sweetheart..." She bit her lip. The wall was still there, and she felt like she could beat her head against it and it still wouldn't do any good.

There was an abrupt knock on the door, and a voice that she recognized as Thanais' said, "Xena! Varia says you and Ares have to leave right now."

"Just a minute!" Xena called out and turned desperately to Eve, brushing her cheek with the back of her hand. "I love *you* -- you're my greatest gift ..."

Eve's fingers closed around her wrist.

This time the knock was louder and angrier. The beaded curtain rustled and Gabrielle came out of the back room, wearing a plain brown tunic she had put on while her skirt and top were drying off; in the half-dark, with her hair wet and slicked back, she looked waifish and pale and heartbreaking. Xena sighed, helplessly patting Eve's hand, and rose from the cot.

"I'm ready," she said.

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The initiation ceremony would start right after nightfall. It was already evening, and only a little daylight penetrated through the small windows into the ceremonial hut where the queens (except for Varia, who had retired to her private quarters) and a few Amazon elders were preparing for the ritual. The weapons laid out on the table, next to the bird and animal masks, the necklaces, and the jars of face paint, sparkled dimly in the quavering light of two small oil lamps.

Gabrielle had just finished listening to Cyane's explanation of her role in the ritual. Quite a few things had changed; thankfully, there would be no more howling at the moon -- she wasn't sure what Eve would have made of that.

"There is something else." Cyane looked almost embarrassed. "While Eve inherits your right of caste, we would like an agreement that she will lay no claim to the queenship. It's an unusual condition, but we hope you -- "

"Of course," she said quickly.

"And after the initiation, she will have to undergo a purification rite to be cleansed of her crimes against the Amazons."

Gabrielle nodded, her mouth suddenly dry. The purification rite ... She remembered, all too well, the time when she underwent it herself -- when the demon child she had protected killed Xena's son, and her bond with Xena was almost destroyed by lies and betrayals and anger.

"That covers everything, then," said Gwyn-Teir. "You should go and prepare Eve for the ceremony."

Poor Eve, Gabrielle thought as she rose from the bench. How confused she had to feel -- about to become part of a nation that had put her on trial for her life just the night before, that had viewed her, not unjustly, as a mortal enemy. Her mind took her back to the moment when she and Eve stood on the outskirts of the village watching Xena and Ares ride away, and when Eve said wistfully, "They look right together, don't they." She had looked at Eve in shock: the truth was that the same thought had hovered somewhere in the back of her own mind.

She wondered how long she should stay with Eve.

"Wait, Queen Gabrielle -- one more thing," Cyane said. "Since you will be initiating Eve into the tribe, you should be the one to mix the sacred ointment into the paint."

Gabrielle gave her a puzzled look. "Sacred ointment?"

"They didn't have that back in the old days," said a grey-haired woman named Meroe, an elder of Varia's tribe. "It was a gift we got from the goddess Artemis, some twenty-five summers ago, isn't that right?" She turned to another elder, from Cyane's tribe, for confirmation. "She gave it to three of the tribes."

Artemis? Strange... Artemis hadn't paid much attention to the Amazons, as far as she'd heard, in a very long time.

"What does it do?"

"It's meant to bring the blessing of the gods to the Amazons," said Cyane. "We use it in the most important rituals."

"The goddess said that as long as the ointment lasted, the Amazon nation would live and prosper," Meroe said reverently.

Gabrielle wanted to point out that Artemis had been dead for over a year, and that her gift had brought little luck to the Amazons when Livia attacked them -- but then decided that it was best to steer clear of that subject. Anyway, if the Amazons believed in something that gave them strength, perhaps it was better for them to go on believing.

Cyane went over to a carved chest in a corner, opened it and took out a small, well-polished silver vase.

"All you do," she said, "is take a dab of this on the tip of your finger and mix it with the paint before you put it on Eve's face, and say, 'With this sacred ointment, I invoke upon you the blessings of the goddess Artemis.'"

Gabrielle wondered if Eve, with her Elijan faith, would object to invoking the blessings of a pagan deity. But it was just a ritual, really; a silly ritual invoking a goddess who no longer existed -- no harm in that. Eve could do that much, to make amends to the people she had wronged.

Cyane lifted the lid. The crimson substance inside seemed to emit a faint glow in the half-darkness of the hut.

In that moment, everything changed.

Gabrielle was unable to stifle a short laugh, and quickly pretended to have a coughing fit as the queens and the elders gave her odd looks.

So Ares hadn't been so crazy after all, back when he had the Furies bouncing around in his head.

The Amazons did have ambrosia.

CHAPTER 9

Waking up felt good.

The air was full of bird-cries and the whispery ripple of trees and the smell of fresh grass, and the lake blushed in the dawn's misty light, and Xena was sleeping next to

him just like he'd always wanted, wisps of her hair fluttering on his arm, everything filled with her naked warmth, with her faintly sweaty musky smell, with *her*. Ares closed his eyes again, letting himself wallow in her closeness. For now, hard as he was, it was enough to lie next to her like this, her hip pressed into him, his hand resting on her stomach. The two of them together -- no warlords to fight ... no villagers to save ... no vengeful Amazons ... no whining Elijans with mommy issues ... no blonde bards.

A rush of wind made Xena shiver slightly. He pulled up the blanket over her bare shoulder and hugged her closer, her breasts soft and pliant under his arm. What a way to start the day, especially a day he was supposed to spend being dead.

For much of the previous day, they had been riding through the musty-smelling forest, its half-darkness mottled with dots and patches of sun on the wiry tangle of the underbrush, the tree trunks blanketed in leafy vines, the jagged fallen limbs of old trees. It had been a mostly silent journey. As they were leaving the Amazon village, Xena seemed somewhere else, probably thinking about Eve, and Gabrielle, and all that had happened? - not something she'd talk about, certainly not to him. Eventually, the path got too narrow to ride side by side, and Ares was reduced to staring at the back of her head. Left to its own devices, his mind drifted inevitably in the direction of reliving the last day's events. He found himself wondering if his luck would run out eventually, and one of his many enemies would catch up with him. The question of what would have happened if Gabrielle had lost came back to him too, worrying at his mind until he couldn't take it anymore.

"Xena," he said, and she turned with a slight start, her features warming into a smile. "What if -- she hadn't won?" Her smile turning sly, she replied, "I had a plan," and he shot back, as playfully as he could, "I hope it was for something other than my funeral."

Then they stopped, and she told him. She had been all set to hurl her chakram at the pole holding up one of the Amazon banners, having calculated that the banner would fall right on top of Varia while she was coming up the steps to the platform. In the confusion, Xena would have collapsed the platform -- having loosened a few boards the night before -- and topped it off by setting fire to three bundles of wet straw she'd placed under it to produce thick clouds of smoke. That should have been enough to make their escape possible.

He gaped at her in awe. At last he said, "You ... you really are something, you know that?" and a tiny smile twinkled about her lips. "I'm almost sorry I didn't get to see that," he continued, only to add in response to her amused head-shake, "On second thought, probably not." They looked at each other, and she reached out and put her hand over his. He wanted her so acutely at that moment that his eyes slid over to a clear patch of grass behind the wispy shrubbery by the path, and he wondered if they could stop here; but just then Xena turned and nudged Argo's flanks and said, "Let's go."

By the time they got to the lake, it was evening. When he saw the water swashing placidly at clusters of tall reeds, Ares suddenly realized how much he had wanted to take a bath; it was as if some residue of the stale air of the jail still clung to his skin, reeking of misery and fear and weakness. Xena gave him a quizzical look as he began

to get out of his clothes. "I'm going for a swim," he said, his voice rough; he didn't want to touch her now -- not even when her breastplate fell on the grass with a soft thud, not even when she reached behind to undo the lacings of her tunic, the motion making her breasts swell against the leather -- not yet, not until he felt clean again. He waded into the cold water, wincing as the pebbles on the bottom dug into the soles of his feet and underwater weeds lashed at his ankles, and walked on until the water was deep enough to immerse himself completely. In a moment he surfaced, spluttering, and watched as Xena too rose from a dive, the water rolling down her body like a thin glittering fabric. She came closer, and this time they did embrace; her face and mouth tasted of fresh lake water, and her wet hair, silky and cool, streamed through his fingers. Ares stepped back a little, and she ran her palms down his arms and caught his hands in hers; the late sunlight gave her skin an almost golden shimmer, and he had a memory of looking at her like this on their first night, in the quavering yellow light of an oil lamp.

Once they had started touching, they couldn't stop. A little later when they were coming back to the shore, he dropped on his knees in the thigh-deep water and turned Xena toward him; she gasped as he lapped at the water dripping down her legs and then moved higher, making love to her with his mouth, savoring her as if she were new to him. Finally she collapsed into his arms with a cry and a splash. A couple of ducks flew up from the reeds about thirty paces away, filling the quiet with a burst of rustling, flapping noise. "We're scaring the wildlife," Xena murmured with a weak laugh. Ares rose, sweeping her up in his arms, and grinned at her: "We *are* the wildlife."

He carried her to the shore, and she broke free to get a blanket out of her saddlebag and spread it out on the sun-bronzed grass. They lay down, and the touch of the evening breeze on his still-wet skin gave him goose bumps for a moment, but even that felt good. When they pulled apart from another breathless kiss, Ares drew his fingers over the curve of her breast, brushing the faint scar on its underside and the tiny bumps around the nipple. Then his hand trailed up Xena's neck to her face, tracing its lines, as though trying to memorize her features so he'd know them with his eyes closed; she too touched his face and his mouth, and then he did close his eyes, moaning, grazing her fingertips with his tongue. Neither of them could stand it much longer, and she pushed him on his back and rolled on top of him. He wanted to remember it all, the way her lip curled and her eyes clouded when she took him in, the soft fullness of her breasts on his chest, the dampness of her hair. He arched to meet her rhythm, gripping her hips, pulling her toward him, wanting to be deeper inside her, wanting more.

Afterwards, they lay together, the trickles of still-drying water on their bodies now mingled with sweat, and Xena was touching him again, lightly stroking his neck and his shoulder, her breath warm on his chest. Ares stared up into the sky, where the orange disc of the sun floated half-hidden in the stacks of rolling clouds. It was strange to think that he might have never seen this sunset, and that it mattered to him. He knew that his near-death experience may have lent a special frantic urgency to their lovemaking; but then, whenever they made love, it was nearly always as if they were about to lose each other forever, or had narrowly escaped losing each other. So often, he had tortured himself with the thought that what they had together could end at any moment. But of course, it *would* end sooner or later; some day, next week or in thirty years, he would hold her in his arms for the last time. Maybe all mortal life was

a near-death experience.

The clouds looked like snowy mountain caps suffused with a purple glow, and it made him think of Olympus -- only to realize that somehow, everything that had to do with godhood seemed to have moved further away from him, gliding off into some dreamlike mist. He didn't have much time to dwell on that, because Xena kissed his chest and looked up at him, the dark trees behind them reflected in her eyes. He smiled, lifting the coils of her damp hair on his palm. "What?" she asked, her voice low and teasing. "Just thinking that I have you all to myself for a couple of days," he said. A shadow crossed her face, making him wonder if he'd said the wrong thing; but in a moment the little line between her eyebrows smoothed over, and she smiled back and leaned in to kiss him.

He talked her into letting him catch their dinner; she would have done a faster and better job of it, to be sure, but he was determined to show her that he was good at something, and he actually did better than he'd expected. Afterwards, when they climbed into her bedroll together, it was with no discussion, as if it were the most ordinary thing, as if they had been doing this forever. As soon as they settled in, he was swept by a warm heavy tide of sleepiness and exhaustion, and barely had time to press his lips to her shoulder before it pulled him under.

Now, lying next to her, it felt like the most natural thing in the world that they should wake up like this -- every morning of every day of the rest of their mortal lives.

A cool breeze whooshed through the grass and the leaves. Xena stirred next to him and tossed her head, and muttered something that sounded annoyingly like "Gabrielle."

Oh well. So much for no blonde bards.

With a sigh, Ares pressed closer into her, circling her nipple with his thumb while he kissed her neck, softly at first and then more insistently, darting the tip of his tongue over her skin. Xena's breathing quickened; she moved again, and suddenly turned and opened her eyes. At first she looked almost puzzled. Then she stretched a little and smiled, drawing an arm around him.

"Good morning," she said softly and brushed her mouth against his, her other hand sliding down his chest.

He closed his eyes as their lips met again.

For now, this morning was enough.

* ~ * ~ *

The lantern filled the ceremonial hut with deep black shadows outside its unsteady circle of light. The floorboards made a harsh grating sound, as if registering their dismay at the nighttime intrusion.

The hut was unlocked and unguarded. It never occurred to the Amazons that anyone would try to steal their sacramental objects. Anyone -- let alone one of their queens.

Squelching the guilt, Gabrielle raised the lantern higher. For a moment, the amber light formed a halo around a stern-faced bird mask, then swept over the shelves crowded with small wooden figures of sacred animals and Amazon heroines, and reflected dully off a row of ceramic urns that housed the ashes of dead queens and princesses. Terreis had her resting place here, the noble Amazon from whom Gabrielle had inherited her right of caste; and Melosa, and Ephiny. Ephiny ... her beloved friend, a friend who'd given her comfort at the worst time of her life, when Solan and Hope died and she nearly lost Xena ... what would Ephiny have thought of her now?

Gabrielle walked to the corner where the chest with the ambrosia stood and sat on the floor with her legs tucked under her, setting the lantern down on the floor.

There was no other choice.

For a brief moment, she had actually considered pocketing a pinch of the ambrosia during the initiation ceremony itself. That could be the best way to pull it off: to be completely brazen and just do it in front of all the masked queens and the elders, while everyone was busy watching Eve recite the Amazon oath and receive small tokens of her membership in the Amazon Nation from the queens -- a bracelet, a bear's claw necklace, a feathered belt, an arrow. But she lingered a moment, and then it was too late; one of the elders took the small vase from the table and put it back in the chest.

So she had waited until the next night. And now, here she was, with a lantern and a small vial.

The Amazons would never miss it, she told herself. There would be plenty left ... and it wasn't as if Artemis' "sacred ointment" actually had anything to do with the survival of the Amazon nation. Except that they believed it did...

They'd never forgive her if they found out.

What was happening to her? This question had stirred in her mind a number of times over those two days as she mulled over. Who *was* this person who so casually planned stealing from her own people ... and was here now, under the cover of night, to carry out her plan? She had worried that being a warrior was going to destroy her; but what was thievery and betrayal going to do to her soul?

But there was no other choice. If Ares stayed mortal, he was never going to leave -- not now -- not after he had risked his neck to save Xena's daughter. And that would destroy her soul all right.

Once he was gone, she could start worrying about doing the right thing again. She'd find a way to make up for this ... somehow.

With a sigh, Gabrielle lifted the lid of the chest, wincing at its squeak even though no one was around to hear it. As she looked at the three vases, it occurred to her that her plan might backfire. What if, instead of going off to Olympus and leaving them alone, Ares enticed Xena to become a goddess and follow him?

No, Xena would never agree to that. She couldn't be sure, of course, that Xena would break it off completely. But it wouldn't last -- not if Ares was the God of War again. Soon enough, he'd try to start a war somewhere, pit one city against another, or have a conquering army roll through the countryside, and Xena would have to stop him; and then, she would no longer trust him enough to let him close. And even if she still slept with him once in a while ... at this point, Gabrielle could bring herself to deal with it, as long as she and Xena could have their old life back.

She reached down and pulled out one of the three vases. She wondered how much she should get. It wasn't as if you could get hold of an Olympian rulebook and look up the dosage of ambrosia required to make someone a god. She tried to recall how much Velasca had taken before gaining godly powers. It was just a tiny morsel... would it be different for someone who had been a god before?

Gabrielle lifted the lid of one of the vases. The jelly-like substance inside had a faint glow. Holding her breath, she dipped a flat wooden stick into it, scooped up a lump roughly the size of her thumb, and transferred it to the vial. The glass had a strange warmth in her hands as she corked the vial and slipped it inside her top. A sudden shiver ran through her at the thought that she held in her hands a substance that could turn one into a god. Her eyes closed as the tide of a distant memory rose up and washed over her: how, the day he killed Eli, Ares spoke to her in the desert and tried to lure her into his service, and then laid his hands on her and made her feel his power. It wasn't pleasure ... at least it wasn't like any earthly pleasure. For just a few moments, she felt that she could lift a hand and shape the world according to her whim, dealing life or death, fire or ice as she pleased -- her body a perfect instrument, completely obedient to her will, beyond pain and weakness. She remembered Ares' deep, calm, captivating voice. *This is how I feel every moment of every day of my life...*

With a shudder, Gabrielle opened her eyes. As she closed the vase with the ambrosia, her hands shook a little, and the lid made a slight grating sound. She wasn't sure if the vial was actually burning against her skin or she was just imagining it.

She put the vase back and closed the chest. She knew she had to get up and go, but her limbs felt strangely lifeless, as if her bones had dissolved.

He gave up all that -- for Xena...

Well, she was going to give it back to him -- what was wrong with that? It wasn't as if *she* was planning to take the ambrosia herself and then use her godly powers against him. And Ares had probably believed all along that he'd get his godhood back eventually, one way or another.

Except that, of course, he'd never take the ambrosia from *her*. If she marched up to him and handed him the vial, he'd know exactly what she was after -- to get him out of the way -- and see it as letting her win. She wouldn't put it past Ares to stay mortal out of sheer stubbornness.

Gabrielle raised her head, rubbed her eyes and finally forced herself to get up. Her legs felt numb from sitting down for too long, her haunches tingling unpleasantly.

She'd make sure he got the ambrosia somehow; she could always think about the *how* later. The important thing was that she had it.

Picking up the lantern, she headed toward the door, and froze in her tracks as she heard the soft creak of footsteps just outside.

The door took forever to open.

The moonlight streamed in, gleaming milky-white on the tip of a spear. Gabrielle felt ice-cold all over, except where the flask with the ambrosia was touching her chest.

Slowly, cautiously, the wielder of the spear leaned in through the door. Before Gabrielle saw the face, she saw the blonde hair and the tan leather shirt with fringes on the sleeve.

Cyane.

She felt dizzy, and realized that she hadn't been breathing.

"Gabrielle." Cyane lowered her spear. "What are you doing here?"

Gabrielle's throat clenched, her mouth dry. She hoped the light wasn't enough for Cyane to get a good view of her face.

Her eye fell on the urns, whitish-grey in the moonbeam that cut a pale swathe from the open door to the shelves by the wall.

"I ..." Gabrielle took a deep breath. Once she had found the words, they came almost easily. "I was thinking about Ephiny -- I wanted to come here and -- say good-bye to her ashes before I left."

"Oh." Cyane's voice was sympathetic, almost embarrassed. "I'm sorry I disturbed you... I saw a light in the window and thought I'd check it out. I'll leave you alone, then."

"No, no," Gabrielle said hastily. "I'm all done here -- I was leaving."

Cyane closed the door behind them. As they walked back to Gabrielle's hut together, Cyane asked questions about Ephiny, and Gabrielle answered, only half aware of what she was saying.

I'm sorry, Ephiny. I'm sorry. I know you wouldn't understand. But I have to do this.

I know this isn't me.

I can be myself again ... when this is over.

* ~ * ~ *

The army he favored, an alliance of several cities, laid siege to the great seven-gated

city of Thebes, and the Thebans had launched a sneak attack and killed over a hundred allied warriors; and so he had advised his commanders, by way of retaliation and intimidation, to execute a dozen Theban prisoners captured in an earlier battle. The men had been dragged to a field before the city walls, so that they could be seen from within the city; now they were lined up on their knees, hands tied behind their backs, shirtless, shivering from cold or fear or both. The allied commanders stood to the side, dazzling in full armor, the wind stirring the plumes on their helmets. He, the God of War, stood there with them, arms folded on his chest. He glanced casually at the doomed men kneeling in the brown dust under the bloated gray sky. His eyes met those of one prisoner, dark-haired and bearded, about thirty years old from the looks of him; the man was shuddering once in a while, the muscles in his neck moving spasmodically, his lips trembling as he seemed to be soundlessly repeating something over and over again.

Bored, Ares turned to one of his generals.

"Let's get it over with," he said, gesturing toward the prisoners. "And get ready to storm the gates tonight."

He was still speaking when everything changed. His knees were hurting, and the rope was rubbing his wrists raw, and his arms were sore from being wrenched back, and the cold wind was biting into his bare shoulders and chest -- and he knew that these were the last things he would ever feel in this world. He tried to remember the touch of her mouth and the warmth of her arms, to see her face, and he kept saying her name, *Xena*, as if he could summon her there, *Xena*, as if he could make her hear him across the distance, *Xena Xena Xena*, as if he could make up for all the times he would never say it to her, all the days they no longer had. His eyes darting frantically, he caught sight of the armored enemy commanders overseeing the execution and the tall dark leathery figure that stood with them, slouching a little. The man in black leather turned and looked at him, and he stared into his own face and his own cold eyes, implacable and mocking.

Ares' breath failed him and he could no longer speak her name, and then the blindfold came down over his eyes and all went black.

After that, bafflingly, he saw it from outside again, the twitching face of the blindfolded man and the ragged breaths that shook his chest, and the swordsman prepared to deliver the blow -- but he felt it too, the cold and the pain and the blind terror, and the breeze that he knew was not the wind but the sword slashing through the air -- and, watching, he knew that he was about to see the blade cut into the man's neck, his own neck, about to see the blood spurt and --

Ares sat up with a gasp that scraped at his throat. *They didn't want to die.* He gulped for air in a bluish half-darkness.

"They didn't want to die..."

He heard himself mutter it aloud. Just then something touched his shoulder; he shuddered and flailed wildly, and felt the back of his hand hit something. In the same instant, he saw the mane of dark hair and the patch of white that was Xena's face, and knew he had struck out at her. They were in her bedroll, at the campsite by the lake,

and it was just before dawn.

Xena caught his wrists and held them gently.

"Shh," she whispered, sliding her hands up his arms, then wrapping her own arms around his shoulders. He realized that he was shaking and drenched in sweat.

She held him close and kissed the top of his head, and part of him wanted nothing more than to sink into the comforting warmth of her embrace, but the pleasure of it was mixed with a queasy shame.

The memory that had turned itself into his nightmare came back; he could see the Theban's face and his moving lips -- *saying the name of someone he loved?* -- and the way his headless body convulsed in the scarlet-soaked dust moments later. He had ordered that man's death, sent so many to their deaths in one way or another, and they had all wanted to live as desperately as he had wanted to catch another glimpse of Xena's face before he was blindfolded ?- and they had lost everything, and their slaughter had pleased him. He had trouble steadying his breath. Did Xena know what was going through his head? Suddenly, he knew what she felt when she looked back on her past. Maybe that was what this whole atonement thing was about: running away from things that were too sickening to look back on, trying to build a wall that would hold them back. For the first time, he understood her completely; only now, he wasn't sure he wanted to understand. And he could never talk to her about it, never.

Xena reached over and handed him a waterskin. He took a few gulps, almost choking on the cold water.

"It's over," she whispered, stroking his damp hair. "You're okay now."

"No," he said hoarsely before he had time to think.

She was silent for a moment. Then she pulled him down, gently but insistently, as they settled into the bedroll.

"Ares." Her lips brushed his ear, ruffling his hair. "You're a good man."

So she knew...

He snorted into her neck, and wanted to make a joke about her liking for bad boys; but he didn't trust his voice not to break or falter. They lay silently, pressed into each other, her leg wrapped around his hip, her palm flattened on his back, and after a while the lump in his chest was gone.

A good man, he thought dimly as his eyelids grew heavy again. To think that it made him feel better.

Xena listened as Ares' breath became steady, and tried to push back a vague anxiety. She had thought at first, when he woke from a nightmare, that he had been reliving his near-execution. But it had clearly been more than that. "They didn't want to die..." What long-dead victims of his godly games had invaded his dream? It was unnerving not to know what was on his mind. It was also unnerving, she realized, to think of

Ares feeling guilty over his past. For one thing, it could drive him mad, considering how long he'd had to accumulate his track record; and given that Ares didn't do anything by half, who could tell how far he would go if he went on what he had once mockingly called an atonement kick? But it wasn't just that... She was used to him being cocky and unapologetic, even as a mortal, and -- well, dammit, it felt good to have someone like that around.

What was she thinking? *She* had wanted him to change ... because she cared about him, and maybe because, if she helped the former God of War become a better man, it meant that she herself really was a good person.

And yet -- and yet -- maybe she didn't want him to change *that* much...

He stirred a little in his sleep and clutched her tighter, and made an inarticulate groan that could have been her name.

Then she thought of something else. She had changed him. For years, he had tried to make her his; now, she had made him hers. In a way, it was almost as terrifying.

* ~ * ~ *

The little flask with ambrosia had been transferred to her saddlebag, but Gabrielle could still feel its presence as she rode through the murky woods.

Somehow, she had to get it to Ares. She had to make sure he didn't know it came from her. No less important, she had to make sure *Xena* didn't know.

What was she supposed to do, slip the stuff in his waterskin? She couldn't even be sure it would work mixed with water (that Olympian rulebook sure would have come in handy...); besides, if it did, and Ares started shooting firebolts out of his hands all of a sudden, it was bound to look suspicious.

The ludicrous image made her smile first, and then wince. Was she actually thinking about making Ares a god without his knowledge or consent? A queasy feeling started up in the pit of her chest, and for a moment Gabrielle wondered if she should give up on the whole thing.

She couldn't. It was a matter of saving her life.

There had to be a way.

The path before her narrowed, heavy branches swooping over her head like giant bird wings. Gabrielle lowered her hand and touched the saddlebag that hid her guilty little secret, as if wanting to make sure it was really there -- or maybe, deep down, hoping to find out that it wasn't.

And then it came to her. She had to get someone else to give it to Ares. Someone Ares would trust. *Of course*. One of his followers, from his days as a god. Maybe a priest.

All she had to do was wait until they got to a town that had a temple of Ares.

The streaks of daylight between the trees ahead of her told Gabrielle that the lake was close. She was about to see Xena, knowing all the time that she was planning to deceive her.

This time, the doubt hit her like a cold hard blast.

Don't do it.

Reaching into her saddlebag, Gabrielle rummaged for the vial. Her fingers curled around the warm glass. She could take it out and fling it into the dense shrubbery where she'd never find it, even if she changed her mind.

She gave Clio's bridle a gentle tug with her other hand, slowing the mare down to a walk. From where she was now, Gabrielle could see the silvery glaze of the lake and the softness of the sky through the almost black latticework of leaves.

Don't do it. She would have betrayed her sisters for nothing, then. But at least she would stop at that. At least she wouldn't be lying to Xena. At least --

Near the edge of the clearing, she heard indistinct voices and Xena's laugh.

She brought Clio to a halt, and carefully moved a branch out of the way. Ares and Xena were sitting side by side, she polishing her armor, he cleaning his vest; Xena said something, and Ares answered, and then she laughed and gave him a light punch on the shoulder.

Gabrielle let go of the vial and took her hand out of the saddlebag.

She had to do it.

When she rode out of the trees, Xena looked up, and there was such love and joy in her face that it stopped the breath in Gabrielle's throat.

She dismounted and came closer. Xena rose and walked toward her, her lips quivering a little as she smiled, her eyes bright. For a moment they stood still, less than a pace apart. Then Xena stepped closer and hugged her, holding her tight, stroking her hair and her back; Gabrielle closed her eyes, and heard Xena's husky whisper in her ear.

"I'll make it up to you ... I promise."

* ~ * ~ *

Dawn was breaking over the city, smudging the gray sky with pink, lifting the darkness that shrouded the houses, the trees, the empty horse-carts, the cobblestones. Standing by the window in her room, Gabrielle listened to the low murmur of the sea in the distance, where she could just make out the masts of the ships in the Maroneian port.

In three days, they would catch the boat to Lemnos island. A ruthless band of pirates was operating off the island's shores; Xena's plan was to either take them on if they attacked the boat, or to track them down to their hideout. Gabrielle's plan was that she

and Xena would be getting on that boat alone, and Ares would be in no further need of transportation.

She had a somewhat hazy memory of the last ten days. It was almost as if none of it were completely real; her life was on hold until all this was over. Xena had been tender and solicitous toward her, and they had spent two nights together while staying at village inns. But, when they made love, Gabrielle had found that she couldn't give herself completely, not only because of everything that had happened between them but because of what was going to happen. In the end, she wanted only to get it over with, and she gave a fake cry of pleasure and made her body rigid; from Xena's look, Gabrielle felt sure that Xena wasn't fooled. The next time Xena came to her room, they just held and kissed each other, and eventually Gabrielle relaxed enough to doze off in Xena's arms.

Xena's birthday had come and gone in that haze. Gabrielle had meant to give her the scroll with Sappho's poem -- to her dismay, she'd almost forgotten about it -- but then realized that she couldn't, not while she was planning to deceive the woman she loved. She'd save it for later, for when their love was whole again.

There was one moment she remembered more vividly than the rest. Something had roused her during the night at a campsite; still half-asleep, Gabrielle heard a noise, and cautiously opened an eye to see Ares sitting up in his bedroll, breathing hard, and Xena crawling toward him in the faint glow of the nearly extinguished campfire. She watched as Xena put an arm around Ares' shoulders and he squeezed her hand. "What is it?" Xena asked quietly. Ares shook his head; "Tell me," she pressed, and he sighed and spoke in a breaking half-whisper that only let Gabrielle pick up some words and phrases. Something about Thebes, about prisoners and some order he gave, and something else she couldn't make out. He fell silent, then looked up at Xena and said, "He was waiting to die..." -- and after a moment she heard Xena say, "I know." They held each other close, and Gabrielle's heart clenched in sympathy for Ares and in shame at her plan. Closing her eyes, she reminded herself yet again that she wasn't doing anything wrong, not to Ares. If anything, she'd be doing him a favor; he so obviously wasn't suited to mortal life and its perils.

Three more days. Then, everything would be all right.

Walking away from the window, Gabrielle went to the corner where her two saddlebags were stashed, and reached into one of them to get out the vial. Later today, she would go to Ares' temple.

* ~ * ~ *

She had told Xena she was going to check out the city library. The words tasted foul in her mouth, but what was one more lie?

Luckily, it turned out that the temple of Ares wasn't too far from the inn. As Gabrielle walked toward the massive edifice of marble and granite with twin dragons guarding its front steps, her feet felt as if they belonged to somebody else, and something inside her rose up and tried to pull her back. Still, she walked on, past the faceless houses of grey stone that lined the street leading toward the temple.

Gabrielle had spent a long time thinking of something to tell the priest about why she was giving the ambrosia to him and not directly to Ares, and why she didn't want Ares to know where the ambrosia came from. Finally, she had come up a cover story that seemed to hold up quite well -- almost good enough to have been Xena's invention. She was going to say that Ares had offered to be her mentor when he was still a god (which, amazingly enough, happened to be true), and that she had traveled with him and saved his life as a mortal (true again). The fictional part would be that she had offered Ares to get him ambrosia and he had absolutely forbidden it, wanting neither to risk her life nor to be any deeper in debt to her; she had gotten it anyway, but she didn't want her god to know she had defied him. Yeah. It made sense.

The temple was very close now. A giant banner, black with silver lettering, hung over the portico. Coming even closer, Gabrielle stopped in her tracks and wondered if she was seeing things.

The banner said:

GRAND OPENING TONIGHT!

COME PARTY WITH US FROM SUNDOWN TILL DAWN

AT THE NEW TAVERN AND DANCE HALL

TEMPLE OF WAR!

And, in smaller script underneath:

No weapons allowed

She blinked, closed her eyes and opened them again. The banner refused to go away.

Gabrielle walked up the steps and stopped at the massive black doors with skulls, bones and swords carved into them. Ares and his taste in decorating.

Her eyes fell on a yellow piece of papyrus lying face down on the stone at her feet. She picked it up. It was an advertisement for the grand opening, with the same text as the banner and a skull-and-sword logo at the top. Thoughtfully, Gabrielle folded it and slipped it into her satchel. Then she grasped one of the two huge cast-iron rings on the door and knocked.

For a while there was no response, though she thought she heard movement and voices inside, and music? While she waited, it occurred to her dimly that she probably had to devise a whole new strategy. Xena, she thought ruefully, would have already had a new plan by now. She knocked again, and listened as the dull low echo of the boom died away.

There were footsteps, and then a small window opened up in the massive door and a woman's gaunt face peered at her.

"Use the side door for deliveries," the woman snapped.

"This isn't a delivery," Gabrielle said, a little taken aback. *Well, it was... sort of.*

"If you're here for the party, it's at sundown." The face disappeared abruptly and the window was about to close, but Gabrielle held out a hand to block it.

"I'm not here for the party. I need to talk to" -- she wanted to say "the head priest," but maybe that wasn't the right word -- "someone in charge."

The woman leaned forward again. "Are you here about a job?"

"Let's say I have a business proposition." Gabrielle was getting impatient. "Look, your boss will want to see me, okay?"

The woman pursed her lips and said, "All right."

She slammed the window shut, barely giving Gabrielle time to jerk her fingers out of the way. A moment later, there was the sound of a heavy latch being pulled to the side, and the door opened up enough for her to step through.

Even the banner advertising the tavern and dance hall hadn't quite prepared Gabrielle for what met her inside. Everything in the cavernous torch-lit temple was decked out in black, red, and silver ribbons and in garlands of red and black roses. Incredulous, she ran her fingers over a garland woven around a sculpture of a wolf -- making the fanged beast look almost domesticated -- and realized that the petals were cloth.

"Hands off the flowers, please," snapped the woman who had let her in.

Still slightly dazed by this sight, Gabrielle walked forward. The music she'd heard before struck up again; it came from a cluster of young women with flutes and lyres seated on cushions at the foot of a huge garlanded statue of Ares. Their outfits, at least what there was of them, were also red and black, with small, obviously fake silver swords dangling from their red belts.

She spotted a tall, dark-haired bearded man dressed in what seemed to be the official colors of this establishment, talking to a woman carrying a tray with silver goblets. The man looked over the goblets, pointed fastidiously to presumed blemishes on a couple of them and waved the woman away; she nodded and hurried toward a side door.

Taking her chances, Gabrielle came closer and tapped the man on the elbow. "You're the head priest of this temple, aren't you?"

The man turned. He would have seemed imposing if not for the mismatch between his slender nose and full pouty lips; they gave his haughty look an air of petulance, as if she had just

spat on his boot..

"In case you haven't noticed, this is not a temple anymore."

He hadn't denied it; her guess must have been correct.

"I *have* noticed," she said, far more breezily than she ever thought she could manage. "And how do you think your lord Ares would like what you've done to the place?"

The priest gave Gabrielle a mildly curious, disdainful look. "What are you doing here?"

The woman who had let her in spoke up hastily. "She said she had some business proposition."

He reflected for a moment and then nodded. "All right, Carissa, that will be all. Go and check up on the cooks."

Carissa stalked away, turning once to give Gabrielle an unfriendly look over her shoulder.

"So," the tall man said. "Are you here about a job?" He looked her over. "What do you want to be, a dancer or a bouncer?"

She was momentarily at a loss. "Are you -- the owner?"

"Yes," he said dryly. "Geryon, formerly the head priest of the Temple of Ares in Maroneia. And now" -- he spread his arms, indicating the unusual scene around him. "Not very dignified, to be sure. But one does have to keep up with the times."

"Times may be changing." Gabrielle felt pretty pleased with that line; it sounded almost like something Xena would have said.

"So. Are you going to tell me what your business is, or am I going to have you thrown out?"

"I wanted," she said, as coolly as she could, "to tell you to expect a visit from your old boss."

"You don't mean -- ?"

"Ares? As a matter of fact, I do."

Geryon snorted. "All right, I've heard enough. Get out."

Damn. Xena would have had him cowering in terror by now.

"You think I'm pulling your leg?"

"Look here, young woman." Geryon sighed in exasperation. "It is common knowledge that Ares has been mortal for well over a year. Indeed, it is rumored that he was killed some two moons ago near Amphipolis, in a battle with Gascar the Terrible."

"The rumor is wrong," she said. "I fought at Ares' side when he killed Gascar."

For the first time, the former priest looked at her with interest, if not a hint of apprehension.

"Who are *you*?"

"A warrior. Some time before he lost his godhood, Ares offered to train me as his champion."

Geryon coughed and licked his lips. "And you are telling me that Ares is here in Maroneia right now."

"That's right."

The various emotions that flitted across the priest's face finally settled into a purse-lipped look of offended dignity. "Well, that isn't any of my concern, as long as he's still mortal. My allegiance was sworn to the God of War." In the next moment, he seemed somewhat frightened of his own audacity. "Uh ?- on the other hand, young woman -- if Ar -- if lord Ares is interested in a portion of the profits, I'd be happy to discuss -- "

Ares would have been pleased, she thought with bitter amusement; even mortal, he was still scary.

"It's a little worse than that, Geryon," she interrupted. "Ares is about to get his godhood back."

Even in the golden glow of the lamps and torches, Geryon looked white as a sheet.

"*What?*"

Now, she felt confident, almost lightheaded.

"I managed to get some ambrosia," she said. "The reason I came here was to make sure you were ready to receive him -- it seemed right to me that he should reclaim his godhood in one of his own temples..."

She realized that the musicians had stopped playing and were looking at them, though they were surely too far away to have overheard any of the conversation. The attendants, too, had stopped doing their chores and were staring, evidently sensing that something big was happening.

Geryon shuffled over to the bar on the side of the hall, poured himself a goblet of wine and took a few sips, wiping his forehead. When he looked at Gabrielle again, his face had regained some color, and his eyes were suddenly suspicious.

"*Wait* a minute," he said slowly. "I think I'm on to you."

Her heart sank. He couldn't *possibly* --

"You're working for Alysia, aren't you?"

She blinked in genuine confusion, but also in relief.

"Alysia?"

"That witch is afraid of the competition, isn't she," Geryon spat out. "Of course -- who would want to go to that smelly barn she calls a dance hall once my place opens up! Anything to sabotage our grand opening..." By the time he had gotten to "sabotage," the bravado had started draining from his voice, perhaps because he could see that the bewilderment in Gabrielle's face wasn't fake.

"You believe whatever you want," she said. "Go ahead, have your grand opening. I don't blame you for trying to make some money when you thought you were out of a job. But just in case I'm telling the truth -- I can offer you a way to save your butt."

Geryon gave her a peevish look, too nervous to convey offended dignity.

"You see, Geryon," she continued, "I was actually going to give the ambrosia to *you*. Ares doesn't know I have it yet -- I wanted it to be a surprise. And I thought it would be proper for a priest of Ares to present him with the means to restore him to Olympus." She reached into her satchel and took out the vial. "You can still do that. Then, I suppose Ares would be inclined to be -- forgiving of this little venture."

"Is that -- the real thing?" Geryon squeaked.

"It certainly is." Gabrielle noticed what looked like a covetous glint in Geryon's eyes, and it occurred to her that perhaps letting him have her entire supply of ambrosia wouldn't be so smart. "I'm willing to give you half," she said. "The other half, I'm keeping as insurance."

"Oh -- oh -- okay..." His hands shaking a little, Geryon grabbed a silver bowl and held it out to her. Gabrielle used one of her sais to scoop up a little more than half of the precious substance and transfer it to the bowl. It looked like such a tiny sliver...
Please, gods, let it be enough...

"By the way, don't even think of helping yourself to the stuff," she added. "Remember, Ares *is* going to become a god one way or the other, and then, even if you become one too, you won't have a chance against him. Let's face it, he's had a lot more practice."

"I -- I wasn't..." Geryon gulped and wiped his forehead again, cradling the bowl to his chest with his other hand.

Gabrielle couldn't help smirking. "And don't tell him when or where you got it."

"Okay..."

"Good luck," she said, re-closing the vial and putting it away. "You do know what Ares looks like, right?"

The former priest nodded with a grunt that was obviously a "yes." As she turned to go, he suddenly regained the power of speech -- or rather, of hiss.

"Listen, missy, if I find out that you played a trick on me and this is grape jelly -- I swear in the name of Ar-... I swear I'll track you down, and believe you me, you are *not* going to be smiling."

"Well, then," Gabrielle said cheerfully. "I guess we'll just have to see who has the last laugh."

Walking away, she heard Geryon bark at one of the attendants, "Take the flowers off the damn statue, will ya?"

As she came down the temple steps, wincing at the sunlight, it occurred to her that things couldn't possibly have gone better. With the party being held at the temple, she didn't even have to think of an excuse to get Ares there -- of course he'd be curious. Maybe the Fates, if the Fates still had anything to do with anything, actually wanted this plan of hers to work.

On her way back, Gabrielle noticed a lanky red-headed teenage boy nailing a piece of parchment announcing the grand opening of the Temple of War to the wall of a wooden house. She remembered the parchment she had stashed away in her satchel, and the fence right across the street from the door of the inn.

"Hey, kid," she said. "I can show you where to put up another one of those."

The boy turned his head and scowled. "I'm all done -- this is the last one I got."

"I have an extra one. Come on, I'll pay you a dinar."

He gave her a gap-toothed smile. Everything was working.

The whole thing had turned out to be so much easier than she thought. Gabrielle wasn't sure if that made her want to skip down the street singing, or hide somewhere in a dark corner.

* ~ * ~ *

"Gabrielle."

With a start, she saw Xena's hand waving in front of her face.

"Huh?"

"I said, are you all right? You've been very quiet."

Dinner was almost over and they still hadn't said anything about it. Damn.

"I have?"

Act normal. She had to act normal. Gabrielle looked at her plate and realized that she had been the first to finish her meal.

"Uh, sorry." She rubbed her face and gave Xena the best smile she could muster. "I was thinking about starting a new scroll."

"You should do that more often," Ares said amicably, cleaning up the sauce from his plate with a piece of flatbread. She glanced at him, surprised. A corner of his mouth hitched up in a slight smirk, and then she realized it was a thinly veiled gibe -- *you ought to keep quiet more*. Her lips tightened; with luck, she wouldn't have to put up with this nonsense much longer.

With luck -- what if her luck had run out in the end? What if, somehow, they hadn't spotted the notice nailed to the damn fence right across from the damn door?

Finally, she couldn't take it anymore. She took a gulp of ale and put down the mug.

"So," she said, trying to sound casual. "What are we doing tonight?"

Ares chuckled. "Going to my temple."

Gabrielle held back an audible sigh of relief as the tension ebbed from her body; yet the sick anxiety she had felt before rose to her throat again.

She hoped she'd managed a properly surprised look. "What for?"

Xena grinned. "A party."

"A par-" Suddenly, she couldn't do it, couldn't fake surprise, couldn't go on lying like this ... not to Xena. For a moment Gabrielle was afraid she would throw up. She pressed her hand to her mouth and coughed, almost retching.

"You okay?"

She was about to say that she wasn't feeling well -- but then Xena wouldn't want to leave her alone for the evening -- *damn damn damn* --

"Fine," she squeezed out. "Just -- something caught in my throat -- "

She grabbed her mug of ale; as long as she was sipping it, she didn't have to look Xena in the eye.

"Anyway... a party?"

"Yeah," Xena said wryly. "See, the temple's been converted to a tavern and dance hall."

"Could've been worse." Ares shot Gabrielle a mocking look. "They coulda turned it into an academy of bards or something."

She snorted feebly into her ale.

"They're having a party for the opening tonight at sundown," Xena said. "You're coming, right?"

Only now, Gabrielle realized that she couldn't. Not only because Geryon might somehow give her away, but because she couldn't bear to watch ... watch Xena get hurt, because of her -- knowing that Xena's loss was her own victory...

Gabrielle shook her head. "Actually... it doesn't sound like my kind of thing. I think I'll stay and start that scroll."

"You know what would be cool?" Ares leaned back and folded his arms on his chest, a dreamy smile on his face. "Put on a little show like we did in Elaea and make those idiots think I'm a god. Can you imagine the looks on their faces -- "

Gabrielle almost choked on her ale. She hadn't counted on this -- what would Geryon do if he thought Ares was *already* a god? It could mess up the whole thing... or maybe it was really for the best...

"Ares. We're not putting on any show," Xena said. "You're going to behave, right?"

"Mmm... right."

Gabrielle looked up and saw them exchange a quick glance, the amused sparkle in Ares' eyes reflected in Xena's. She drained her mug and got up.

"Well," she said, "I guess I'll go up and write." With her back to them, she added, "See you later."

* ~ * ~ *

As they walked up the temple steps in the throng of revelers, Xena glanced at Ares and wondered if he was really so casual about the whole thing. He was about to be reminded very starkly of his fall from power. What if someone recognized him -- as a mortal, on an equal footing with his own former servants and worshipers? Was it this fear, not just a general love of mischief, that had made him want to pull that pretending-to-be-a-god stunt?

Maybe they shouldn't have gone ... shouldn't have left Gabrielle alone for the whole evening, anyway. Her face was suddenly burning, and guilt lay like a stone in the middle of her chest. Ever since they'd gotten news of Eve's capture, she had been so wrapped up in what was happening to Eve, and then to Ares ... and Gabrielle was dying inside. She had promised to make it up to her -- as if she ever could! -- and now, here she was going to a dance hall with Ares -- and leaving Gabrielle alone. They wouldn't stay, she told herself; just look around to satisfy Ares' curiosity and then go back.

They reached the top of the steps and walked through the portico of the former temple. Music was drifting from the wide-open doors, the steady beat of the drums chopping its way through the lilt of flutes and lyres. Xena looked at Ares again in the rich golden torchlight, and saw his jaw twitch and tighten. She reached over and took his hand, feeling his warm fingers tremble in hers. It hit her how different he looked now. What if one of his former priests saw him, and *didn't* recognize him? Would that be even worse?

So different... It wasn't just the tiny wrinkles near his eyes and mouth or the other traces of mortality on his skin, or the glint of silver on his temples, or the little tuft of hair sticking out on the side of his head -- she wanted to smooth it over but wondered if it would only make him more self-conscious. He needed a haircut. But there was something else ... it was almost as if his face, his eyes, all of him had once been encased in a cold hard shell, and now it had fallen off or melted away, leaving him -- no, not soft, but exposed, vulnerable ... human. She squeezed his hand tighter as they stepped through the doors into the temple's round anteroom.

"Hey, hey, hey," said the burly-looking attendant, poking her in the shoulder with a fat finger. She glared at him and he jerked his hand back. "Didntcha see the sign? No weapons allowed." He pointed to the chakram at her belt.

"That's not a weapon," Ares said cheerfully. "That's a fashion accessory."

"Come on, lady -- don't give me any trouble..."

Xena smirked, her spirits lifting a little. "You heard what he said. Watch it -- it's a *sharp* accessory," she added as the attendant reached out tentatively to touch the edge of the chakram.

He shifted his eyes from her to Ares and back and finally sighed. "All right, go on."

Crossing the anteroom, they reached the main hall, the music floating around them as the drums fell silent for a moment.

It was quite a sight, the black and silver and red everywhere, the air aglow with dozens of lights, the men and women dancing and drinking, the quick-footed serving girls carrying trays with silver goblets or wine-filled helmets-turned-pitchers. Two columns looming behind the altar had become pedestals for large brass cages, a busty girl in a tiny leopard-spotted skirt and top writhing in one and a muscle boy in a matching loincloth in the other. The drumbeat picked up again, bursting out of two alcoves on opposite sides of the hall, and the dancing sped up. Several female voices soared above this sea of sound; turning her head, Xena saw five women in sleek black and silver standing on the altar-top, baying a popular song as they swayed a little to the music, their faces ablaze in reflections from the firepit in front of the altar.

She threw a cautious glance at Ares. He was looking around, mouth agape. Then his eyes rested on the black stone wolf with a garland of fake red and black flowers draped around its snarling muzzle. He started laughing -- not bitterly, not hysterically, but with what seemed like genuine, almost helpless merriment. It made her laugh, too.

"Ooohhh..." Ares wiped the tears from his eyes, and looked at her with a sly smirk. "You know something -- I approve."

"You do, huh?"

"Especially of the flute girls."

"I bet." She grinned at him, still holding his hand.

"Hey. Wanna dance?"

She had to go back -- Gabrielle was back at the inn, alone... "Ares -- I don't know -- "

"Oh come on." He drew an arm around her waist, pulling her toward him. Then, the music stopped.

The flutes and lyres died first; then the singers' voices were abruptly cut off on a jarringly dissonant chord, and, looking in their direction, Xena saw them scramble rather ungraciously off the altar. Finally the drums rattled to a halt; she noticed an attendant signaling frantically to the drummers. All that remained was the puzzled din of voices, the sharp tapping of shoe heels on the stone floor, and the clinking of goblets, but even these sounds were beginning to hush. She stepped back from Ares, still holding his hand.

She felt cold inside. It had something to with --

"My lord Ares!"

Ares' hand jerked slightly in her grasp.

The scattered gasps in the crowd dissipated into a silence in which someone's hurried steps echoed dully through the hall.

A tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired man was walking toward them, carrying something in his hands. His legs seemed a little unsteady, and when he dropped to his knees before Ares it looked as if he had collapsed rather than knelt deliberately. His lips were trembling, his eyes wide with mortal terror. He raised his hands, and Xena saw that he was holding a small silver tray in his hands with a gob of red jelly-like substance on it. The realization of what it was came like a hard punch to the chest.

"My lord Ares," the man rasped. "It is my honor to offer you this humble gift -- "

How the hell did a priest of Ares in a town on the edge of Greece get his hands on ambrosia? The question scurried across Xena's mind and settled somewhere in the back of it, to be retrieved later. The pain spread through her, bright and searing. Of course -- she had always known this moment would come.

Ares licked his lips almost convulsively, his eyes riveted on the silver tray, and it seemed to Xena that she could see some of that cold hardness return and set into his face.

She'd been going to give him a haircut...

She had no right to stand in his way. He was born and made to be a god. He had given it up for her, and now he would get it back.

Maybe it was best this way, for everyone. Best for him ... certainly best for Gabrielle. Lowering her eyes, she saw herself coming back to the inn, looking at Ares' empty room ... she wondered what would be worse, to go through his meager mortal

possessions or just to leave them there, to be picked apart by the innkeeper and the servants. The pain sharpened. But maybe, in the end, it was best for her, too. At least she would stop chasing the impossible dream of a life with Ares -- of having both Gabrielle and Ares in her life.

She let go of his hand.

The small crimson lump twinkled softly, winking at him, and Ares knew that he couldn't look away even if he tried. He also knew that the shimmer wasn't just from the torchlight. No, this was a glow no human craft could have faked ... the real thing. It all came back to him: the splendor of Olympus and the ruthless magnificence of the Halls of War; the thrill of striding storm-like through a battlefield, urging warriors on to kill and die, igniting their rage and feeling it flow back from them into his own immortal blood; the sense that he had within him a force unbound by space and time, a power that made the world his playground. One couldn't possibly describe this to a mortal, any more than one could describe the color red to someone born blind. But he knew what it was like, he still remembered, and he felt a jab of panic at the thought that this memory was slipping away from him. Maybe some day, if he stayed mortal, he'd forget completely.

This was his chance, then. He could let this little piece of jelly dissolve under his tongue, filling his mouth with its thick tangy sweetness, and the power would fill his body again, burning away every pain, every weakness, every mortal flaw. His humiliation at the Amazons' hands, the terror that had racked him when he was on his knees waiting to die ... all that would fade into a mist, the memories still there but their sting gone. And those other ghosts of death and suffering that had harassed him lately -- memories that left him torn between shame at his past and shame at his regrets -- they'd lose their power too, once he knew that death and suffering were no longer his own lot.

Or would they? Maybe some of his mortal instincts would survive ... maybe, if he went back to playing with his toy soldiers of flesh and blood, he would never quite be able to forget that he had been like them once, and knew too much of their pain and terror. What then? If he regained his godhood and couldn't do his job anymore, what *could* he do?

He could risk it. He had been mortal before, if only for a short while, and had gotten his godhood back, and things had returned to normal ... almost. *But maybe he didn't want things to return to normal... What sort of nonsense was that?*

Ares reached out -- it seemed to him that he was moving with an unnatural slowness, as if underwater -- and took the tray from the priest's unsteady hands. His own hand shook a little, in yet another mortifying reminder of his weakness. His thumb pressed on the tray, almost touching the ambrosia. It wasn't just that he *wanted* to be a god; all of him, spirit and flesh, craved godhood, craved to feel the rush of power shoot through his body -- it was something like mortal hunger and thirst, or sexual longing, only far, far stronger. He had never wanted anything so much -- except for --

Suddenly, he realized that Xena was no longer holding his hand. He made himself take his eyes off the ambrosia, and looked at her.

She stood stiffly, her hands clasped in front of her, her face still -- so beautiful ... so sad.

He wanted to reassure her that she wouldn't lose him, that he would always love her -- he had loved her before when he was a god, why would that change? Only -- would *she* let herself love the God of War? Maybe she could become a goddess with him, maybe they could split it ... but no, she wouldn't, he knew her too well. Dammit, if he could only talk to her... if they had only been alone... He became conscious of the silent crowd around him, all those people gaping, their faces frozen in shock and greedy anticipation. They'd be talking about it forever. *Ares, God of War, had to ask his girlfriend's permission before he got his godhood back. Right.*

For no special reason, the memory of one particular moment sprang up in his mind: how, just before Gabrielle got back to the campsite by the lake, he was sitting with Xena, cleaning his vest while she was polishing her armor, and they were talking about ... what was it? -- oh yeah -- fishing -- she had told him he was getting really good at it, and he teased her about getting better than her, and she laughed and punched him in the arm.

He could become a god, and she might -- *might* -- still share his bed sometimes. But it would never be like that again. Never.

Another moment came back to Ares then: the time he regained his godhood on Sisyphus' island, with Xena's help, after his first bout with mortality. *I won't forget this ...* those were the last words he had spoken as a mortal. *Yes, you will,* she replied, her eyes filled with same sadness he saw there now, the same quiet resigned pain. And he remembered what she said to him afterwards. *It's your loss, Ares. For a while, you weren't just mortal -- you were human.*

Their eyes met again. Xena nodded a little, as if to say, *Go ahead.*

He wasn't sure how long he had been standing like this, the tray with the ambrosia in his hand. A few barely audible whispers and murmurs rolled through the crowd, and Geryon -- he had suddenly remembered the priest's name -- cautiously raised his head and gave him a puzzled glance.

His whole body, and most of his mind, screamed in protest at what he was going to do. *Shut up,* he told them.

His jaws refused to move at first, and his mouth was horribly dry, but he finally managed to give a reasonable approximation of a laugh and then to speak.

"Sorry, pal," he said, thrusting the tray back toward Geryon. "You've got the wrong guy."

The look of utter bewilderment on the priest's normally dignified face was comical enough, but Ares had already turned toward Xena, only vaguely aware of the murmurs rising and swelling up around him. Her eyes were very wide, her lips trembling a little -- he had seen that look on her face before, on Olympus, when he had just given up his godhood to save her and the ones she loved. Only it wasn't quite the same look; still stunned, still moved, but there was less disbelief in it, and more tenderness.

A gaunt woman ran up to Geryon to help him up, fixing Ares with an irate glare. The priest reached out, a little shakily, to take the tray back.

No, wait a minute -- he couldn't just leave a chunk of ambrosia here at the temple; there was no telling what psycho was going to get hold of it and gain the powers of a full god...

"Hold on," he said. "Why don't we make a proper sacrifice to the gods, huh?"

The tray arced in the air and disappeared into the fire-pit before the altar. The chorus of gasps turned to shouts and squeals as the flames rose, flaring scarlet and then gold before settling down.

It was gone -- really gone.

He looked at Xena again. Her eyes and her smile said, *Well done*.

"Geryon?" A middle-aged blond man with a neatly trimmed beard, clad in an elegant blue coat, stepped forward from the front of the crowd.

"M- m- m- " the priest stammered, his features working frantically. "M-m-mayor Deon..."

"What in Tartarus is going on around here?"

"Everything's cool." Ares had no problem thinking quickly now. "It was an act -- all part of the show." He flashed the spectators his most wickedly charming grin. "You bought it, didn't you? You actually thought I was Ares. Wow. I'm flattered."

There were scattered, still-tentative laughs in the crowd. Ares himself started to laugh, quite genuinely this time -- it was hard to believe but he felt *good* -- and then Xena was laughing too, and more and more people joined in, even the mayor, and finally Geryon too twisted his mouth into something resembling a snicker.

Ares reached over and took Xena's hand.

"Let's get out of here."

CHAPTER 10

She couldn't stay in bed. Gabrielle paced around the room for a while, then grabbed the scroll with Virgil's epic poem and tried to read it, but the letters danced meaninglessly before her eyes; they might as well have been those strange symbols they used for writing in Ch'in. Setting the scroll aside, she rose and paced some more, wondering if it was already over.

After a while she put out the lamp, walked to the window and pushed the shutters wide open. The nearly full moon was veiled in a red-tinted mist. What if it was a sign that the God of War had returned to Olympus? Gabrielle twitched her nose at this superstitious silliness. *Would* there be any kind of sign, any tangible change in the world, if he regained his godhood? Why should there be -- nothing special had happened the first two times...

She looked down at the almost empty street below, where a couple of torches mounted into the wall added their orange glow to the moonlight. Two chattering women walked past, then a man scolding a whiny child. A lone rider rode by at a trot; the bright clacking of hooves on the cobblestones echoed down the street and faded gradually, merging with the sound of somebody's footsteps. A tall female shadow danced into view. Gabrielle held her breath ... *no, not Xena.*

Unable to stand still, she began to walk around again. What would happen when Xena returned? Would Xena come to her? Would she talk about what happened, would she show that she was hurt, or keep a stiff upper lip and hold it all in? Would she want to be comforted? The thought of comforting Xena, knowing that it was she who had deliberately caused her pain, made Gabrielle stop and shiver in her thin linen tunic, hugging her shoulders.

She went back toward the window, just in time to hear the front door slam below. Her heart leaped in joy and fear. *Xena.* She ran to the bed and climbed under the covers, waiting for the familiar footsteps in the hallway. The silence taunted her, with its distant echoes of laughter and singing in the downstairs tavern.

After a while she got up and walked to the window again, and leaned on the windowsill. Wind ruffled her hair, bringing with it the fresh salty smell of the sea; a wispy grayish cloud that had half-hidden the moon floated past it. Somewhere out of sight, a bucket was emptied with a loud splash. Two cats screeched at each other. The tavern door creaked open and a man and a woman tumbled out, laughing hoarsely, grabbing at each other. A whiff of roasted meat reached Gabrielle's nostrils, making her wince; the thought of food sickened her. There were footsteps again; this time, she knew it wasn't Xena even before she saw the stooping figure of a woman wobble by, basket in hand. Another gust of wind made the woman pull her shawl tighter about herself.

And then, Gabrielle saw them.

Them.

Xena and Ares, walking together, hand in hand.

She shrank back from the window, even though they couldn't have seen her in the darkness of the room. The floor seemed to have vanished from under her; her heart lurched and then hovered in a dizzying void. She was dimly conscious of staggering toward the bed, but she barely felt her legs or feet, as if they were filled with water.

What ... how?

Maybe Geryon had chickened out. Maybe ... maybe Ares had actually turned down the

ambrosia. Maybe --

Her head was spinning. She pressed her fingers to her temples. *Think. Think.*

Maybe Ares was a god now -- only, instead of going back to Olympus, he had decided to hang around.

Never thought of that, did you? You stupid, stupid girl.

Maybe Geryon had given her away.

Gabrielle reached for the mug of water on her nightstand. Her hand trembled; she knocked the mug over and heard it shatter, the sound exploding inside her skull. She tried to take a deep breath.

There were footsteps and voices in the hallway. Shaking, Gabrielle scrambled to climb under the blanket. At first, her face and neck had been on fire; now she felt as if she'd been dunked in icy water.

Xena stopped at her door and said something to Ares. He walked on; slowly, with a soft squeak, the door was pushed ajar.

"Gabrielle?" Xena whispered.

Her face turned to the wall, she breathed as evenly as she could, hoping she wouldn't give herself away. She couldn't, just couldn't face Xena right now.

Gabrielle heard her come closer and stand over the bed, then felt her tug slightly at the bedclothes. She tensed -- *was Xena going to get into bed with her?* -- but instead Xena tucked in the blanket and fixed up her pillow, and then turned and walked away, closing the door almost soundlessly.

Gabrielle sat up, her forehead damp with sweat.

Now what?

She had to know what happened.

The blood was thumping insistently at her temples. *Got to know. Got to know.*

She got up, shuddering as her bare feet touched the unexpected cold wetness of the floor ?- oh yes -- the broken mug...

She walked around, trying to calm herself down.

She could wait until tomorrow morning.

No, she couldn't. Another moment without knowing and she would die.

Maybe they were going to talk about it. Maybe if she went over and listened...

Crazy. That was crazy. She might hear --

The thought made her dizzy and feverish.

Maybe she could risk it. If she heard them... if she heard *that* ... she could always walk away. Anything was better than not knowing.

Gabrielle tiptoed out into the murky hallway, praying to whatever entity was in charge of legs that hers wouldn't fail her.

She stopped outside Ares' room and steeled herself for the worst. She heard nothing at first -- that was good -- and then, listening closer, picked up Xena's muffled voice.

Careful to make no sound, she got down on her knees and put her ear to the door. It was too late to be ashamed of herself.

She had to know.

* ~ * ~ *

"Where do you think he got it?" Xena asked.

She lay relaxed, her head nestled on Ares' shoulder, his arm around her, her hand wandering lazily over his warm, sweat-slick chest. Their lovemaking had been too fast, after all the tension they'd built up on the way back stopping to exchange feverish kisses in a deserted lane here and under a portico there -- fast but still satisfying. They had left the lamp on, and she was glad; more than on any other night, she wanted to see him.

"You know what? I bet it was Sis."

Xena raised her head, frowning a little. She had almost forgotten that Ares, mortal as he was, still had a family of gods ... well, what was left of it after she was done. She pushed back the guilt: she had been protecting her daughter. But even apart from that, something about it bothered her, as if they could still come and reclaim him, despite the choice he'd made.

"You mean -- Aphrodite?"

"Yeah." He ran his hand through her hair, winding a strand of it around his finger. "She popped in a while back -- said she'd have brought me ambrosia but Apollo and the rest of 'em wouldn't let her."

"When was that?"

"Hmm... just before we got to Megara."

Just before Megara... It seemed as if ages had passed since then. That was when Gabrielle begged her to send Ares away, and then changed her mind. Xena shivered and pressed closer to Ares. She wasn't sure what was worse: the thought that she had nearly lost him then, or the memory of Gabrielle's almost-breaking voice saying, *I*

can't go on like this anymore -- and the knowledge that they were still going on like this. And yet what was there to do? It wasn't just that giving up Ares would break her heart; she could make that sacrifice for Gabrielle ... *yes, she could*. But doing that to him after he'd risked his life to save her daughter, after he'd given up his godhood for her a second time -- not on the spur of the moment, not to save her life, but because he chose to stay with her -- that was unthinkable.

"You didn't tell me," Xena said quietly. Would he have taken the ambrosia then if it had been offered to him? Maybe it didn't matter...

Ares twitched a shoulder. "I didn't feel like talking about it."

She sensed his unease, and dimly understood what a tangle of emotions he must have felt after Aphrodite's visit: regret for his lost godhood, confusion about what he would do if he had a chance to get it back, the humiliation of facing his still-divine sister as a common mortal. She reached out to stroke his face.

"It's okay."

He put his hand over hers and closed his eyes.

"That was a smart move," she said after a moment, "what you did with the ambrosia. Wouldn't want to leave something like that lying around."

Ares opened his eyes and grinned at her. "See, I'm not as dumb as you think."

"You think I like dumb guys?"

"A-hah." He pulled her toward him. "So you do admit you like me."

His lips covered hers and she sighed, oblivious to everything but the soft heat of his mouth.

She drew away and looked at him, and touched his face again, brushing her fingertips over his cheek and his lips.

"You think it'll burn forever?" he asked.

"Maybe..."

The contented look on his face turned pensive, a touch of sadness and apprehension clouding his eyes. "After I'm -- "

His voice trailed off and they lay quietly for a while, holding each other.

She needed to ask him, even though she wasn't sure she should, and even though she probably knew the answer.

"Why did you do it?"

Ares' hand lay flat on her back, so warm, so comfortable, so human.

Finally, he said, "I gave up my godhood for you, didn't I? I don't take my gifts back."

His voice was flippant; but when she looked up into his eyes, they were tender and serious.

"What if I'd given you the ambrosia?" she asked. She hadn't thought of this before. "What if it was my gift to you?"

He brushed the hair back from her face, and ran his thumb over the corner of her mouth.

"Would you have taken it with me?"

Slowly, Xena shook her head. "I'd miss you. But I would always choose to -- stay human."

His eyes were locked on hers, as if searching for something.

"Maybe," he said, "that's your gift to me."

A warm wave surged inside her, filling her chest, rising to her eyes and threatening to overflow. She kissed him, and kept kissing him until they both had to pull back and catch their breath, and then leaned forward to kiss him again.

"Ares..."

"What?"

She was still a little afraid to say it. Once she did, there was no turning back, no more pretending that some day she could go back to her life with Gabrielle the way it had been -- and still no conceivable way to avoid destroying at least one of the two people she loved. But she had to say it, now that she knew she wasn't saying it to the God of War.

"I love you."

His eyes widened and he drew in his breath, pulling her close. She thought he was going to kiss her again, but instead he pressed his face into her hair and rocked her quietly in his arms, his broken whisper hot in her ear -- "I love you, Xena -- I love you -- love you so much..."

Then they were quiet again, lying next to each other, her head resting on his arm. After a while she said, "You're not going to miss it?"

"Me?" He chuckled. "Maybe you don't know what *you're* missing." He turned, propping himself up on his elbow, and looked down on her, his eyes twinkling gently. "As a god" -- he pressed his hand to her belly, his fingers splayed -- "I could do this and make you glow..."

"Ares," she murmured, her eyes half-closed. "You *are* making me glow."

Ares laughed and dipped down to kiss her. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

He lay on top of her and slid down, and she trembled and moaned as his mouth trailed to the spot where his hand had been before.

Gabrielle felt as if she had left her body and was watching herself, a small thing in a white shirt huddled on the grubby floor. She noticed that she wasn't crying; she was too numb to cry, too numb to move. It occurred to her, or at least to the part of her that was watching from the outside, that she could pass out right there by the door and Xena would find her. The horror of that thought momentarily jolted her out of her stupor, and she forced herself to get up. Her room, only four doors down the hallway, might as well have been leagues away.

Out of the jumble in her mind, Xena's voice floated up, saying, *I love you*. She stopped and closed her eyes, leaning against the wall, a dry sob clutching at her throat. *She said it to me*, she told herself. *She said it to me*.

No she didn't.

Somehow, she walked on; somehow, eventually, she got to her room, and managed to get into her bed before she sank into a dreamless nothingness.

* ~ * ~ *

Still in the dark, Gabrielle felt something cool and wet touch her forehead. She was aching and burning all over; her eyelids felt heavy and bloated, but somehow she managed to lift them a little. She saw her hands lying still and white on the badly patched gray blanket, as if carved of stone. She moved a finger to make sure they were still alive, still hers.

She opened her eyes wider and saw Xena's worried face leaning over her.

"Hey," Xena said softly.

Gabrielle blinked and licked her lips; her mouth felt as if she'd swallowed a spoonful of mud.

"I, huh" -- she tried to clear her throat. "What's wrong?"

"You're ill," Xena said, adjusting the wet cloth on her forehead. She was sitting on the edge of Gabrielle's bed, in her leather tunic but without armor or weapons. "You wouldn't wake up this morning -- I checked you and you were burning up ..." Her mouth tightened and she looked down. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left you alone last night."

Last night... Gabrielle wondered if the whole thing had been a nightmare.

"It's okay," she said. "How was -- how was the party?"

When Xena raised her eyes, the look on her face was timid, almost guilty.

"What is it?"

Xena looked away. "Nothing."

"Xena..." With an effort, she raised her hand and put it on top of Xena's. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Xena was silent for a moment, as if working herself up for a leap. Finally, she said almost brusquely, "The priest offered Ares ambrosia and he turned it down."

All Gabrielle could do was breathe out a soft, "Oh." She wasn't going to fake shock. She wasn't going to lie anymore.

"He could have had it all," Xena blurted out, as if in spite of herself. "And he did it again."

"He really loves you," Gabrielle whispered. Maybe it was only now that she realized this fully.

It always stopped her heart to see Xena's eyes so soft and vulnerable; only now, this softness was not for her but for Ares, and in a moment it gave way to another look, stricken and scared. Xena leaned closer, and the touch of her lips was gentle and soothing on Gabrielle's forehead. Gabrielle closed her eyes. She didn't want to think about anything, not yet.

"I made something for you to bring down the fever," Xena said, sitting up.

Gabrielle sat up, flinching as the damp cloth slid down to her chest, and took the clay cup from Xena's hand. The bitter shock of the willow-bark brew seared her mouth and made her throat tighten. She drained it all. Xena stroked her hair while she drank, and handed her a cup of water afterwards.

As Xena took the cup from her, a slight chill made Gabrielle shiver, and Xena drew her close and held her for a moment, rubbing her back through the thin cloth of her nightshirt.

"Do you want anything else? I can bring down some porridge or broth from the tavern -- "

"Not right now, thanks. I think I'll get some more sleep."

"Okay." Xena eased her down on her back, smoothing the pillow for her, pulling up the blanket.

"You don't have to stay with me," Gabrielle muttered as she closed her eyes, surrendering to a feverish, foggy, oddly pleasurable weakness.

When she woke up some time later, she had a dim recollection of the dream she'd had, a dream in which Ares was a god again and she and Xena were trying to stop him from doing something nasty to the Amazons. The sound of Ares' voice jolted her, and

for a hazily alarming moment dream and reality were mixed in her head -- but it was only Ares telling Xena that she needed new boots.

Gabrielle stirred; her bedclothes and her nightshirt were damp and sticky with sweat, and she was still weak, but she also felt a strange lightness. She turned and opened her eyes. A candle was burning on the small bedside table; Xena sat by the bed mending her boot while Ares slouched against the door.

Xena looked up with an anxious smile, her eyes golden in the candlelight.

"How are you feeling?"

"Much better." She sat up and marveled at the realization that she was hungry, and that being hungry felt good. "I think I'm ready to eat."

"I'll bring you something."

"I can come down to -- "

"No, no -- you stay here." Xena reached over to smooth her hair. "I'll be right back. Chicken soup and bread -- how does that sound?"

"Sounds great."

As Xena got up, Gabrielle looked over to Ares, who was shifting his feet and studying the chipped paint on the wall.

"Hello, Ares," she said.

He gave her a startled look, as if he had only just noticed her presence, and mumbled, "Hello."

Gabrielle watched him open the door and leave with Xena, and listened to their steps fading down the hallway. She got out of bed, walked to the window, still a little unsteady on her feet, and opened the shutters. It was late; the cloudless sky had turned a deep blue, and the gray buildings looked golden in the setting sun.

She leaned on the windowsill, letting the breeze caress her face. It occurred to her that in the end, all her planning and plotting, all her cleverness, all her acting had only accomplished one thing: to bring Xena and Ares even closer together, to strengthen their bond -- possibly make it unbreakable -- and ensure that she could never again ask Xena to send Ares away. Yet somehow, she felt no anger at this thought, no bitterness, no despair. It was just a fact, just as it was a fact that the day was almost over.

Maybe it was just what she deserved.

In her determination to win Xena back, she had been willing to do anything. Hurt Xena. Deny Ares his chance to be a good man. Send the God of War back to Olympus. Betray her Amazon sisters. Betray herself.

Every step of the way, she had told herself that somehow, she'd fix it all when this was over. She had acted with so little thought of the consequences, without even stopping to think that if Ares regained his godhood, he might want payback for what the Amazons had put him through. Somehow, she had talked herself into believing that whatever she did until Ares was out of their lives didn't matter -- wasn't quite real. But everything was real, and nothing could be fixed.

"Thank you, Ares," she whispered into the dusk. She had thanked him once before for giving up his godhood and saving her life; now he had given it up again, for whatever reasons of his own -- and maybe saved her soul. Could she have lived with herself if her plan had succeeded? If she could, that would have been the worst thing of all.

The door opened, and Xena came in, carrying a tray. She stopped and frowned.

"What are you doing up? And by the window -- "

"I'm fine, Xena -- really." She looked at the steaming bowl. "That smells wonderful."

She sat down on the bed and started to eat, savoring every mouthful as the invigorating warmth melted into her body.

"First thing tomorrow morning," Xena said, "I'm going down to the docks to tell the captain we're not getting on this boat. We'll catch the next one after you get a good rest."

"Don't be silly. I told you I'm all right."

"You had a pretty bad fever just a few hours ago."

"And now I'm fine."

"Well, we'll just see how you feel in the morning." Xena sat down next to her. "I've found out a few more things about those pirates from a couple of sailors. There's no real pattern to their attacks -- the next strike could come at any time."

They talked some more about the pirates and the plans to fight them, and after a while Gabrielle noticed that Xena was getting drowsy.

"Go get some sleep," she said, stroking her arm. "You're tired. And you've -- we've got a big day ahead of us."

"Yeah." Xena yawned and rubbed her eyes. "Want me to sleep here?"

"Not tonight. It's a pretty small bed" -- Gabrielle smiled -- "and we both need a good rest." *And I need to think.*

They hugged and she rested her head on Xena's shoulder, and felt the warmth of Xena's lips on her neck.

"Okay then." Xena got up. "If the fever comes back -- I left some more potion here" -- she pointed to the table, yawning again -- "and there's apple cider... and water in the

basin..."

"Thanks. Now go on before you pass out in the hallway."

Left alone, Gabrielle lay down and stared at the wall, as if trying to find meaning in the bizarre pattern created by the peeling paint and the traces of flies and mosquitoes squashed by previous occupants.

She had to understand how this could have happened; how she could have lost her way so completely, where she had gone wrong. Maybe it was when she decided that she would rather give Xena her blessing to bed Ares than risk losing her, or even risk having Xena's feelings for Ares come between them. Or maybe it was long before that. She thought of the time she lay ill in a cave, still racked by guilt over killing Korah -- of Xena's anguished cry, "I set you on a path you were never meant to walk," and her own words: "Any path is okay, Xena, as long as it's with you."

It wasn't okay.

Oh, maybe it was right for Ares. It had occurred to her before that she and Ares had both given up everything they were, everything they'd held dear, for the woman they loved. Only, for Ares, being simply the man who loved Xena and walked her path had to be an improvement over what he had been before: a full-time killer, more or less, drunk on destruction and power. But she -- she had wanted to find a way beyond hatred and killing. She had been wrong to give up fighting completely, she knew that now; but once, even as a fighter, she had made it her goal to avoid bloodshed, to bring compassion to her battles. She had almost forgotten that -- and lost something vital that Xena needed from her ... no, not just that. She had lost something that made her herself.

And, finally, she had followed Xena's path to a place that was -- or should have been -- unthinkable.

This time, when the memory of their last night in Megara crept up on her, she didn't push it back into its corner the way she had before. The night she had gotten drunk to put herself out of her misery, and then ... the rest was a blur, but she remembered that she had hurt Xena. "*That's what you want, isn't it ...?*" Maybe a part of her had really believed that she could please Xena by being like that -- that she was too nice and gentle in bed and Xena would always want more, and so she had to give her more, even if it meant becoming someone she wasn't. But it had been anger and desperation too, and wanting Xena to hurt the way she was hurting. She wasn't sure which was worse.

At least she'd been drunk then. She didn't have that excuse when she went even further; when she saw the Amazons' ambrosia and thought she had found a way to solve her problem.

In the end, she had become someone she barely knew -- someone she couldn't respect or even like.

Until I'm lost -- and then it seems that death is near me...

The words made her shudder. *Lost...* Once, the thought of it had seemed beautiful. Now, it was frightening.

She had to find herself again. There was only one way to do that, no matter how it hurt.

When she imagined it -- actually saying good-bye, hugging and kissing Xena for what could be the last time, riding away with the knowledge that every step was taking her further away from her one and only love -- the odd sense of peace she had felt since her awakening broke down, and she started to weep quietly, the tears streaming down her face and soaking the lumpy pillow. She thought of a day long ago when she took Xena's hand and got up in the saddle and rode away with her, wanting to see the world, wanting adventure, wanting to be a hero and a warrior just like Xena. But the world had been brutal, and the adventures had turned to nightmares, and the warrior's way was not for her. In the end, all she had really cared about was being with Xena. And now, that was over.

Other memories came to her: memories of tender moments by the campfire, of being comforted in Xena's arms after the horror of her first kill, of washing each other's hair and laughing at each other's jokes, and so many other memories, good and bad, heartwarming and heartbreaking, and Gabrielle cried and cried until she drifted into sleep again.

By the time she woke up, the candle had burned out. She got out of bed and stumbled toward the window. The first streak of grey was already showing on the black sky.

Kneeling on the floor, Gabrielle reached into her saddlebag and groped for a candle. Her fingers brushed against a piece of faintly warm glass, and for a moment she was petrified. The rest of the ambrosia, the half she had kept -- she'd forgotten all about it. For a moment she felt feverish again, fighting back a wave of nausea as she jerked her hand away. She'd have to dispose of it somehow.

She found the candle and lit it, then went over to the basin to wash her face. The apple cider Xena had left for her was on the bedside table, in her favorite clay cup; she drank it slowly. She got dressed, and put away her nightshirt in one of her two saddlebags. Looking around the room, she picked up a few more possessions: the scroll with Virgil's poem, the cup, a flask of scented body oil, a mirror in which she glimpsed her haggard face. Fortunately, there wasn't much packing to do.

Now came the hard part.

She picked up the candle, tiptoed out into the hallway and headed toward Xena's door.

Halfway there, she stopped and stood still for a few moments, thinking. Then she turned around and went to Ares' room.

* ~ * ~ *

Holding her breath, Gabrielle closed the door behind her. It felt strange being here, in this room where, along with the stale smell common to cheap inns, she could catch a faint, unmistakable male scent. Ares' leathers lay on the lone chair in the room in a

messier heap than she expected, his boots, swordbelt and sword flung casually by the wall. Lowering the candle, she saw his pendant gleam softly on the bedside table next to a half-eaten bread loaf. Ares was sprawled on the bed, his blanket half off, his breath coming out in even puffs, his face peaceful. *He had made love to Xena in this bed.* She looked down, vague anxiety fluttering in her stomach; an image ran through her mind of Ares kneeling on the floor with his face buried between Xena's thighs, her body arching toward him. She tossed her head and put the candle down on the bedside table.

"Ares," she said.

He didn't respond, and she repeated it louder until he stirred and muttered an annoyed "Mmph."

"Ares, wake up."

Ares opened his eyes and blinked at the light. "Um -- wha- ?" He sat up brusquely. "Are you crazy?"

"I need to talk to you."

He eyed her so warily that she wondered if he thought she was going to attack him or --

"All right," he said, throwing off the blanket -- she flinched back before she saw that he was wearing those rather threadbare blue linen pants -- and slinging his feet over the edge of the bed. "What's going on?"

She wasn't sure how and where to start. Finally she said, "Promise me you're not going to tell Xena."

After a moment he said uncertainly, "All right."

Gabrielle sighed and looked down at her clasped hands.

"It was me," she said.

"What was you?"

"The -- the" -- for some reason she couldn't bring herself to say the word. "The other day at the temple..."

Her words hung in a silence that seemed to stretch into infinity. Downstairs, a door slammed.

When Ares spoke, his voice was very quiet. "What?"

She forced herself to look at him. She expected him to be furious, or maybe to offer her mocking congratulations, something like, "Well played." Instead, he was staring at her, squinting a little, his mouth hanging open. It would have been funny, except that he looked hurt and she couldn't bear it.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You're *sorry*?" Ares grimaced, the hurt in his face wiped away by anger. He rose abruptly and came at her, grabbing her shoulders, backing her into the wall. "You little bitch -- do you know what you -- "

His voice broke off. ... *what you put me through*, she finished for him mentally.

Ares let go of her and balled his fists, breathing hard; for a moment she thought he would hit her. He clenched his jaw and lowered his eyes, then lurched back to the bed and sat down heavily, his shoulders sagging.

"Where the hell did you get it?" he asked, still staring down.

"From the Amazons."

"The Amazons... You mean -- they really had it?"

"Artemis gave it to them. I think it was for safekeeping -- you know, as insurance against the Twilight -- "

"Artemis..." There was a puzzled note in his voice. "So maybe it was really her in my dream..."

"They didn't know they had it -- she told them it was sacred ointment..."

"And you stole it and set up that whole thing with what's-his-name -- Geryon."

"Yeah."

He snorted. "Smart."

"Don't say that," she whispered.

Ares raised his head, and when their eyes met she saw something like understanding in his look.

"You *really* wanted to get rid of me, huh."

"I couldn't take it anymore," she said.

He nodded, as if thinking it over. Then he gave her a crooked grin.

"So that's your idea of getting rid of a guy -- try to make him a god. Once a goody-two-shoes, always a goody-two-shoes."

She shook her head with a short, edgy laugh.

"And you thought that if I got my godhood back, I'd clear out," he said, almost with disbelief -- perhaps marveling at her naiveté, perhaps wondering if she had been right;

she couldn't tell.

She needed to ask him something else. "Ares... If you had gotten it back -- would you have wanted to punish the Amazons in some way?"

"Hmm..." He scrunched up his eyebrows. "Nothing too bad. Maybe have them sacrifice their firstborn children for the next couple of centuries or so." He chuckled at her stricken look. "Don't tell me you fell for that one!"

She said nothing, and his mocking expression softened into a blurry reflective look, as if he himself wasn't sure about the answer to her question -- perhaps didn't want to be sure. After a moment he asked, "Why did you tell me?"

"I had to tell someone." It came to her, then. "Maybe it was because I knew you wouldn't ?- wouldn't judge me."

She remembered what he had said to her long ago, about Xena: *I would never judge her*. Now, she could understand why Xena needed that.

"So," he said. "You've told me. Now what?"

"Now -- I'm going away."

Ares stared at her, as if he had half expected her announcement but was still taken aback by it. "Why?"

"You're asking me why?" The sound she made could have been either a bitter laugh or a short sob. "I told you -- I can't go on like this. It's not just her and you, it's ... I -- I don't know who I am anymore."

"You think too much," he said. The amusement in his eyes had a touch of warmth.

"Don't tell me you'll miss me."

He arched an eyebrow. "Who knows -- maybe I've gotten used to you..."

It was hard to tell if he was joking or not.

On a sudden impulse, Gabrielle stepped closer and leaned down toward him. Startled, he ducked out of the way, and his forehead collided rather painfully with her chin.

"Ow." He rubbed his head and shot her an alarmed look. "What are you doing?"

She felt herself blushing. "I wanted to kiss you good-bye."

He looked surprised and rather touched, though she still couldn't be sure that he wasn't making fun of her. She leaned forward again, putting her hand on his arm, and pressed her lips to his cheek, feeling the warmth of his skin and the tingly hint of stubble. He patted her shoulder a little stiffly, as if she were an animal that he didn't quite know what to do with; it reminded her of his awkward first attempt to pet that dog they'd found on the farm.

She stood up straight.

"Good-bye, Ares."

"What are you going to do?" he asked, and immediately looked like he wished he hadn't.

"I'm not sure. Spend some time with my family. Write... I'll be okay." She paused and added quietly, "I know you'll take good care of her."

He cleared his throat and looked away. "You're leaving right now?"

"After I talk to her."

She picked up the candle and went to the door. Already about to leave, she turned and saw him staring at her thoughtfully and a bit apprehensively; she wondered if he thought that Xena might kick him out rather than let her leave.

"Good luck," she said.

"Yeah," he muttered. "You too."

* ~ * ~ *

"I'll come back for you soon. Promise."

Xena pressed her cheek against the warm silkiness of Argo's neck. Unable to go back to sleep, she had come down to the inn's stables to check on the horses, which would be staying here for the trip to Lemnos. There was a peculiar comfort in the familiar smell of horses and hay and ripe straw, in the animal warmth that breathed in the still-dark air.

"So you think Gabrielle is okay?" She patted the mare's muzzle. "Yeah ... she'll be all right. We're going to be all right." If there was still a "we..." Ever since Megara -- and she didn't want to think about what happened there, Gabrielle hadn't been herself that night -- there had been a kind of emptiness between them; there had been moments when it seemed as if Gabrielle couldn't bear to be touched by her.

Argo snorted softly, and Xena shook her head and sighed. "Who am I kidding... Even you know better than that." She was silent for a moment, running her fingers through Argo's mane. "I bet you're disappointed -- you expected better from me, didn't you. Guess I can't fight or think my way out of this one... And what am I doing talking to *you* about it, huh? You shouldn't even know about this kind of stuff."

She patted Argo's flank. *You know things are bad when you can't even talk about it with your horse.*

She heard a rustle behind her and looked back sharply. The blue-tinted shadows moved, and a small figure emerged into the cloud of light from the lantern Xena had put down on the ground.

"Gabrielle."

She fought back the knowledge that something was wrong.

"I figured you might be here," Gabrielle said. Xena stepped closer to her and smiled. *Everything was all right.*

"Hey." She reached out, taking Gabrielle's hands; they were chilly and a bit moist. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay." Gabrielle's lips twitched and she looked down. "I -- Xena..."

"What -- what is it?" She hugged Gabrielle, stroking her hair and her cool downy back, wanting to hold her forever, to chase away her own growing dread. Gabrielle leaned into her and relaxed for a moment, sighing into her breast -- and then pulled back and looked up, so that their eyes met.

"I have to -- " In the half-darkness, Gabrielle's eyes were a deep misty green. "I'm -- I'm not going to Lemnos."

"That's all right." Xena pressed her hand to Gabrielle's cheek. "I told you we should stay here until you're well -- we'll just catch the next boat."

"Xena..." Gabrielle caught her wrist and held it. "That's -- not what I meant."

So this was it then. The ground under Xena's feet was gone for a moment, and she felt dizzy. Then it passed.

"You..." she said. "You're -- "

"I have to." Gabrielle spoke with a desperate intensity, as if trying to convince Xena or maybe herself that she meant it, or that she was doing the right thing. "I'll always love you, Xena. But I have to do this."

As Gabrielle let go of her wrist, spots of light quivered and danced before Xena's eyes. Hopelessly, she tried to hold on and put the pieces back together. "Gabrielle -- wait -- I could -- "

"Don't tell me you can send Ares away," Gabrielle said. "You can't -- not now. And besides..." She shook her head, and the sudden harshness that had come into her voice gave way to a vague wistfulness. "It isn't just about you and Ares."

"You mean..." *She deserved it; she had taken Gabrielle's loyalty and love for granted, and now...* "You mean there's -- "

"There's no one else." Gabrielle almost smiled. "I mean, it's about me, too. I need to understand some things about myself -- who I am and what my path is..."

Xena lowered her eyes. She had thought about it herself all these years, had even said it to Gabrielle. *I set you on a path you were never meant to walk...* The memory was

achingly vivid in her mind. And Gabrielle had told her that any path was okay as long as --

No. She wasn't even going to think it. She had no right, just as she had no right to pull Gabrielle into her arms and smother her with kisses the way she longed to do right now, looking at Gabrielle's tender face and soft half-open lips. After all the pain she'd caused Gabrielle, there was one thing she could still do for her.

"I understand," she said quietly.

"You'll always be a part of me," Gabrielle said. "That's not going to change."

That hurt more than anything, more than if Gabrielle had screamed at her, hit her, called her names.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle." She choked back tears. "I'm so sorry for everything..."

"It isn't anyone's fault. Xena, I want you to know -- if I could go back to the day we first met -- if had to make that choice all over again -- I would still follow you."

They hugged then, and as Xena rested her head on Gabrielle's shoulder she tried to push away thoughts of all the things they would never share again.

"No matter where your path takes you," she said, "I'll be with you."

"I know." Gabrielle drew back, her eyes huge and shiny. "We'll see each other again, I know we will. Once I -- get my bearings." She paused, and her lips moved in a soundless "I love you."

Xena took Gabrielle's hands and lifted them up to her face, holding them gently, and pressed her cheek and then her mouth to the back of Gabrielle's hand. Then she knew she had to let go.

She stood back while Gabrielle went over to Clio, led her out of the pen and began to strap on her saddle. It was something she had seen Gabrielle do hundreds of times; only now, Gabrielle was leaving. A bleak heaviness coiled around Xena's heart as she looked away. Day was now streaming in through the open door of the stable, and its light made the lantern fade.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

Gabrielle looked back at her. "To Potadeia at first. Then maybe to Athens." She turned away again, checking the harness to make sure it was securely fastened. "Don't worry about me... I'll be all right."

"I know you will be," Xena said.

Quietly, Gabrielle added, "And so will you."

She re-checked the harness and went back to the door where, Xena only now noticed, she had put down her saddlebags. She was really going away.

Don't go, please don't leave me. But she could only say it in her mind.

They didn't hug this time, only held hands.

"Good-bye, Xena."

"Gabrielle..." Xena moved her lips but her voice failed her at first. *Please don't go.* Aloud, she said, "Take care of yourself."

Gabrielle's fingertips brushed against her palms, and then they weren't touching anymore.

"You too." With a small sigh, Gabrielle turned to Argo and patted her on the neck. "Bye, Argo."

She was really leaving. Xena pressed her lips together.

She watched as Gabrielle got in the saddle and rode toward the door, into a burst of sunlight that made her and her horse look silvery-white like an apparition.

Xena stood still, listening as the hoofbeat receded down the still-quiet street.

She leaned against Argo's warm flank, the tears flowing freely now.

Then she said it. "I love you, Gabrielle..."

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Shielding her eyes, Gabrielle looked up at the sun. It was about an hour past noon; the ship carrying Xena was already out to sea. A few times, riding along a mostly deserted narrow road, she had wondered if there was still time to turn back. Not anymore.

She unhooked the flask from her belt to get a sip of water and then, for no particular reason, remembered the ambrosia she still had in her saddlebag.

After a few minutes, she slowed down and turned off the path, and rode through a sparse grove and up the slope of a low hill beyond which, not too far, lay the sea.

Soon, she reached the rocky beach, where small pebbles crunched under Clio's hooves and where a few seagulls, startled from their meal by her appearance, flew up with shrill desolate cries. Far down the shore, on a small pier, a group of fishermen were hauling in their load; nobody else was around. Gabrielle dipped into her bag, found the small flask and clutched it in her hand.

"Wait here, girl," she said, patting Clio's neck.

She undressed and wandered into the glittering blue surf, wincing a little as the pebbles dug into the soles of her feet. The cool water swirled at her ankles, then lapped gently at her hips, her waist, her breasts, and showered her face with tiny droplets. She closed her eyes for a moment and tasted the salt on her lips. Then she

swam forward, further and further out, until she looked back and Clio was just a white spot on the grey beach. She held out her arm and unclenched her fist.

Staring into the distance, Gabrielle noticed a dark dot near the horizon. It could have been a rock, or the ship that was carrying Xena.

Gabrielle turned and swam back to the shore. At least she could be sure that the ambrosia wouldn't fall into the wrong hands -- though she hoped that someday Xena wouldn't have to do battle with a crazed immortal shark.

* ~ * ~ *

"Any more choppy waters, and I'm reconsidering this whole mortality deal. I mean, having to walk is bad enough when *you're* going somewhere. When it's the floor going somewhere -- that's *bad*."

Ares rubbed his shoulder, sore from getting slammed into a mast before, and glanced at Xena. She stood looking out at the now-calm sea, her profile dark in the deep violet dusk.

After a moment she turned to him.

"Huh?"

"Nothing," he said.

She turned again, her hands tight on the railing, looking into the distance again, the lazy breeze swirling tendrils of her hair.

Ares stepped back and sat down on a damp burlap-covered barrel, his shoulders hunched, watching her.

Well, at least they were here on the ship together. He had had a moment of panic that morning, when, after waiting for Xena to come out, he finally went to knock on her door -- and, getting no response, had pushed the door and looked in. The sun-drenched emptiness of the room was like a ball of white lightning bursting into his consciousness: *She was gone -- dammit all, she had gone off with Gabrielle rather than let the girl leave.* Ares lumbered toward the bed and sank down on it, breathing in hard ragged spurts. Maybe the little bitch had never meant to leave at all -- just a setup to distract him while the two of them ran off ... but no, he couldn't believe that Xena would do that to him ... maybe he wasn't even sure that Gabrielle would. There was no way he was going after them; the mere thought of it made his face burn. A nasty little voice in his head laughed at him for being such a fool, and slyly reminded him that the Amazons probably had more ambrosia left; just then, wiping the sweat from his forehead, Ares raised his eyes and noticed the chakram hooked on a bedpost. Xena could leave a lot of things behind, but not her chakram. He looked around. The

hilt of Xena's sword gleamed on the small table by the window, the rest of it hidden in the shadows along with her armor. He took a deep breath and rose, his heartbeat slowing down. How stupid to get all worked up, he told himself; of course he had never really thought Xena could run out on him like that. Not now.

He was headed downstairs, to see if she was in the tavern having breakfast, when he ran into her in the hallway. She stopped, close enough for him to catch the faint scent of hay and horses on her; but there was something about her stiff posture and her blank face that seemed to shield her in an invisible cocoon. They both pretended that he didn't notice she had been crying. Ares wondered if he should tell her that he knew Gabrielle was gone; he decided it was best not to, though it almost hurt to feel her effort as she worked up the strength to tell him. Then she said, matter-of-factly, "Gabrielle left," and he didn't know what to say except, "Oh." They had barely spoken since, except about practical things.

And now, here they were, headed for Lemnos. Much of the time since the ship had sailed, Xena had been standing silently on the deck, just as she stood now. Watching her, Ares thought of waking up with her the next morning. This time it brought him no joy.

Dammit, he was *not* going to just sit there watching her mope around.

Ares got up and walked over to Xena. For a moment he stood by her side, gazing with her into the thickening night. The moon was bright now, a chunk of silver that threw a rippling trail over the darkened waters.

"Come on." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Let's go to the cabin."

"Okay," she said. She turned toward him, and he moved a few strands of windswept hair from her face. The corners of her mouth quivered, and he thought he saw the tiny curve of a smile.

"Come on," he said again.

Down in the cabin, they had bread and salted fish, and talked briefly about how long the trip to Lemnos would take, depending on the weather. "It's getting late," Xena said when they had finished eating. "We should be turning in." She removed her armor and gauntlets and boots, her motions strangely deliberate and a little slow as if she were moving in water, and finally her leather tunic, keeping only the thin linen undershirt.

She sat down next to him on the bunk, and then Ares couldn't take it anymore. He held her tight, pressing his face into her warm salty hair.

"I'll make you happy," he whispered. "I can make you happy."

Xena's shoulders shook slightly; she sighed and twisted her body around so she could kiss him.

"Come to bed," she said softly.

He got out of his leathers, leaving them piled up on the floor. Xena blew out the oil lamp; in the darkness, he could feel the boat rock gently as he knelt in front of her and kissed her thighs, trailing his lips upwards as he pushed up her shirt. She tensed, and her hands clenched on his shoulders.

"Just come to bed," she said again.

His eyes half-used to the dark now, he could see her moving as she got under the blanket. He joined her and they huddled together, quietly kissing and stroking each other, until he was hard against her belly; she squeezed his buttocks in encouragement and breathed a husky "Yes" as he slid on top of her and lay between her thighs. She bucked under him, wrapping her legs around his hips, running her hands over his back, kissing him -- and yet -- and yet -- it wasn't right. Something inside her had gone limp, dead; it was as if she were doing it out of obligation, as if she wanted to want it, wanted to persuade them both that she wanted it. He forced himself to stop moving and she arched into him again.

"Stop," he said hoarsely. "Just stop, okay?"

She sighed. "Okay..."

He pressed his lips to her cheek, then rolled off her with a small grunt and turned toward the wall, shuddering as his cock grazed the rough sheet. A dull pain was growing in his skull, and the throbbing in his groin was almost unbearable.

"I'm sorry," Xena muttered, and he felt her hand touch his shoulder, then slide down his side and over to his stomach. She started to stroke him, and he groaned, "No, don't -- " but his hips were already jerking and it was over, a wretched little orgasm that fizzled almost as soon as it began and left him feeling empty and sick.

After a few moments Ares turned and lay on his back, squirming as he felt the sticky wetness of the sheet. Disgust at mortal flesh welled inside him; there wouldn't even be a chance of a decent bath on this boat. Xena lay next to him, her skin barely touching his, and for a moment it seemed as if Gabrielle were there with them, dividing them. He drew her closer and felt her body grow rigid.

"Go to sleep," he said, patting her hair. As she settled against him, he wanted to tell her that he knew she missed Gabrielle, except that he wasn't sure how to say it or

whether to say it. It was almost impossible for two people to get comfortable in such a narrow space, but if one of them were to move to the upper bunk now, it would feel like slamming a door between them.

When he woke up some time later, his muscles were stiff and he had a cramp in his neck; it was still dark, and there was no Xena. He got up and checked the upper bunk; she wasn't there either. Muttering a few curses, he pulled on his pants and went to the deck.

She stood by the railing in her leather tunic, still staring into the distance as before, her shoulders waxen in the moonlight, the wind whipping at her hair. Ares stopped behind a mast; she turned her head, and he saw the glitter of moisture on her cheek.

He didn't want her to see him; he didn't want to go back below, either. Without any particular aim, he wandered to the other side of the ship, the surface of the deck scratchy and clammy under his feet. A couple of crewmen manning the deck eyed him with idle curiosity. He stopped, leaning over the railing. The waves foamed against the side of the boat, spraying his face with a salty mist. He looked up and watched as the moon rolled behind the cover of a cloud.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ares saw a golden flash next to him and felt a warm glow brush his skin.

Aphrodite. He had forgotten all about her. *Great -- of all the times to pick for a family visit...*

"Hey!" she said. "Aren't you going to say hello to your sister?"

He sighed and turned. Aphrodite beamed at him, lovely as ever, a vision of pink and white and gold that made the night behind her look even blacker.

"Sis. What's up?"

"What's up? You tell *me!* The warrior babe's all yours now, huh? Oh, I know she's a little bummed..." -- she gave Ares a sympathetic pout -- "I mean, *duh!* she loves little Gabby, probably always will. But hey -- I guess she had to pick one of you in the end, right?" She punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Way to go, bro! You won my bet for me."

Ares stared at his sister for a moment, then swept her up and lifted her in his arms. Aphrodite giggled, startled and obviously pleased. Taken by surprise, she didn't have time to vanish into the ether when he tossed her overboard, and he felt a little better when he heard her squeal indignantly as she hit the water with a loud splash.

CHAPTER 11

"Storm's coming."

Xena looked up at the sky blanketed in dark bluish-gray clouds, shielding her eyes from the dazzle of silver at their edges. As if in response to her words, wind swept over the hills, flattening the silky grass, flapping at the horses' manes, startling the trees into loud rasping whispers.

"We can wait it out in that village." Ares pointed to the huddle of tiny houses in the valley below.

"Race you there," Xena shouted over another gust of wind. The first heavy droplets hit them as they rode down the hillside, and they barely had time to wrap themselves in cloaks before the downpour began. They raced the storm then, lashed by slanted jets of rain, squinting and gasping as the cool water streamed down their faces. By the time they reached the village, torrents of muddy water were rushing down the main street, splashing in cascades from under the horses' hooves. Luckily the inn was nearby. As they tied up their horses in the shed, a tow-headed kid of about twelve dove in to ask, "Take care of your horse, Miss? Sir?", and Ares threw him a coin before Xena could say that they'd do it themselves.

Leaving the boy to his task, they picked up their bags and ran inside the inn's murky warm anteroom, where rainwater pattered into a bucket on the floor. They looked at each other and laughed breathlessly, their cloaks and hair dripping.

The stocky middle-aged woman who had come out to meet them, a candle in hand, gave them a sullen look as if she were not only taken aback but almost offended by their mirth.

"You'll be wanting a room?" she asked, scratching her arm under a worn-out woolen shawl.

Xena nodded, taking off her sodden cloak and shaking off her hair. "Yeah."

"That'll be four dinars." The innkeeper turned and shuffled ahead, leading the way around a corner into a narrow hallway. "If you want to warm yourselves, there's a fire in the kitchen," she said grudgingly as she let them into the room.

After the door closed, Xena threw down her saddlebag and looked around for a place to hang up her cloak; she found nothing more suitable than the backboard of the bed. There was no other furniture except for a wicker chair with a ripped seat and a tripod by the bedside. The room, too small to look bare, had a blatant shabbiness about it, unrelieved by so much as an attempt at decoration; the air was soaked with a dusty dankness, and when she lit the stubby candle on the tripod, it was hard to tell the shadows on the coarse wooden wall from the stains and streaks of dirt.

Xena got out of her armor, sat on the bed and began removing her boots. She looked

up to see Ares take off his vest and turn to her; the candle's reflections glittered in the tiny beads of water on his face and chest and deepened the soft brown of his eyes.

"So," he said, throwing the vest down on the chair. "We can go down and sit by the fire in the kitchen -- *or* -- we can get warm right here."

Xena's leather tunic and skirt landed on the chair, on top of his vest. She flopped back on the bed, smiling, listening to the racket of the storm outside.

"Get warm right here," she said.

* ~ * ~ *

It had been about five months since she had sailed to Lemnos with Ares, and Gabrielle had gone her separate way.

The first few days, on the boat, had been the worst. Xena had spent most of that journey withdrawn into her own world, a world filled with Gabrielle. Her mind had swarmed with memories of friendship and love, of fishing and cooking together and scrubbing each other's backs in a tub, and listening to Gabrielle's stories by the campfire; of Gabrielle's face made helpless and almost bewildered by the pleasure of lovemaking, of laughing together and facing death together; of all the times when she had kept her humanity thanks to Gabrielle's stubborn compassion, and when she had watched in horror as life's cruelties threatened to crush Gabrielle's light. Other things came to her too: images of Gabrielle somewhere out there, riding through the countryside, lonely and hurting. Ares had quickly given up on trying to distract her or lift her spirits, and had limited his attentions to bringing her food, dragging her outside when she spent too much time cooped up in their cabin, and gently prodding her back below if she was still up on the deck late at night. At the sight of him, or even at the thought of him in those days, anger and guilt had jostled and pulled inside her, leaving little room for more tender feelings.

She had stood on the deck staring into the empty sky, and what stared back at her was the fact, as implacable as death, that she had let Ares separate her and Gabrielle. It struck her that she had been so moved by Ares' love and his sacrifice because she had considered him incapable of love and selflessness; had she taken Gabrielle for granted because Gabrielle had always been good and loving and giving? Ares had changed for her, and that made her feel good -- knowing that she had helped a tiny spark of light grow inside the dark god to whom she had once been bound through her own darkness. That was it: she'd been so busy patting herself on the back for being Ares' guiding light that she had lost the friend and soulmate who had guided *her*, without whom she couldn't have stayed on her path. Maybe she had taken -- *stolen* Gabrielle's light and given it to Ares. That thought clenched like a stiff cold hand around her heart, the chill of it tingling right through to her fingertips.

Sometimes, in those long hours of looking at the sea, pacing around the deck, and lying on the bunk, she wanted to resent Ares and couldn't; sometimes, she resented him and hated herself for it. Xena reminded herself that he hadn't driven Gabrielle away, and that he hadn't seduced *her*; she was the one who had gone to him on the farm. (Once, the thought squirmed into her mind that it was Gabrielle who had told her to go to him; but she quickly flinched away from it --she would not sink so low as

to blame Gabrielle.) Whatever she could hold against him, all he had done since then was love her and share in her life, and risk his life to save her daughter, and finally give up his godhood for her again. If she froze him out now, she would be punishing him for the best there was in him. Only, at that point, she wasn't sure she had any love left to give.

In the six nights on the ship, she and Ares had made love once, after that disastrous first time. They still bunked together, and she still wanted him; except that, no matter what her body wanted, something was wilting and dying inside her soul. One night, when they settled on the bunk, she felt him shiver and draw in his breath as her hand slid over his thigh, and suddenly she couldn't resist touching him through the thin linen of his pants. He shook under her touch and made a stifled sound, and the heat rose inside her in response. Already on top of him, she thought of Gabrielle and almost willed herself to stop; but he pressed into her urgently, his breath thick with need, and she knew she couldn't do this to him anymore -- even if she could do it to herself. She wanted it to be quick, but he grabbed her hips to slow her down, and then another wave of heat overtook her and she thought of nothing else.

When it was over, she kissed him and laid her head on his chest; but, instead of contentment, the dismal emptiness of the last few days began seeping into her again. Ares pulled her up and stroked her face, sweeping back her hair, and she knew that his tenderness was the hardest thing for her to bear right now. She jerked her shoulder, and he let her slip out of his arms and turn away. A few moments later, he kissed her neck, and then the warmth of him next to her was gone and she heard him clamber up on the upper bunk. She stretched and turned on her back, torn between guilt and relief.

Once they had reached Lemnos, with no trouble from the pirates, things got better. Xena was on the job now. The pain of losing Gabrielle was still there, a constant presence, or rather an absence always felt like a lost limb; but shutting out pain when she focused on the task at hand was nothing new. And her bond of comradeship with Ares was tangible again, even if the ghost of her loss still hovered between them like a patch of chilly fog.

The pirate band, rumored to be anywhere from twenty to a hundred strong, had long eluded capture, spending a lot of time on the open seas and then hiding out in different places on the island's rocky shore. A few times, the government of Lemnos had sent out as bait a merchant ship that carried an undercover fighting force disguised as merchants or slaves; but, by some unerring instinct, the pirates always stayed away. Xena wanted to infiltrate the band, and got the local authorities to agree to a risky scheme: she would go to the pirates with a tip about an incoming merchant vessel laden with goods, and the Lemnians would send a messenger ahead to warn the ship's crew to offer no resistance.

Wearing borrowed leathers, not quite as eye-catching as their regular clothes and more fitting for the role of down-and-out warriors trying their luck on the wrong side of the law, Xena and Ares went over to the rocks and caves on the shore in the hope of bumping into the pirates. It wasn't long before they found themselves staring at the sharp points of half a dozen swords. The chief, Nikia, a tall redhead whose strong angular features were marred by a badly healed broken nose, listened dourly to their story and made it clear that she suspected a trap. Finally, she said she would go after the ship -- on one condition: the two new arrivals would stay behind, chained, closely

guarded, and ready to be killed on the spot if the band ran into trouble or didn't return by noon the next day. Xena coolly agreed, signaling Ares with her eyes to play along, and they let themselves be disarmed, manacled, and chained to the wall of a dank cave, with nothing to do except watch their guards play dice.

"Why do I let you drag me into this stuff?" Ares grumbled, only half-joking as he tried in vain to get comfortably seated, and Xena felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Because," she said softly. Their eyes met for a moment, and then he flashed her his wicked little grin.

"Oh yeah," he said. "That's right."

The chain was just long enough for her to move over and kiss him, and they barely heard the hooting, clapping and lewd suggestions from the guards.

The hunting party came back at dawn with the loot, and Xena and Ares were freed and given their weapons back. "You can stay," Nikia said, then added, "Finders' fee," and threw each of them a small but hefty pouch of gold coins.

"You know we're giving those back, right?" Xena said when she was alone with Ares in the nook in the pirate caves where they were told to set up their sleeping quarters. He gave her a look of innocence that twinkled into a smirk -- "Riiiiight..." -- and then she came up, grabbed his ear and said, "Hand it over."

He yelped and told her to stop it; "Come on," she purred gleefully, pulling harder, and he finally reached into his pocket for the pouch. Someone snickered behind her, and they turned to see a stocky henchman of Nikia's who had come over to bring them sleeping mats and blankets. The pirate shook his head and guffawed louder: "Girlfriend keeps you on a pretty short leash, huh, soldier?" Xena saw Ares scowl and ball his fists; she put a warning hand on his arm, and after a moment he broke into a smile and said conversationally, "Trust me, you don't want to get her pissed off."

That evening, as they sat by the fire with the pirates, eating roasted meat and drinking wine seized from the merchant ship, Xena glanced sideways at Ares, and it occurred to her that he wouldn't have had any qualms about joining the pirates for real -- if she had been game for it. The idle thought floated through her head that he would have made a very dashing pirate; in the next moment, shock at entertaining such an idea even in jest made her shudder inwardly, as if she'd burned her fingers. Was Ares thinking about it too? From now on, she would walk her path with a companion who cared nothing about the greater good. But he cared about her, she reminded herself; he cared about her, and he would fight with her for as long as she would have him. And she would never be tempted to go back to her old ways ... would she? Xena looked up at Nikia as the pirate chief sliced off a piece of lamb's shank, juice dripping from the blade of her dagger, firelight glowing on her tanned face and sparkling in the rings on her fingers. She didn't want this kind of life anymore. She thought of what Gabrielle had told her when they said good-bye: She would be all right. Maybe someday, she'd be able to trust herself, too.

Later that night, she and Ares made love in their corner of the caves, trying to make as

little noise as they could, muffling each other's cries with kisses. Afterwards, the thought of Gabrielle came back to yank her out of the warm cloud of drowsiness; and still, she was almost happy. They were silent for a while, until he said, "So you keep me on a short leash, do you?" Xena chuckled into his chest and murmured, "Somebody has to." He laughed softly ?- "I didn't know you were into that kind of thing" -- and kissed the top of her head; this time, when sleep's heaviness crept up on her, she let it fill her and take her away.

They stayed with the pirates for a few more days, during which Xena learned that the band had been able to steer clear of earlier decoys by placing spies as passengers on ships departing the Lemnian port. Once she and Ares were trusted enough to have the run of the place, the next part of her plan wasn't that hard: setting fire to the pirate ship, not only to destroy the vessel and start a panic but also to reveal their location to the Lemnian militia waiting for a signal to attack.

From the overhead cliffs, Xena and Ares watched as the pirates ran out of the caves and scurried about, shouting in vain for the sentries who had been knocked out, bound and gagged; their torches, fiery points surrounded by quivering misty haloes, added to the deep ruddy glow from the blazing ship. A few large rocks pushed down the cliffside to block their way toward the ship added to the chaos. Nikia looked up, her wild hair gleaming copper in the eerie light; either she managed to see Xena and Ares or she figured everything out without seeing them, but she shook her sword in their direction and let loose a string of curses, calling them traitors and dogs. She yelled something to her crew, and three men started climbing up the rocks; Xena's chakram took down one of them and made the other two falter. Moments later, hoofbeats clanking on stone heralded the militia's arrival.

"Let's go," Xena said and slid down the rock before flipping to the ground. She turned to see Ares jump after her and wince as he landed awkwardly; she was about to ask if he was all right but one of the pirates was already charging at her, his face crimson from rage and from the fires' reflections. Xena recognized him as the one who had taunted Ares about her keeping him on a short leash. As he swung his sword and sputtered, "Bitch!", she heard Ares shout behind her, "I told you, you don't want to get her pissed off!"

Soon enough the man was on the ground bellowing and clutching at his wounded hip, leaving Xena and Ares free to move on to their next opponents; she noticed that Ares was limping a little and started to tell him to be careful, but he gave her a hard challenging look and she knew that she had to let him take care of himself.

The battle was a short one; most of the pirates were already wounded or dead or throwing down their weapons by the time Xena confronted Nikia. The pirate chief had a dark bleeding cut on her cheek and another jagged one on her arm, and her voice was hoarse but strangely calm as she said, "You're Xena" -- having obviously heard militia members call out the name. Nikia raised her sword abruptly; Xena blocked it, and found herself face to face with the pirate, staring into her dark green orange-flecked eyes.

"Shall we give them a good show?" Nikia said, her face twitching in either a sneer or a grimace of pain, obviously determined to go down as a good loser. Xena had to remind herself that she was doing the right thing -- that this woman and her band had

not only looted but killed and sold captives into slavery. Their swords clashed again; even without looking back, Xena knew that the rest of the battle had stilled and everyone was watching them.

Nikia fought well -- well enough to get in a kick that sent Xena sprawling with barely enough time to parry her blade, but not enough to last much longer after that. A few more moves left her disarmed and backed up against a wall of rock with Xena's sword at her chest. "Come on," Xena said, every gulp of air hurting her throat. "Give up -- they'll spare your life."

Nikia stared at her, fear and scorn struggling in her bloodied face as short gasps rushed from her lips; then her right hand went for the dagger at her belt and darted out, in a thrust intended less to kill than to invite a death blow. The flat of Xena's sword slammed down on her wrist; the woman's cry drowned out the thud of metal on flesh and bone, and the clatter of the dagger on the rocky ground. Nikia crumpled to her knees. As two Lemnian officers came up to take her, Xena turned and walked off, sheathing her sword; but there was no turning away from the sound of Nikia's choked groan as they bound her hands.

"That was good," Ares said, squeezing Xena's shoulder. There was an odd lack of enthusiasm in his voice, but she wasn't going to dwell on his moods.

She showed the militia where the pirates' loot was; the goods were still being loaded into bags when she and Ares headed toward their horses. When they were getting in the saddle, he said suddenly, "She wanted you to kill her, you know."

"We can't all have what we want," Xena snapped, ramming her boots into her horse's sides with a hardness that made her wince in the next instant. She was hoping he'd drop the subject; but as they trotted off, their way illuminated by a swaying circle of yellowish light from the lantern in Xena's hand, Ares pressed on.

"You think you did her a favor? Letting her live like a caged animal instead of dying like a warrior?"

Xena glanced back; the burning ship still reddened the night sky, and she could see the captive pirates being herded together for the march back to town, but it was too far now to see which one of them was Nikia, and the voices on the beach were fading away and mingling with the whooshing breath of the sea. Xena sighed and lifted her lantern, peering ahead to make sure they stayed on the path.

"She'll have a chance to turn her life around," she said reluctantly, and heard Ares chuckle in response.

"You really think everyone should buy into this atonement thing," he said. Xena pressed her lips tight and urged on her mount, irritation and vague alarm starting to churn inside her. She wished Gabrielle had been there.

They didn't speak again on the way back to town; but after they got to the inn and dismounted at the stables, Ares caught her hand and held it, and there was no mockery or doubt in his eyes as he said, "We make a good team, huh?"

She let him draw his arms around her and leaned against his warm chest, closing her eyes, listening to the rustle of hay, the soft snorting of the horses, the flapping of tails on sleek hides. "Yeah," she said, her fingers winding around his. "Yeah."

They had four days to wait for their ship. On the second day, Xena was busy mending another rip in her boot when Ares came up to her and said, "Let me have that."

She looked up in amusement. "You mend boots?"

"Watch me," he said. She handed him the boot; he examined it skeptically, then drew his dagger and began methodically slashing at the leather. Xena was so stunned that by the time she jumped up, grabbed his wrist and shouted, "Have you lost your mind?", the boot was quite beyond salvage. He dropped it to the floor, looking with satisfaction at the crumpled heap of his handiwork, and then turned to her, grinning brazenly.

"There's a cobbler's shop around the corner," he said. "We're getting you a new pair of boots." She wanted to hit him or kiss him or both; in the end she shook her head, gave him a look of mock exasperation and said, "Let's go." He glanced at her feet and asked if she was going barefoot, and she told him that if he tried to carry her, he'd pay for that *and* for cutting up her boot.

At the shop, Ares slouched by the wall and watched as the cobbler, a wizened little man with a wispy gray beard, measured her feet. When the old man was done and asked Xena what kind of leather she wanted, Ares spoke up before she could, and told him to use the best. The cobbler pointed out rather timidly that the tab would come to ten dinars; "Eleven if you get them done by tomorrow morning," Ares parried, ignoring Xena's furious tug at his vest. The old man looked caught between excitement and doubt; Ares reached into his pocket and showed him the money, which led to a burst of wheedling thanks and assurances that the job would be done.

"Wait a minute," Xena cut in. "I am *not* paying eleven dinars for a pair of boots."

"That's right," Ares said smugly, "you're not." Before she could say another word, he added, "Paid in advance," and threw the gold to the cobbler who pocketed his fee with a speed that belied his frail appearance. She wasn't going to pry a handful of coins from an old man, and there was nothing left to do but go back to the inn.

Out in the street, she whipped around on Ares and demanded to know where he got the money; her heart took a steep dive at the sight of his mischievous smirk. "You -- you took it from the pirates," she whispered.

"They're not gonna miss it, are they?" he retorted, but her dismayed look wiped the sly satisfaction off his face. "Oh, come on, Xena" -- he rolled his eyes -- "you think it's better if the king and his moron councilors collect all the loot?"

"It's supposed to go back to its rightful owners," she said through clenched teeth, turning away.

"Yeah, supposed to -- if they ever track them down," he snorted, following her as she strode toward the inn, her bare feet kicking up billows of hot pale dust. "Do you know

how much they would have had to pay anyone else to take care of their little pirate problem?"

"I'm not anyone else," she shot back, the blood pounding in her ears. She was already inside the inn when she realized that Ares wasn't behind her.

For the next hour or so, Xena lay flat on the bed trying not to think. Then he came back and told her to come with him.

"What else do you want to buy me with stolen money?" she asked bitterly.

"Dammit," he said, "just come with me," and she sat up with a sigh and put on sandals and a cloak. Their destination turned out to be a street corner in the shade of bright-leafed poplars where two Hestian sisters in white robes sat at a table collecting donations for the town orphanage. Speechless, Xena watched Ares empty a pouch of gold coins, at least fifty dinars, into their bowl. As the two women stammered their thanks, Ares pondered something for a moment, then reached into his pocket again, pulled out a pendant -- a cluster of pearls on a silver chain -- and tossed it in as well. Xena wasn't sure whether she was more moved or appalled; but when his other hand lightly squeezed hers, she squeezed back. They had already started to walk away when Ares turned back, leaned on the table and said casually, "Hey, if Aunt Hestia pops by, tell the old girl Ares said hello." The sisters already looked too stupefied for their plump dimpled faces to register any additional shock.

On the way back, he said dreamily, "That thing would have looked good on you." She sighed -- "Ares, did you really think I was going to wear jewelry from pirate loot?" -- and then stopped and turned to him; the anxiety in his eyes made the rest of her anger ebb. "I'm proud of you," she said, even though she wasn't sure that she should be. They kissed, and then walked the rest of the way in silence, his arm around her waist. When they were back at the inn, he came up behind her and asked quietly, his hands on her shoulders, "You'll wear the boots, right?" She chuckled and elbowed him lightly in the side. "I'll wear the boots."

He had one more surprise for her during their stay in Lemnos. The next day, he disappeared for a few hours, and when he returned with Xena's brand-new boots, he rummaged about in his pocket, held out his hand and opened it to reveal a sparkling ruby on a chain.

"It's not from the pirates' loot," he said quickly, before Xena had time to be horrified.

She narrowed her eyes at him: "Then where's it from?"

"Trust me," he said, "this one's rightfully mine." Then she guessed it; her eyes dropped to his gauntlets, and she grabbed his wrists and turned them and saw the empty spot where the stone used to be. This time she wanted to kiss him or cry or both, and part of her still wanted to hit him for making her feel like this. "Just because you've got principles doesn't mean you shouldn't have a pendant," he said smoothly, fastening the chain around her neck. "There."

"Don't do it again," she said and leaned forward to give him a short tender kiss. She didn't have the heart to ask how he had paid for the chain and the setting.

When they returned to Maroneia, a letter from Gabrielle was waiting for Xena at the inn. It was the kind of letter she might have written if she had left for a brief visit. She described her journey, and passing through a village where someone recognized her and she suddenly had to tell tales of her adventures to a large eager audience; she wrote about coming back to Potadeia and staying with her sister and niece, making friends with Lila and Sarah's new calf, helping them fix the house -- all very ordinary, except for what was left unsaid. At the end, there was an "I hope you're well," and then a small blot of ink where Gabrielle's quill had paused, and some scratched-out letters that might have been the start of an "I love you."

Alone in the room, Xena read the letter again from the beginning, and then started again at the middle, and skipped to the end again. "I should've read more of your scrolls," she whispered, belatedly realizing that she had said it aloud. It had taken her five years after they'd started traveling together -- five years before she finally read one. *One*. So she had never been much of a reader; but hadn't she owed Gabrielle that much? *Selfish -- selfish*. The tears she'd been holding back finally got the better of her, and a droplet fell and smudged a couple of letters. She ran her hand over the scroll, the papyrus dry and brittle under her palm, and then rolled it up slowly and put it away.

Ares didn't ask about the letter when he returned with cold cuts and bread for their supper, and she didn't tell him anything. After a quick silent meal, she undressed and got into bed, lying on her side with her face to the wall. He climbed in next to her; there was hardly more than a finger's width of space between them, and she could feel the warmth of him on her skin, hear his breathing, until he sighed loudly and tossed about for a bit, jostling her with his shoulder and elbows, and finally turned his back to her. Xena closed her eyes and pressed her forehead to the cold, scratchy, dusty wall, and thought of Gabrielle.

When she woke up at dawn, she felt warm and comfortable and good; then she realized that somehow she'd snuggled up to Ares during the night and settled into his embrace, and she didn't know anymore if she felt comfortable or trapped. After a few moments she tried to wriggle free, only to hear him sigh and feel his arms tighten around her; before she could let herself go all sappy at his wanting to hold on to her, she clenched her jaw and freed herself with a jerk. Ares stirred and mumbled some sleepy vexed question, his eyelashes fluttering half-open; "I have to go out," she said sharply, and didn't look back at him as she pulled on her tunic and walked out of the room.

She went down to the outhouse and then over to the stable, the damp straw on the ground prickling at her feet. As she patted Argo's sleek golden head, and Argo nuzzled her shoulder in response, it struck Xena that this was where she had last seen Gabrielle; these wooden stalls, these rough-hewn beams had witnessed their good-bye. Argo flicked an ear and gave her a reproachful look. The quiet of the stable, with its familiar munching of horses and the crisp rustle of hay and straw, had suddenly grown oppressive, as if everything here were waiting for something -- for someone. Waiting for Gabrielle to come back, only she never would.

Back in the room, she told Ares to get up and get dressed. "Come back to bed first," he said, but she looked the other way and started to put on her boots -- the boots he

had bought her with stolen pirate loot.

"I want to get out of here," she said. Out of this inn, out of this town.

They left Maroneia and turned off the crowded main road, and rode in a dull, heavy silence. By the evening, when they made camp, Xena couldn't bear to be so alone anymore. As she started to spread out her bedroll near the fire, she caught Ares' stare and nodded, silently inviting him to join her. He came up to her, and she felt a twinge of shame at the thought that she'd been giving him the cold shoulder all day through no fault of his. "I'm sorry," she said, squeezing his hand, and heard him sigh in response. When they got into the bedroll she reached for him, silencing him with a kiss when he tried to speak, stroking him until he was ready and then moving on top of him. Then it was done, and the brief aftermath of pleasure drained from her body; and she was still alone with her grief.

She was sharpening her sword the next morning when a blade clanged sharply against hers; caught by surprise, she jerked her hand and dropped the whetstone in the grass, and nearly let go of the sword. She looked up to see Ares standing over her, sword in hand, a strange hard look on his face.

"It's sharp enough," he said. "Now do something with it."

She gave him a questioning frown. "Come on," he said, jabbing the tip of his sword at her weapon.

"Not in the mood," she muttered, lowering her eyes and picking up the whetstone, but he jabbed again, more forcefully? - "Well, get in the mood, dammit!"

"Leave me alone," she snapped, only to have him knock the sword from her hand and taunt, "Are you going to let me beat you?" Really pissed off now, she grabbed the sword and jumped up and parried his next blow, and in a moment they were dancing their elaborate weave of steps and jumps and spins around the black patch of the campfire's remnants. As they fought, some invisible fog seemed to lift, and suddenly Xena was aware of the smell of fresh grass, and the babble of birds in the trees, and the happy gurgle of the nearby brook and metal swishing through the air, and the sting in her upper arm where Ares' blade had nicked the skin, and the sweat sliding down her face and neck, and the wispy bits of clouds in the gleaming sky.

They fought hard, and somewhere along the way her anger turned to elation. Ares kicked her sword away, and she charged him before he could have her at the point of his blade, taking them both down, turning his wrist to make him drop his weapon before he could recover from the surprise. Then they wrestled in the cool dew-silvered grass, and she felt a surge of desire far sweeter than their coupling the night before, a desire so wonderful that it didn't even matter if it was satisfied or not; and, knowing that he felt it too, she laughed as she dodged his attempt to pin her to the ground.

All was well for a few days after that, until Ares woke up one night and heard a strange, low sound, and realized that it was Xena; lying on her stomach next to him, she was weeping in quiet choked sobs that would have racked her whole body if she'd given them free rein. A hollow, chilly ache grew in his heart. He wanted to turn her around, hug her, let her head shake under his hand and her tears soak into his chest;

but something stopped him. Maybe it was the knowledge that in her place, he would not have wanted her to see him like this; or the thought that he couldn't very well comfort her over a loss that she no doubt blamed on him.

She had too much passion for living to let herself drown in sadness for long; eventually, something inside her rebelled and pushed her to come up for air. It helped that there was always work to do -- bandits or thieves or slavers to be dealt with, a burgeoning civil feud to be stopped in one town, an unjust execution in another -- and that a good fight was always just around the corner. It helped that there were rivers and lakes rich in fish, and valleys where one could ride at a gallop and feel the wind's rough caress on one's face. It helped that most of the time they took a greedy tender joy in each other's bodies, and that they loved each other.

But still the sadness was there. Occasionally, Xena would wander off into the woods on her own, ostensibly to hunt or lay traps. Once, she was gone so long that Ares followed her. He found her sitting in a small murky patch of sun-dappled clearing, hands folded in her lap, tears running down her face. She didn't see him approach behind the cover of trees, and he retreated as quietly as he could. When she returned to camp with a dead partridge, its head dangling pitifully from the twisted neck, she looked calm and composed; he ventured an uncertain, "Everything all right?" and she curtly replied, "Fine."

There was a day when he thought he was going to lose her.

It had started out well enough, when they arrived in the nick of time to save a village from being torched by some thugs who were extorting money from the peasants. Ares nearly got himself killed charging three of the hoodlums and getting ambushed by a fourth, and then again pulling an unconscious woman out of a burning house. When it was over, Xena tended to the bleeding cut on his chest and the burn on his arm, and asked, in a teasing tone that didn't quite cover her concern, if he was trying to prove something. "Like what?" he asked, wincing as she put a stinging herbal balm on his burn. "Ooh ... that you're mortal," she said lightly. "I already know." He chuckled with her, and reached for a kiss when she was finished with the poultice; but they were interrupted by peasants eager to thank and to gape at their saviors.

Talking over each other, several villagers explained that the thugs worked for a group of women who had taken over an abandoned temple of Hera nearby, claiming that their prayers had resurrected the great goddess and demanding tribute for her worship. Xena shook her head and promised to do something about it (meanwhile, Ares had to stifle a laugh at the thought of the Twilight of the Gods being fodder for yet another human scam). One of the village elders, a portly graying woman of about fifty, invited them to stay for dinner, and then asked Xena, "You remember the time you were here some thirty summers ago, don't you?"

She didn't. The woman launched into her story, and the moment Ares heard the first words of it he knew this was going to be bad. "This warlord, what was his name again? -- oh yes, Kirillus -- he had an army all set to take our village; I remember it very well, you see -- my father was our chief elder then. Well, then you took his army from him and brought it here -- there was this man that you thought was your father, and -- "

Xena cut her off with a grim "I remember," and added that they had to leave right now and wouldn't be staying for dinner; some fresh water from the well would be enough. Clucking her tongue in regret, the elder sent a couple of boys to fetch the water and begged Xena at least to accept some bread and wine for the road. While they waited, she turned to the crowd and continued her tale. "She thought, you see, that our people had beaten her father to death, and she was mad enough that she could have destroyed the whole village with that army -- only her friend stood up to her, a mere slip of a girl she was, and made her come back to her senses. And what do you know, it turned out the man wasn't her father at all; it was Ares, God of War, who had taken her father's likeness to trick her into leading an army for him. He was furious, too, when she refused -- nearly killed her, he did, before our very eyes."

The villagers murmured and gasped, and a teenage girl asked what the God of War had looked like. The elder began an enthusiastic description, then paused to look at Ares -- who couldn't decide if it was worse to direct his eyes at Xena or at the villagers, or down, or up at the sky -- and said, "Come to think of it, now, he looked a bit like Xena's friend over here, only young, and much taller and more handsome of course -- no offense, sir -- after all, he *was* a god ..." Rescue came in the form of a boy who handed him a dipper full of cold water, and Ares was immensely grateful, both for the water and for something to hide behind. He tried to convince himself that the dread jabbing at his chest was just from the blow to his ego; of course it hurt to think that he had changed so much. Bad as it was, it was better than wondering what was going through Xena's mind.

As they rode away from the village, the memories came back to him. He *had* been furious with Xena then, and even more furious with himself because he, the God of War, couldn't bring himself to kill a defiant warrior who had dared him to do it. Maybe that was when she had first messed with his mind, and begun his undoing. He also found himself thinking about Kirillus, his devoted follower whom he had so casually set up as a decoy for Xena -- wondering if the man had died from his wounds, or had been left crippled, after she'd beaten him. With a faint, distant surprise, Ares realized that it had been a while since he'd had one of those fits of remorse; maybe because his godhood was really over now, or because he was too busy worrying about Xena. He wished that he had never done any of it -- or maybe that the accursed village had burned to the ground before they had gotten there.

He didn't expect Xena to talk about it -- but she did, after they had been riding for a while. "You nearly turned me that time, you know," she said, her voice bright with anger.

"What do you want me to say?" He was startled by the hollow weariness in his own voice. "I'm glad it didn't work."

"It didn't work," Xena said slowly, "because *she* risked her life to stop me. To stop *you*." Her laugh made him shudder. "And look at us now."

"Yeah," he said bleakly. "Look at us."

By nightfall, it was raining, and they took refuge in a small cavern in the steep side of a ravine. Wrapping himself in the thin blanket, Ares huddled in the cave's dank darkness -- the feeble fire they'd made from a pile of damp branches had yielded only

fleeting warmth ?- and wondered what he would do, where he would go if Xena left him. Memories and hopes and fears swirled and tumbled through his head, and somehow, exhausted by this muddle of thoughts, he fell into an anxious jerky sleep.

When he woke up sometime later, the touch of Xena's hand on his arm was the only thing he was aware of at first; then came the smarting of the burn on his other arm, and a blurry, stinging knowledge that something was terribly wrong. Then he remembered, and thought that perhaps he was still asleep and dreaming, because Xena was lying next to him.

"What ?- what are you doing?" he muttered, not daring to touch her yet.

"I was wrong," she said flatly. "You've changed and I was holding the past against you. It's ... it goes against everything I believe."

Somehow it irked him that she would drag her principles into this, and he said almost brutally, "You think I've changed? You think I care about your damn peasants? You know why I'm doing this."

"That's good enough," she said, her palm resting on his cheek now. "You are what you do. You're doing good, Ares. You're doing good." He could see her eyes glitter in the dark as she added, her voice dropping, "It just hurts to remember these things -- because..." Her voice broke off. He caught her wrist and kissed her hand, a lump of emotions he couldn't name rising to his throat.

She crawled under his blanket, and they held each other; the rain had stopped, but rainwater was still trickling down the tangled tree roots over the cavern's entrance. They lay like that for a while, and then she sighed into his chest and said quietly, "I miss Gabrielle..." He knew, dimly, disbelievingly, that what had just happened between them was more intimate than being inside her. He held her closer. "I know," he said.

They didn't talk about it again.

The next day, they got off to an early start; there was still the matter of the scam artists who operated out of Hera's temple. They took care of the problem and moved on -- to other places, other villages, other gangs to be routed. And so it went; they traveled together and spent evenings by the campfire, and slept together, and hunted and fished and swam, and took refuge in country inns on stormy days.

* ~ * ~ *

Ares opened his eyes and closed them again. Outside, the rain and the wind still whipped at the walls and the shuttered windows; the candle had burned out, and the shutters hardly let in any light. The musty odor of the bedding reached his nostrils; but it didn't matter, because Xena lay sprawled on top of him, limp and sweaty and warm, her hair slightly damp from the rain, smelling of freshness and herbs. The sexual excitement he felt now was a low-simmering glow, more a pleasure in itself than a need for pleasure or release. He remembered how they had ridden to the inn, racing against the storm, and smiled to himself.

This was the life he had wanted. Well, not quite; despite moments like these, he knew that that Xena was never quite happy, and never quite his -- perhaps less so than when Gabrielle had been with them. If this was the most he could have, he would make the best of it. It still felt like a miracle to have her asleep in his arms.

* ~ * ~ *

Xandra, when I'm with you, this emptiness that I have felt my entire life -- it's gone.

Gabrielle paused and re-read the line. Her chest suddenly felt tight, and she knew she needed a few moments to compose herself before she could go on. Taking a deep breath, she put her quill back in the inkwell. She wondered yet again if she should have chosen another name for the heroine of her play. Tyra... Kara...

The parchment was golden in the lamplight, the thin dark shadow of the quill stretching across the top of the scroll. The play was almost completed; she had only to finish the jail cell scene in which Queen Xandra is about to be led to her death, then write the scene in which Corinne goes to the Fates' temple and burns their loom to undo the false destiny created by King Acrisius -- and then the ending in which the heroines meet again in their own, restored, real world.

The idea for the play had come to Gabrielle when she was in Potadeia, about to leave for Athens. The plot had been inspired by re-reading one of her old scrolls -- the one that recorded Xena's account of what happened after they'd foiled a raid on the temple of the Fates. The Fates had offered Xena a chance to start over, erasing her dark violent past, yet she had chosen to restore her old life in order to be reunited with Gabrielle and to spare her the lot of a hate-filled slave. What if, she thought, some enemy of theirs had tampered with the Fates' loom so that she and Xena had not met, had not traveled together -- and then, in their new lives, their paths did cross and they were drawn to each other all over again? Briefly, she had considered giving the bad-guy role to the God of War (it seemed logical enough for a god to be the one to alter Fate), but then realized that, after everything they'd been through, she didn't have the stomach for it. So she based her villain on Caesar: King Acrisius, who had once betrayed and tried to kill the great warrior Xandra, and was ultimately ruined by her vengeance. In the play, Acrisius managed to take the Fates captive and re-weave the thread of his destiny to have Xandra as his ally and his wife. And it worked, until the poet Corinne, Xandra's friend and companion in their real lives, arrived at the court; then the love in their hearts was rekindled, and the queen risked all to save the young bard from the king's wrath.

Gabrielle picked up the quill again and swept her hair, now grown to shoulder length, away from her face.

Who would have thought that she'd have a play produced in Athens? Yet the theater director had enthusiastically accepted *Destiny* after reading just the first act, and if everything went as planned it would open in couple of months. Sophisticated Athenian audiences would be watching and judging her work. The prospect was both exciting and intimidating.

CORINNE: I can't let you die.

*XANDRA: Some things are worth dying for. Isn't that what your poem was about?
Being prepared to sacrifice everything for love?*

Gabrielle leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. *Everything for love...* Xena was out there somewhere right now. Xena and Ares were somewhere out there right now.

Was there a chance that Xena would see the play? The thought of it made Gabrielle's face hot. Her hand with the quill shook slightly, leaving an inky scratch on the parchment; she reached over to pick up the cup on the table and take a sip of tepid herbal tea.

SOLDIER: Queen -- it's time.

CORINNE: I'll love you forever.

* ~ * ~ *

It had not been easy.

The journey to Potadeia had been the first time in years that Gabrielle had traveled alone. Sometimes in those days and nights on the road, she had imagined talking to Xena -- about where she would camp and what she was going to eat, about the funny shape of a cloud, about what kind of bird was soaring overhead as if etched into the bright sky, about her fancy that birds were really descended from dragons. When some villagers in a tavern recognized her as the Bard of Potadeia and begged for tales of the Warrior Princess, she wasn't sure she'd be able to get to the end of her story -- the one about how she and Xena helped a group of Athenian soldiers fight the Horde -- without tears. But she didn't break down then, only later that night, in her bed at the inn, when the memories came again, demanding to be let in.

When the cluster of Potadeia's neat little houses were already in sight, it struck her that she was about to see her sister, once her dearest friend in the whole world, and that she had hardly thought about it since leaving Maroneia, preoccupied instead with her separation from Xena. It made her feel ashamed. This should have been a homecoming; instead, she still felt as if she had left her real home. Lila's astonished delight at her arrival only deepened Gabrielle's shame.

Having recovered her daughter from captivity in Gurkhan's harem, Lila had also regained much of her vitality and even her youth. She and Sarah were fixing up the house, which didn't look quite so gloomy anymore; Gabrielle helped them out, grateful for the opportunity to keep herself busy. Sarah mostly kept her distance, but this time she and Lila had a chance to talk about the years that had passed since she and Xena had visited Potadeia with baby Eve.

As days went by, Gabrielle's desire to talk to Lila about what had happened between her and Xena grew into an urgent need; if she could only talk to *someone* about it, she thought, it would be easier to put it behind her. And she should have been able to talk to Lila. They had never had any secrets; for all the differences between them, and the distances, they had always understood each other so well. Lila had never questioned her passion for poetry or her interest in philosophy, or her need to get out of Potadeia,

or, eventually, her love for Xena. She needed that now, to be understood wordlessly, not in some grand gesture of love and acceptance but simply as a matter of fact.

She wasn't sure where or how to start; it was Lila herself who brought up the subject. One night, they sat by the fireplace after Sarah had gone to bed, and Lila asked, without lifting her head from her embroidery, if she and Xena had had a quarrel. Gabrielle sighed, awkwardly smoothing the rust-colored skirt she wore around the house -- much like the one she'd worn when she first left home with Xena, only she had trimmed it to knee length -- and said, "It's ... it's complicated." An uneasy silence crept in between them, and Gabrielle berated herself for her cowardice. She forced herself to look up into Lila's kind eyes, bright and warm from the fire's glow. Thoughtfully, Lila said, "It usually is..." She lowered her head again, letting the shadows blanket her face, and went back to embroidering. After a moment she asked, "Want to tell me what happened?"

Then Gabrielle knew, with hollow resignation, that she would never be able to tell. How could she explain that she had given Xena permission to take another lover -- that the three of them had traveled together -- that she had lied and cheated and plotted in a desperate effort to get Xena back, and had finally had to choose between losing Xena and losing herself? For that matter, how could she explain that even before that, she and Xena had hurt each other beyond words, beyond pain, and still stayed together? Could any of it make sense to anyone ... except the two of them, and -- maybe Ares, of all people? She could only say, her voice drained and colorless, "It wasn't a quarrel really... we just kind of -- drifted apart."

Lila came up and knelt in front of her and hugged her, and Gabrielle felt clumsy and stiff as she wrapped her arms around her sister. "I'm so sorry..." Lila said gently, and Gabrielle held her closer and laid her head on her shoulder. "I'm all right," she said. "I'll be all right." "Yeah, you will" -- Lila stroked her hair, then drew back and touched Gabrielle's face and added quietly, "I love you, Gabby." Gabrielle's eyes were watering; as she murmured, "I love you too" and kissed Lila's cool cheek, she felt another twinge of shame at the thought that she had shut Lila out, that the special bond between them would never be restored.

Gabrielle stayed in Potadeia for another ten days or so, long enough to discover that she was now a hometown legend. Then she moved on to Athens, as she had planned, and found that her fame had preceded her there, too. She was invited to teach at the Academy of Bards. She had admiring students; she met scholars and philosophers, and successfully pitched her play to one of the city's leading theaters. She renewed her friendship with Virgil, who lived in Athens with his mother and his young brother and sister.

After a long period of neglect, the bard part of the Warrior Bard was flourishing, and it felt wonderful -- sometimes, almost enough to make up for the fact that the person with whom she most wanted to share her success wasn't there.

Of course, there was no leaving behind the warrior part, either. Her students at the Academy wanted to see her in Amazon garb rather than a dress, and sometimes she gave in to their curiosity; some of them also approached her about teaching them her fighting moves. Once, she was on her way home from the theater with several of her students and with Virgil when they found themselves in the midst of a street riot

started by supporters of a politician who had been expelled from the assembly on charges of corruption. Before she knew it, she and Virgil were battling the rioters, and she was using a staff she had grabbed from one of the rowdies after downing him with a single kick; they were able to stop the mob from looting a shop before the militia arrived to restore order. When the fighting was over, she received an enthusiastic round of applause from her awed students, and her exploits were the talk of her class at their next meeting at the Academy.

For all the praise, the incident left her with a vague queasy aftertaste. Partly, perhaps, it was the knowledge that she had used her combat skills against people who were not trained fighters -- and who, for all she knew, might have had legitimate grievances, even if they'd chosen a bad way to express them. Partly, it was the realization that having combat skills entailed consequences she couldn't escape: Whether she liked it or not, whether she was with Xena or not, there were times when she would have to either fight or stand by and watch innocent people get hurt.

This stark truth was brought home to her again two months later. A letter from Lila arrived, telling her that Potadeia was involved in a dispute with a neighboring town over a piece of choice grazing land; the conflict threatened to turn violent, and the townsfolk wanted her help. By the time she returned, the rival town, Olynthus, had allied itself with a small-time warlord named Tryphonius and instigated two raids on Potadeia's shepherds and cattle herders; Potadeia's elders were mobilizing a fighting force, and expecting her to lead it. She suggested negotiating an agreement by which both towns would have access to the disputed land; the town council of Olynthus, sure of its victory, refused. Finally, she agreed to take Potadeia's none too confident band of defenders out into the field to meet Tryphonius and his army; and she couldn't deny that she was pleased when, at the mention of her name, an alarmed buzz ran audibly through the warlord's ranks.

"Stay out of this, Tryphonius," she said coolly as their horses stood side by side so that she and the warlord faced each other, an arm's length apart. "Let the town councils settle the dispute; it isn't any of your business." "Well, well," the man sneered, shaking a shaggy mane of graying blond hair, "I expected the Battling Bard of Potadeia to look a little more impressive. Maybe they should've -- " Before he could finish, her arm shot out and she landed a hard punch in his chest, knocking the man out of the saddle; by the time he had scrambled to his feet, cursing loudly, she had already dismounted, and a couple of swift kicks took him down again even before he had time to draw his sword. The mutterings among his men swelled to a wave, but the cheers that erupted among the Potadeians rose even higher.

Tryphonius and his army retreated; Olynthus agreed to negotiate the next day, and when Gabrielle went back to Athens she was even more of a local legend.

And all the while there was a hollow space inside her, an empty core that was Xena's absence. There were times when she hardly felt it, and times when it turned to a cold hard lump -- and still other times when it was a tight knot of pain: when people talked to her about Xena; when she re-read one of her scrolls about their adventures; when she woke up after dreaming of Xena; when Sappho's poem forced itself into her mind; when a letter from Xena arrived, which happened twice. They were short, terse, just-the-facts letters, one informing her that the job on Lemnos was done and that she and Ares were back and headed inland, and the other, three months later, giving a brief

account of her recent travels. Gabrielle wrote to Xena as well, sending her letters to Xena's usual mail drops, never knowing when they would be picked up; only they were never the letters she composed in her head.

Occasionally she wondered, with an odd detachment, if she would ever find love again. Virgil spent many evenings at the small cozy house where she now lived. She enjoyed his company, and the memory of the kiss they had shared at the library in Megara was both troubling and sweet. He was warm and affectionate with her, but there was something peculiar in his manner, as if he were waiting for something -- perhaps for some kind of signal from her. Then, one evening, she offered to read to him the first two acts of her play. After she put aside the last of the scrolls, her eyes met Virgil's. He gazed at her thoughtfully, then looked down for a moment. When he raised his head again, something in his face was different; he wasn't waiting anymore. He smiled and said, "It's beautiful, Gabrielle."

About a month later, she saw him at a book vendor's with a slender dark-haired woman, his arm around her waist. Gabrielle turned away for a moment, her lips tightening; the ache that jabbed at her heart was made worse by the knowledge that it was an ache she had no right to feel. When she looked at Virgil again, he waved at her, a wide, friendly, open smile lighting up his face. He introduced her to his companion, Lais. They chatted, and she smiled, and invited Virgil to bring Lais the next time he came to her house. It still hurt a little.

Then she came home and sat down to work on her play, and forgot all about it.

* ~ * ~ *

Gabrielle glanced at the window and realized with a faint shock that a gray pallor was already starting to spread across the black sky. She had to get a few hours of sleep; she had a class to teach at the academy, and she had reluctantly promised three of her women students to teach them to fight with the staff. But she was almost finished; all that remained was the last scene, and she had already played it out so many times in her mind.

XANDRA: You brought the world back to us.

CORINNE: I'm glad. I like this one better.

XANDRA: Even though you're not a famous poet?

CORINNE: Fame -- who needs it?

* ~ * ~ *

"So is it your message that you can't change fate?" said a big long-faced woman with blonde hair arranged in a heap of ringlets. "Or that you shouldn't change fate?"

"Uh ... you shouldn't."

Gabrielle stood with her back to the wall in the theater portico, where the banquet to

celebrate the premiere of *Destiny* was in full swing. Dozens of people came up to compliment her and ask questions. Was Xandra her famous friend Xena? Was it true that she herself had met the Fates? Could you really alter destiny by tampering with your life thread? (The question left her stumped; all she could say was, "I don't recommend trying it.") Were Xandra and Corinne just friends or lovers? ("They are two women who love each other very deeply," she replied.) She hoped her answers made sense, because she only half-heard some of the questions, distracted and almost dazed. Writing those lines had been one thing; hearing them spoken onstage was another, even if the actresses didn't look anything like herself and Xena.

Twirling a goblet of wine in her slightly moist hands, Gabrielle looked around, trying to see over the heads of the people around her. She spotted some of her students milling about, and Virgil and Lais, who had come up to congratulate her before. She saw a tall woman with jet-black hair hanging loose about her shoulders; her heart fluttered wildly, and then the woman turned and Gabrielle saw a round, plain face, a stranger's face. Only then did she realize that she was looking for Xena in the crowd. Her legs felt weak, and she leaned against the wall and took a sip of wine.

Of course Xena wasn't there. After debating it with herself for a while, she had written to Xena to let her know about the play; but Gabrielle couldn't even be sure that she had gotten the message in time.

".... the whole world just to save her beloved friend."

She looked up with a start, to find herself facing a slight young man with a dreamy look on his face.

"I'm sorry -- what did you say?"

"Your heroine risks destroying the whole world just to save her beloved friend," the young man repeated. "It's so -- inspiring."

Was that really what she was saying in her play? Gabrielle smiled and muttered "Thank you," but suddenly she felt uneasy. There was no wine left in her goblet, and she motioned to an attendant for a refill.

As she fielded more compliments and questions, the crowd was beginning to thin. A fat man with a gray-streaked beard monopolized her attention for a while, talking about a treatise he was composing on the subject of fate; she nodded and made polite remarks. Finally, he thanked her for writing such a thought-provoking play and went away. Gabrielle wondered when it would be all right for her to leave.

"Not bad," said a male voice that made her shiver even before she knew she had recognized it. "Of course, it could've used more fight scenes."

CHAPTER 12

The voices and the clinking of goblets and the pounding of her own blood all merged into a din in Gabrielle's ears. For a moment she saw nothing; a flush of heat made her dress sticky with sweat. Ares stood in front of her, a wry quizzical near-smile on his face. Her mind registered, with distant surprise, the fact that he wore a black linen shirt instead of the silver-studded leather vest. He was alone.

She had forgotten that there was wine in her goblet. She raised it, gripping its sides with both hands, and took a sip. As she put the goblet down on the pedestal of a vase, the metal clanged against stone, her hand still unsteady. At last, she was able to speak.

"Ares. You ... you're here." She took a deep breath and turned her head sharply, her eyes darting about the portico. "Is *she* -- "

"Excuse me." A possessive hand came down on her forearm, and she flinched and turned to see an elegantly dressed middle-aged couple.

"I *must* tell you," said the woman, her hand on Gabrielle's arm, "this is simply the *best* play I have seen in *ages*."

"Quite so," chimed in the man. "Simply the best."

"You managed to put so *much* into it -- kings, warriors, poets -- fate, friendship, love... What more could one *possibly* want?"

She continued, her rising voice more and more unbearable, and Gabrielle put all the willpower she had into nodding, making polite replies and not screaming.

"But how *rude* of me to go *on and on*... You must be so *exhausted*." The woman glanced at Ares, who stood by patiently, amusement at Gabrielle's plight flickering in his eyes, and suddenly inquired, "Are you two -- together?"

Lost for words, Gabrielle looked from her to Ares and back, and then stammered, "Not -- exactly."

"Ah. What a *pity* -- you two make such a good-looking couple." The woman sighed. "Well, I just wanted to say I *adored* your play -- a *pleasure* to meet such a promising young author..."

"Such an interesting ending, too," the man spoke up. "I meant to ask you..."

"Now, now." The woman pulled on his arm. "We've already taken up enough of Gabrielle's time. Let's go, dear."

The couple walked away, and Gabrielle let out a long breath and turned to Ares, who looked almost sheepish for a moment.

"Is she here?"

"Yeah," he said. "She's -- " He motioned vaguely toward the steps of the portico.

Gabrielle struggled for breath. "Why didn't she -- " she started, and then nearly wept at the thought of Xena being there, too scared to approach her. "Come on," she said. "No, wait..."

She picked up her goblet, wandered to a bench and sat down on the cool marble, her knees shaky. Ares sat next to her.

"So," he said. "When are you coming back?"

She was glad she was sitting down for that one.

"What?" she breathed out.

"Yeah. Back. I mean, you've made your point, right?"

Suddenly, Gabrielle felt as if she were stumbling about in the dark. "What point?"

The corner of his mouth twitched up a little. "You know -- that whole business about finding your own path. You went off -- did your bard thing -- wrote a sappy play -- "

"I thought you liked my play," she snapped.

Ares shrugged. "It was okay as sappy plays go."

"My play is *not* sappy."

"Oh please -- what was that line?" He pursed his lips and recited in a sing-song, "*That's what we all dream about -- someone who'll look into our hearts and find something to die for --* "

"Who'll look so deep into our hearts they'll find something worth dying for," she corrected automatically.

"Whatever," he snorted. "That's not sappy?"

She looked at him, and was struck by a thought that made her head whirl for a moment.

"You did it," she said in a hushed voice.

"I did what?"

"You died for her."

He raised his eyebrows a little, then patted his sides and gave a mock sigh of relief. "Whoa. Still here. You had me going for a second."

Gabrielle smiled weakly, running her finger over the rim of the goblet. "You gave up your godhood. And you stayed mortal."

He was silent for a moment, looking away. Finally he said, "That's different. Dying is

just a side effect. I don't plan on doing it anytime soon."

She stared into her goblet, and then remembered what he had asked her.

"Don't tell me you want me back," she said.

"Oh, but I do. Let me tell you -- things are getting quite desperate."

Gabrielle looked up, dimly frightened even though she knew that it was probably a setup to a joke. "Desperate -- how?"

"I'm learning to cook."

She chuckled in spite of herself and shook her head as he added, "If you're not coming back, at least scribble down some recipes for me, will ya? Like the one for those dumplings with -- "

"Ares," she said. "I have a good life here."

"So did the chick in your play, didn't she? Corinne? She had a good life -- and she gave it all up to be with her true love ..." He calmly met Gabrielle's gaze, hardly any mockery in his eyes now. "The -- what did you call it? -- the emptiness..." He turned away and added quietly, "Not good, is it?"

Gabrielle gaped at him, the hot flush rising back to her face. Her play and what it meant for her own life... to think that Ares, of all people, would point it out to her...

He was saying something else -- something about -- the farm?

"What?"

"I said, once we leave Athens we're heading to the farm for a few days."

"The farm. You mean -- *the farm*."

"Yeah."

The farm. Where it all started to fall apart. She fought another rush of dizziness.

"So ..." she said weakly. "How is she?"

He shrugged. "Same old, same old. Kicking ass. Looking for redemption. You wouldn't happen to know where they keep that stuff, do you?"

A vague memory rattled about her mind: Ares telling her, long ago, that maybe it was good for Xena to have someone around who didn't take her guilt and her atonement too seriously. She hoped he had a point.

"Well?" he said, getting up. "Do you want to see her or not?"

* ~ * ~ *

People walked by, talking and laughing, as the balmy air began to thicken into dusk. An attendant came by and lit two torches mounted into the columns on both sides of the steps; the light they gave off only made the evening deepen. Before walking away, the man eyed Xena curiously, probably wondering why this woman was standing there alone, her back against one of the columns. Xena glared at him, out of sheer habit.

She felt out of place here, outside this fashionable theater, among these people in elegant clothes. She herself wore a slender red dress with a black sash belt and a scarf, instead of her leathers and armor, and somehow it made her feel even more out of place. It wasn't like her to dress up for the theater; but this was one occasion when she didn't want to stand out in a crowd, let alone take the chance that someone would recognize her.

Finally, she couldn't resist turning to look up the steps. There was still no sign of Ares, or... Xena leaned back against the column. She shouldn't have let him stay behind... She had promised herself, as they left for the theater, that she wasn't going to approach Gabrielle. Gabrielle had her own life here in Athens, the kind of life she deserved, and she had no right to interfere. The best thing she could do for Gabrielle right now was to leave her alone.

Her mind reeled back to the moment when she saw Gabrielle come out onstage after the play was over, to wild applause from the audience. Gabrielle, so graceful in the loose folds of her lavender gown -- her hair grown out and flowing down to her shoulders -- her face, even at that distance, so radiant and full of spirit -- she looked softer and younger, somehow. Xena wasn't sure if she felt more pain or joy at seeing her, and which hurt worse.

And before that, Gabrielle's play... *You're my source -- when I reach inside myself for a reason to go on, I find you...* She had flinched at hearing two strangers on a stage speak the words of her and Gabrielle's love for each other. *Our real fate was to be together -- forever... We didn't make it that way, it just is...* It was as if hearing those words spoken by someone else had stripped away a tight bandage, and for a moment, before the agony of the raw wounds hit home, there had been a sense of relief at being freed from confinement.

Now, as she stood alone outside the theater, the unease she had felt before had turned to torture. The most precious thing in her life, and her greatest weakness, had just been exposed to all these people. She would have cared much less if she had been paraded in front of them naked. She was glad she hadn't stayed for the banquet; anyone who had seen her talking to Gabrielle would have surely known that they were "Xandra" and "Corinne." Just thinking about it twisted her insides into a knot of rage -- *all those gawking idiots...* When the anger had subsided, it occurred to her, with a fresh pang, that perhaps Gabrielle was really over her, over *them*; that was why she could write about it, could turn their love into a public spectacle -- it was nothing to

her now except fodder for a play.

Xena closed her eyes. Well, if Gabrielle was over them, it was really better that way, wasn't it? Wasn't that what she had decided -- that she had to let Gabrielle go, for Gabrielle's sake?

She shouldn't have come here. She hadn't planned to; except that, from the moment she had gotten Gabrielle's message, Ares had acted as if it were a fact that they were going, and for once she had followed him. Even after they'd gotten to Athens, she had thought of not going to the theater. Just the day before, she had walked into a bookshop thinking that maybe she would just buy a copy of the play instead. But they didn't have it, so she had looked for any scroll of Gabrielle's, and bought the only one they had: the story of their first meeting. *You've got to take me with you...* She had hung around, looking at the scrolls piled on the tables and the shelves, sliding her fingers over their smooth surface, wondering if Gabrielle had been in this shop; finally she'd picked up a scroll by Sappho, a poet that she recalled Gabrielle mentioning. Something about the first lines had made her heart swell; it was as if these words had the power to reach inside her, to speak for her. Who would have ever guessed that she would be in a bookshop -- for the first time, as far as she could recall -- buying a poem. Now, both scrolls lay buried at the bottom of her saddlebag, back at the inn. Maybe some day, she would --

"Xena."

With a start, she opened her eyes. They stood before her, Ares and Gabrielle; Xena noticed mechanically that Gabrielle was leaning on Ares' arm. Her eyes were wide and shocked, her lips parted nervously, and she had never looked so lovely before.

Xena didn't know what she was feeling anymore.

"Gabrielle..."

"Xena..." She let go of Ares' arm. "You -- you look beautiful..."

"I do?" Xena chuckled edgily, glancing down at herself. "It's not really my style." Then she raised her eyes, suddenly fighting the onrush of tears, and the breath caught in her throat for a moment before she said, "*You* look beautiful."

She desperately wanted to take Gabrielle in her arms, except that she didn't dare to move. Finally Gabrielle took a half-step toward her and lifted her hands a little, awkwardly and uncertainly, as if she had thought about reaching out for a hug but couldn't quite go through with it.

They continued to stare at each other; then Xena shifted her eyes to Ares, whose face was unreadable as he looked back at her.

It was Gabrielle who spoke first.

"Look -- there's a tavern just a short walk from here -- maybe we could go there and ?-"
" her voice faltered.

"And listen to the sound of your voice all evening?" Ares said rather genially. "Spare me. You two go on -- you've got a lot of catching up to do. I'll be back at the inn." He paused and nodded to Gabrielle. "See you around."

"No, wait -- " Gabrielle started, but he was already on his way. Xena turned her head to watch him as he walked, too tall to disappear quickly into the crowd. Then she turned back to Gabrielle.

"So..."

Gabrielle looked away for a moment, her eyelashes fluttering; her hand jerked up to her face and dropped again.

"Well," she said with a weak, nervous little smile. "Shall we go? They serve great rabbit stew."

As they started to walk, Xena glanced, once again, in Ares' direction. She couldn't see him anymore. She wondered suddenly if he expected her to come back with Gabrielle ... or to not come back at all.

She wanted to talk about *something*. Something that didn't have to do with *them*. Then she remembered that the week before, she had received a message from Eve.

"I heard from -- " she began, and stopped because Gabrielle had started to say at the same time, "I got a letter -- "

Gabrielle stopped too, and they walked on in an uncomfortable silence for a moment, until Gabrielle spoke again.

"I got a letter from Cyane," she said. "Eve is in Rome -- "

"Yeah, I know ... freeing the Amazons from the gladiator schools."

"They'll have a celebration when she brings them back," Gabrielle said. "If you want to attend, I could ask Varia..."

Her words sank into the silence between them. The twilight had become a dense grayish-blue veil that wrapped around the houses and the shushing fragrant trees, darkening Gabrielle's dress, making her profile look hazy, dreamlike.

"I heard about your run-in with Tryphonius," Xena said. "You really kicked his ass, huh?"

"How did you hear?"

"Word travels fast... About time somebody put him in his place. You did a good job."

"Thanks..." Gabrielle added quietly, her voice cracking a little, "I had a good teacher."

Xena knew she had to say something about the play; only there was nothing she could say about the way it had made her feel. Even if she had wanted to, she wouldn't know

how.

"So you wrote a play," she said.

"Yeah..." After a short pause Gabrielle asked, "What did you think?"

"It -- it was great."

After every time they spoke, the silences grew longer, or maybe it only seemed that way.

"So -- what have you been doing?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena shrugged. "Same as always -- a warlord here -- a cult there... We ran into a gang that had taken over a temple of Hera and was extorting money -- " Even as she spoke, she became aware that she was talking about her and Ares' experience in the village where he had once posed as her father -- where Gabrielle had stopped her from succumbing to vengeance and rage. Whatever had made her talk about that, of all things? She continued quickly, " -- money from villagers, telling them they'd brought Hera back to life and it was her will..."

Gabrielle shook her head. "It's sickening, isn't it... All those people using the old gods as a tool to squeeze a few dinars out of defenseless peasants -- "

"There are always going to be people who want to squeeze a few dinars out of defenseless peasants, Gabrielle. They'll use whatever tools they can get."

For a moment, suddenly, it was as if they were still together, just like in the old days, walking side by side and talking about their adventures, about fighting the bad guys, about Gabrielle's faith in people. It was as if their bond had never been broken, and everything was right with the world -- until, just as quickly, the joy turned to a heavy bitterness because that feeling was a ghost of something she had killed.

"So you're going back to the farm," Gabrielle said quietly.

"Just for a few days -- " Xena glanced at her, taken aback. "Did Ares tell you?"

Gabrielle nodded, and Xena felt a vague, unsettling alarm. *Did Ares have some reason for telling Gabrielle? And Gabrielle ... was Gabrielle upset that she would settle down with Ares on some farm when she wouldn't settle down with her among the Amazons?* Even now, she could feel the tension in Gabrielle's silence.

"It's only for a few days," she said again.

They walked on, and then Gabrielle said, "There it is," pointing to a squat building with small windows whose walls were a muddy brown in the near-dark, except for two orange spots of torchlight. The low hum of voices inside turned into a babble that rolled over them as Gabrielle pushed the door open. Inside, lights quivered and wisps of smoke floated in the air, and the smell of food made Xena realize that she was hungry. A serving girl came up and directed them toward a table.

Just as they started to sit down, a male voice cried, "Gabrielle?" and Xena flinched a little. Gabrielle's face showed no trace of recognition as a blond man in an elegant tunic and pants of white and gold strode toward them, smiling broadly.

"You're Gabrielle, the Bard of Potadeia -- aren't you? I just came from the theater," he added as Gabrielle gave him a distracted nod. "That was a great play. Hope you write a lot more."

"Thank you," Gabrielle said.

"Well, I just wanted to come up and meet you and tell you how much I enjoyed it." The young man beamed. "It's such an honor -- you know, some day I'll be telling everyone I met you when you had your first big hit..."

"Thank you," Gabrielle said again, squeezing out a smile.

"Thank *you!*" The young man bowed slightly and walked away. The serving girl was headed toward them, but a plump young woman with frizzy curls cut her off.

"Gabrielle! The playwright!" she cried, every word bubbling with enthusiasm. "It's you, isn't it?"

"Yes -- yes, it's me." Gabrielle squirmed a little.

"I am so, *so* happy to meet you!" The woman grabbed Gabrielle's hand and shook it vigorously. "Your play -- it's so empowering for young women! You know, I've been thinking of writing a play myself and you'd be the *perfect* person to give me some advice!"

"Uh ... you can find me at the Academy of Bards," Gabrielle said doubtfully.

"Great!" The young woman finally released Gabrielle's hand. "I'll definitely look you up, then -- you can count on it!"

As she sprinted away, Xena let out a long breath; but the young man in white and gold was already back, hovering over the table with a scroll in his hand. Meanwhile, the serving girl had gone off to wait on someone else.

"Not to bother you again, but may I have your autograph?"

Gabrielle signed the scroll, and then glanced quickly at Xena as he walked off with his prize.

"The price of fame," Xena said wryly.

"I'm sorry..." There was a nervous note in Gabrielle's voice. "My place isn't far from here ?- do you want to go there instead?"

They were just going to talk, that was all.

"Sure," she said.

* ~ * ~ *

There was no hot dinner at Gabrielle's place, but there was fruit and cheese and fermented apple cider, and the fire was mellow and golden in the small fireplace. Xena and Gabrielle sat in front of the table on a couch with a softly curved back, keeping their distance. They had talked about everything except the things that mattered.

As Xena twirled the remnants of a bunch of grapes in her hands, it hit her suddenly that she could end up leaving and those things would still remain unsaid -- and then, desperately, she blurted it out.

"Why don't you say it, Gabrielle. I betrayed you."

Gabrielle turned to her with a start, her face tender and bewildered.

"What?"

"I promised you that you would never lose me..."

"I..." Gabrielle blinked, her eyes moist. "I didn't -- "

"And then I drove you away. I took everything from you and -- "

Gabrielle slid over and seized her hands, making her drop the grapes. It was the first time they had really touched, and Xena realized how much she had wanted it and feared it.

"Xena ... don't..." Gabrielle murmured.

"I knew it was killing you inside -- and I let it go on..."

Gabrielle shook her head, her eyelashes wet and heavy. "It wasn't just -- *that* -- I told you..."

"Wasn't just Ares, you mean?" Xena said savagely. "Yeah, I know. It was all the other things too. The *other* things that were killing you inside. All the fighting -- all the killing..."

She could see Gabrielle's eyes widen as she spoke, as if every word were a stab. But she had to say it.

"Xena... please -- " Gabrielle's voice was a hollow shell. She sighed and moved one hand away, to wipe the tears rolling down her cheek. Then she asked, "How did we let this happen to us?"

"We? It was me, Gabrielle. Don't make it sound like it was your fault too."

"It was." Gabrielle frowned a little and shook her head. "There were so many things we didn't talk about..."

"I'm no good at talking, you know that."

With a faint smile, Gabrielle put her moist hand on top of Xena's. "I am. There was a time when we could have said anything to each other -- and then we both stopped talking."

"I know I didn't treat you right. I just..." -- she squeezed Gabrielle's fingers -- "I want you to know that I never stopped loving you. And I never would have chosen anyone over you..."

"You just love him, too," Gabrielle said quietly.

"I never should have..." Her voice broke off and she knew she, too, was crying. *She should have let him go. It would have hurt terribly -- but still not as much, still not as much ... and it would have been the right thing to do. Only she couldn't...*

"It would have still come between us."

They were silent for a moment; with a vague shock, Xena felt the soft touch of Gabrielle's fingers caressing the back of her hand.

"I want you to be happy," Xena said.

"I have a good life here."

"Do you see Virgil?" She wanted to kick herself for asking.

"Yeah. Sometimes." Gabrielle paused. "Not -- not like that." Her head was lowered, her face veiled in shadows, but Xena could hear the blushing in her voice. "Xena -- there's never been anything between Virgil and me..."

Xena felt her cheeks burning as her mind raced back to that night in Megara. What right did she have to even want to know?

Gabrielle raised her head and asked, in a small voice, "Are *you* happy?"

"I..." *What could she say to that?* "Sometimes..." Her throat tightened and she couldn't speak for a moment. Then she said, "Gabrielle -- can you ever forgive me?"

"There's no- "

"Don't say there's nothing to forgive. If you say that -- then I can never have your forgiveness. I know I don't deserve it -- but I need..." She choked again on those words.

Gabrielle seemed to consider this for a moment. At last she said simply, gravely, "I

forgive you."

Finally, finally they held each other, and Xena's arms were filled with Gabrielle's warmth and her cheek was resting against Gabrielle's soft hair. Gabrielle's back quivered slightly under her palm; they sat still for a while, half-reclining on the back of the couch, and then Gabrielle pulled back a little and lifted up her face, flushed and shiny with crying. The need to kiss her was overwhelming now, and Xena leaned forward and pressed her lips to her cheek just under the eye, tasting the salt of her tears. Gabrielle sighed and pressed closer to her, and in the next moment she was holding Gabrielle's face and kissing her mouth -- gently and almost chastely at first, until Gabrielle sighed again and parted her lips, and their kiss grew deeper, a kiss sweet with wine and fruit and memories. The jolt of desire Xena felt made her break away? - *this was wrong, wrong, she couldn't do this to Gabrielle* -- and it was Gabrielle who drew her close again, stroking her hair and her neck.

They kissed once more, her tongue caressing Gabrielle's mouth, a familiar caress that was now new and forbidden. Xena's hands slid down Gabrielle's shoulders, and she barely held back from cupping the swell of her breasts through the thin dress.

"We shouldn't do this," she said, her voice hoarse.

"I know," Gabrielle breathed out.

For a long moment they stared at each other; then, Gabrielle took Xena's hands and guided them to her breasts. It brought back the memory of their first night, and Xena wanted to cry and to beg forgiveness once more -- but Gabrielle was arching against her and making a small soft sound, and then nothing mattered except to see her shudder in pleasure.

As she moved to unbuckle Gabrielle's dress, Xena paused and looked questioningly at her; their eyes met, and Gabrielle nodded almost imperceptibly before her eyelids drooped. Her breasts were tinted gold in the lamplight and the fire's reflections, and Xena dove down to cover them with kisses, pausing to suck each nipple to a hard peak. Gabrielle pulled her up and their mouths locked even more feverishly this time, and when they broke their kiss it was only to gasp for breath and let their lips roam hurriedly over each other's faces, necks, shoulders.

"Xena -- take it off..." Gabrielle whispered. "I want to see -- "

Xena sat up and tore off her sash, then pulled off her dress, ripping it in her impatience, and they embraced again, breasts crushed against breasts. Gabrielle's moans spurred her on; kneeling on the floor, she pushed back Gabrielle's dress and pulled off her undergarment. Gabrielle trembled and cried out, and Xena paused a moment to kiss her inner thighs before taking her with her mouth. Gabrielle squirmed desperately; for a moment it seemed as if she was trying to get away, and Xena tried to slow down, knowing she was too eager to be as gentle as she wanted to be -- but then Gabrielle arched forward to meet her. At last, in a desperate jerking movement, Gabrielle's hand sought out hers and Xena clutched it tightly as she drank in Gabrielle's long final spasm.

She stayed still, her eyes closed, resting her face on Gabrielle's stomach, feeling the

smoothness of her skin and the little tremors that still rippled through her body, breathing in her scent.

"Xena..." Gabrielle's hand ran over her hair. "Oh, Xena..."

She moved up to the couch and reached out to stroke Gabrielle's face. Gabrielle took her hand and pressed it to her lips, and then gently pushed her back. Doubt and guilt and regret were rolled up into a ball inside her, almost-ready to burst open; but for now she surrendered to pleasure as Gabrielle kissed her breasts and trailed her lips down her stomach, and knelt between her thighs, touching her with soft hands and mouth, making love to her. The wave of heat rocked her and rose and crested, and she heard herself cry, "I love you, Gabrielle!" as if these words had been wrested from her by exquisite torture.

Gabrielle slid up; the hem of her dress, now crinkled and bunched up about her waist, grazed Xena's inner thigh and made her shiver. She settled into Xena's arms, her body light and warm, and they lay like that for a while, Gabrielle's head resting on Xena's breast. They could go to bed and spend the whole night together, sleep together, wake up together. And then...

Gabrielle raised herself up on an elbow, looking at her, a wistful tenderness in her eyes.

And then, maybe Gabrielle would come back. Leave the good life she had in Athens, and come back -- to what? To fighting and killing? To their insane arrangement with Ares? Maybe she could force herself to give him up. And then she'd go on, racked by guilt, racked by wanting him, missing him -- loving him. He would go away and take a part of her with him, just as Gabrielle had taken a part of her when she had gone away. Maybe a smaller part -- a worse part -- but still a part of her, and Gabrielle would only have what was left. It wasn't fair to Gabrielle; none of it was.

Gabrielle touched the corner of Xena's eye with the tip of her finger, and Xena realized she was tearing up.

"Gabrielle... I'm so sorry..."

Gabrielle's eyelids flickered, her eyes dimming a little.

"I know," she said. "Me too."

They both sat up. Gabrielle pulled up the top of her dress and held it at her shoulders; for a moment she looked as if she didn't quite know what to do next. Xena buckled up her dress for her.

"I'm sorry," Xena said again, stroking her face. "I should leave." She got up and found her undergarment, then picked up her dress, a crumpled heap of ridiculously bright scarlet on the floor, the fabric ripped at the hem. She slipped it on and tied the belt around her waist.

Gabrielle rose from the couch as well. Xena turned and put her hands on her shoulders.

She knew what she had to do. For now, until it was done, she could keep the pain in check, keep her voice and her hands steady.

"Gabrielle, you're still the best thing that ever happened to me. You'll always be in my heart, always. But we can't be together, not anymore. You deserve better."

"Xena..." There was a plea in Gabrielle's voice as her eyes filled with tears again, but Xena wasn't sure if she was begging her to stay or to go.

"I want you to have a good life." She leaned forward and pressed her lips to Gabrielle's cheek, just above the corner of her mouth, the way she would have kissed a good friend. "I know you'll have one."

Gabrielle hesitated for a moment, and then reached up to kiss her back.

"Thank you -- for coming to my play," she said, her voice stifled.

"Thank you ... for everything." *For everything I've taken from you.* She wasn't sure how much longer she could stay in control. "Good-bye, Gabrielle."

* ~ * ~ *

Ares had given up on trying to sleep.

She could be out until morning, of course, and he'd spend a sleepless night, exhausted and hungry. The downstairs tavern was already closed. He remembered the honey cakes he'd gotten for Xena on the way back to the inn while passing a vendor's stall; they were Xena's favorites, and he had a disquieting feeling that he might need to make it up to her, that she might be upset with him for setting her up with Gabrielle. He sat up and took one of the cakes from the bedside table, and drank some water to wash down the too-sweet taste. Then he stretched out on his back, staring at the cracked ceiling paint in the feeble light of the lamp.

Setting her up with Gabrielle... Yes, that was what he had done. Who'd have thought it? But Xena needed the girl; he had known it for a while, but perhaps he hadn't fully understood it until after Gabrielle had left. *It's a package deal*, she had told him once, when she faked Gabrielle's death and her own suicide in front of him to deceive the gods. Maybe she would come back, and then -- what? Go on as before, taking turns in Xena's bed, acting as if they were just three fighting partners on the road together? He wondered idly if his old friends the Furies were really dead, or still around and possessing all three of them. Crazy, *crazy*... Maybe she would come back, and, no matter what else happened, Xena would be whole again.

He turned on his side and shifted around, settling into the mattress. At least it wasn't too lumpy, and it was a fairly large bed; a *double* bed, where he and Xena had slept the night before, where she had turned away from him the night before. As Ares moved the pillow, trying to get more comfortable, his hand touched something soft and flimsy under it ... her nightshift. He pulled it out and held it, and pressed it to his

face, breathing it in.

Then it struck him how pathetic this was, playing touchy-feely with Xena's nightshift like some lovesick kid -- while Xena was... He tried not to think about it, but trying not to think about it didn't help. Right now, they could be in bed, naked, tangled together ... Xena could be kissing Gabrielle's mouth -- making low husky cries, her head thrown back, her nipples swollen from Gabrielle's kisses -- lifting her hips and opening up to Gabrielle's touch and -- *dammit*. He wasn't sure which was worse, the angry pounding at his temples or the sharp hot tightness in his groin. Finally it was too much, and he brought himself to a quick hard orgasm that only made him more tense, adding a blurry sense of shame to the jumble of other emotions. In those past months, he had gotten used to having Xena all to himself. It was maddening to think of sharing her again. That his own jealous imaginings turned him on only made matters worse.

Suddenly, it occurred to him that he could lose her completely. Ares opened his eyes and sat up abruptly, as if trying to get away from that thought. He could lose her. She could just go off with Gabrielle. Or ... He remembered that Xena wanted to go back to the farm after they left Athens. What if she was counting on Gabrielle to come along -- and planning to leave him behind on the farm, the way she had wanted back then? His heart was racing painfully, and he jumped up from the bed to grab his wineskin and gulp down some wine. He wouldn't stay and wait for her, he told himself; he wouldn't -- *dammit*, he still had some pride, he hadn't lost everything yet.

He took a few deep breaths and went back to bed. When he rolled over on his stomach, his arm brushed across her shift and he pushed it out of the way. He lay like that for a while, his face pressed into the pillow; it still had the faint scent of Xena's hair, of the sweetish spicy herbal mix she used to wash it.

Whether she came back alone or with Gabrielle, it was useless to think about what would happen next. His anxiety and anger had simmered down to the weary thought that if she shut him out, if she pushed him to the side, he'd have the strength to leave. But it wouldn't, *couldn't* come to that. Whatever happened, it probably wouldn't work; but he was willing to give it a try as long as he was a part of her life. He loved and needed Xena and she loved and needed him -- he believed it almost completely now -- and she loved and needed Gabrielle. There was no way out of this one.

At some point he must have fallen asleep after all, because then he was blinking in confusion and Xena was standing over him.

"You're back..." he muttered.

Xena took off her dress -- he noticed hazily that the hem was ripped -- and dropped it on a chair, absently, as if she wasn't fully aware that either the dress or the chair was there.

"I got you some cakes. There ..." -- he nodded toward the table.

She gave him an almost-startled look before the expression in her eyes turned soft and hurt.

"Okay," she said.

Fully awake now, Ares watched her pick up a cake and bite into it. *Was that a mark on her left breast? No, just a shadow...* He wanted to hold her, stroke her hair, carry her to bed and make slow tender love to her; now, after all this time, her nakedness could still move him like that -- perhaps especially now.

Xena put down the half-eaten cake and came over to the bed. As she slipped on her nightshift, he caught her musky scent, and bit his lip. *What did he expect?*

She paused to blow out the lamp. Ares moved to let her get under the blanket, and she settled down on her side, facing him, the way she always did; and then her familiar warmth next to him felt much more real than his fears. He sighed and wrapped his arm around her waist. Her body stiffened a little but she didn't turn away. Her hair was warm and silky under his cheek.

After a while he said quietly, "She's not coming back, is she?"

He heard the catch in Xena's breath. She was silent at first, and he thought she wasn't going to say anything. When she spoke, her voice was a dry whisper.

"You wanted her to come back?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I want to be with you." After a moment he added, "I want you to be happy."

She made a heartbreaking little sound, something between a sigh and a moan; then she stroked his cheek and leaned forward to give him a kiss.

"Ares... Thank you."

He put his hand over hers and closed his eyes, basking in her touch, in the sweetness of her breath on his face. "For what?"

"For putting up with all this. For everything you've given me..."

"But it's not enough, is it," he said with sudden bitterness, letting go of her hand. "It's never -- "

She interrupted him with another kiss, running her fingers through his hair, stroking his neck.

"We'll always be together," she said. "I promise."

There was sadness in her voice when she said it, and Ares knew that he was right; it wasn't enough for her, never would be. But this was all they had. He hugged her, letting her nestle her head on his shoulder.

"I do love you," she said.

* ~ * ~ *

"Gabrielle."

She wondered if she was hallucinating. There couldn't be anyone there; yet, as she lay on the couch with her eyes closed, she could have sworn she'd heard a voice.

She wasn't sure how much time had gone by since Xena had left. She had locked the front door and walked back to the sitting room, her legs moving of their own accord; all the objects around her -- the sparse furniture, the flickering candles, the fireplace with the flames dipping low -- seemed oddly distant in the amber half-darkness, as if they were reflections she could see but not touch. As she sank down on the couch, her eyes fell on something dark at her feet. It was Xena's black scarf, curled up on the floor. She picked it up and held it, running the smooth thin fabric between her fingers.

Her hair felt sticky with sweat. She thought, fleetingly, about taking a bath. But she couldn't; her whole body was still covered in Xena's touch, the feel and warmth and smell of her -- the pleasure of their lovemaking was still lingering faintly inside her, spreading outward, warming her skin -- and she knew she wanted to hold on to that, for now.

A distant voice in her head asked how she could have let this happen, what she could have been thinking. Had she expected, or even hoped, that she and Xena would get back together? No, not really. What *had* she expected, then? Maybe nothing. Maybe she had wanted so badly to be in Xena's arms again, to feel their bodies touch, to lose herself in Xena's heat that for a short time, nothing beyond that mattered. It was a frightening thought.

Other things drifted through her mind. Ares... the farm... Eve... *maybe she would see Xena again at the celebration when Eve brought the Amazons back ... no, probably not...* The play... *"I have a good life here."* -- *"So did the chick in your play, didn't she? She had a good life -- and she gave it all up to be with her true love..."* Her true love; Xena was still her one true love, and that would never change. That was the one thing she knew with perfect clarity, and that clarity was the worst thing of all, far worse than all those other floating bits of thoughts and images. No, there was something even worse ... the knowledge that Xena still loved her too, and that Xena had given her up.

You promised we'd always be together. You said I'd never lose you.

Anger twisted into a tight knot inside her, and she sat up straight with a dry sob that turned to a short animal-like cry. *You lied to me.* She wanted to run to the bath-chamber and heat up the water in the tub and scrub herself, wash off all the traces of something that shouldn't have happened. *You lied to me -- I lost you -- and just when I thought I'd learned to accept it, you had to come back and make me lose you all over again.* Xena's scarf had slid down to her lap; Gabrielle picked it up and grabbed it at both ends and tugged furiously, trying to rip it in half. The fabric chafed at her hands

but wouldn't tear, and she pulled harder and gave another wordless, tearless cry that burned her throat, and pulled again. Then her hands went limp; defeated and spent, she lay down on the couch and rested her head on the pillow, clutching the scarf to her chest.

Xena still loved her. Maybe that was what hurt so much -- knowing that Xena had given her up, not because she had stopped loving her, not because she loved Ares more, but because she thought it was the best thing for her, for Gabrielle. Just as, once, Xena had tried to leave her because she was afraid that her vision of them being crucified together would come true.

My life is empty despite my success, Corinne said in her play. Was it? She would gladly give it all up, the Academy, the theater, her fans, her students, if she and Xena could be together again. But give up who she was? Wasn't that why she had left in the first place, because she knew she was losing herself? It occurred to Gabrielle that Xena wouldn't have done that for her or for anyone else. Xena would have readily died for her, and lived for her -- but she wouldn't, *couldn't* have given up being a warrior, as long as she could hold a sword; she probably wouldn't even have settled down with the Amazons, whose communal life went so against the grain of her nature.

She thought about that, and about her life with Xena, and about Xena and Ares; it was strangely painless, almost like reflecting on someone else's life. When she opened her eyes at some point, the room was nearly dark; the fire must have gone out in the fireplace, and only two candles were still alive. Gabrielle wondered if she should go to bed or eat something or bathe. She sighed and closed her eyes again.

And then there was that sound, a sweet, silvery female voice calling her name.

"Hey, Gabrielle!"

This time she knew she hadn't imagined it, and knew who it was. She sat up slowly, too drained to be shocked. Aphrodite was lounging in a chair in a deliberately, charmingly casual pose, exactly the way one would have expected her to make an appearance. She looked around, then gave a little sniff and clapped her hands; the flames in the fireplace leaped up at once, and there were more candles burning than Gabrielle remembered having in the room. Pleased with her handiwork, Aphrodite smiled at her, streaks of light gleaming in her golden hair.

"There. That's better."

"Aphrodite..." Gabrielle couldn't muster a smile. "What are you doing here?"

"Just checking up on an old pal." Aphrodite stretched a little and giggled. "I thought you might need some moral support. Here, have more wine -- it'll do ya good."

She waved at the empty goblet on the table, and it filled instantly to the brim. Too exhausted to argue, Gabrielle picked it up and sipped the wine.

"So," Aphrodite said. "She ran off, huh?"

Gabrielle gingerly put down the goblet and stared at the Love Goddess. A sudden thought shook her out of her stupor, scalding her face and neck. She lowered her eyes and murmured, "Please don't tell me you were watching..."

"Not the *whole* time!" Aphrodite exclaimed, offended.

"Oh by the heavens..." Gabrielle buried her face in her hands, trying not to think about when exactly Aphrodite was watching. Maybe it wasn't such a good thing to get close to gods; if you didn't know them personally, it didn't bother you that they could watch you any time they wanted.

She heard Aphrodite sigh and say, "Poor Gabby..."

Then, without warning, the pain was back, and it didn't matter anymore that Aphrodite might have spied on her in an intimate moment. Still hiding her face in her hands, she began to cry, her shoulders shaking helplessly.

"Aww ... now don't do that." In a moment Aphrodite was sitting beside her on the couch, patting her back, handing her a handkerchief embroidered with pink hearts and flowers that had probably zapped down from some Olympian linen closet. "There, there... You'll be fine."

"Will I?" Gabrielle looked up, twisting the wet handkerchief in her fingers.
"Aphrodite -- why does it have to be like this?"

"Love, you mean?" Aphrodite smiled benignly. "*Duh!* Nobody said love was perfect."

"*Perfect?*" She didn't have the energy to be furious. "Who's talking about perfect? There's perfect, and there's good, and there's okay, and there's pretty bad, and there's awful -- and then there's -- *this*."

"You mortals just don't get it. You think love is just that happily-ever-after stuff? Well, there's jealous love, and tragic love, and doomed love" -- Aphrodite held up a hand and examined her fingernails, turning them hot pink, then dark blue with sparkles before settling on a pale shade of violet -- "and really twisted love... It's all the real thing, you know."

"Oh, that's a huge comfort." Gabrielle tried to laugh but all it did was make her cry again, her teeth chattering. "It isn't ... it wasn't like that for Xena and me. We were meant to be together. You know that, don't you? You're the Goddess of Love..."

"Honey, I'm not even sure I know what this 'meant to be' stuff is all about. Sure, sometimes the gods will fix people up, but that's usually more like -- a joke or something."

"But we're soulmates," she said stubbornly, swallowing tears.

"*Of course* you are! I'm just saying ... who knows why? I mean, if I'm the Love Goddess and I don't know... Maybe it was meant to be. Maybe it just happened. And maybe you sort of made it that way, you know?" Aphrodite gave her a knowing little grin; Gabrielle realized that she was alluding to Corinne's line in the play about her

bond with Xandra -- *We didn't make it that way, it just is* -- and for a moment she felt ridiculously flattered. Aphrodite continued unflappably, "Who cares? It's still, like -- *totally cool.*"

"Then how can she be with Ares?"

"Who says you can only love one person at a time? It happens. Oh, not every day or anything -- not when it's like *true love* -- but..."

"Wait -- are you saying that what we have isn't true love?"

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. "*Hello?* You paying attention or what? I *mean*, even when it's true love, it still happens. Xena's always breaking all the rules anyway. Hey, this is a chick who's been to hell and back -- *literally*, right? So being in love with two people should be a breeze. Besides, when big bro really has his mind set on something, he's going to get it even if it kills him... and I guess it will kill him eventually, poor guy. You know I saw him and he had, like, *gray hairs* and wrinkles? It was -- "

"What am I going to do?" Gabrielle asked softly. She had been only half-listening.

"Well, I was hoping you'd find somebody else -- fish in the sea and all that... but looks like that's not gonna happen, huh?" Aphrodite made a sympathetic face, then brightened suddenly. "Hey, maybe you're like my bro -- he's really the one-chick type too, you know, deep down. Too bad it's the same chick, huh? I guess one of you had to go..." She paused and giggled. "Or maybe not... Maybe you and Ar should have hooked up too and then all three of you could have had your happily-ever-after -- "

"*Aphrodite!*"

"What, what? Chill out, will ya?" She shook her curls with a theatrical sigh of exasperation. "I'm only kidding. He's *way* too much of a drip to hook up with anyone these days, anyway."

Gabrielle laughed unhappily and sipped some more wine. Aphrodite watched her for a moment. Then she said, "Listen, Gabrielle, you really want some advice? Here goes. You can go back to her or you can move on. Don't just sit and mope around."

"Go back to her?" Gabrielle nearly choked on her wine. "But how can I -- "

"Sorry, little one, consultation's over. Take care of yourself, okay? Don't do anything I wouldn't do." She smirked and blew Gabrielle a kiss, which thankfully didn't turn into a cloud of pink hearts or rose petals. Before Gabrielle could say anything else, the goddess was gone in a burst of golden sparks.

Gabrielle put down the goblet. Then she went to her bedroom, lit the lamps there and opened a small wooden chest that stood in a corner. That was where she kept her Amazon outfit and her sais, and Xena's letters, and Sappho's scroll.

She took out the daggers and let them lie on her flattened palms, as if weighing them. She remembered stabbing a stranger in a sandstorm, thinking he was about to attack

Xena, and then realizing that the man she had killed was Korah, her host's son, holding a scroll not a dagger. It wasn't just because of Ares that she had left. Maybe, if she went back, she could be a warrior on her own terms and not worry that she was letting Xena down if she held back from deadly violence, now that Xena had a fighting partner with no such scruples... *What sort of idea was that?* She flinched and dropped the daggers back in the box. *Was she trying to persuade herself that it was good to have Ares around because he could pick up the slack for her when it came to the fighting?*

No, that wasn't a good reason to go back. There were no good reasons to go back... except one. *When I'm with you, the emptiness is gone.*

She reached for Sappho's scroll. She hadn't looked at it since she had come to Athens. Of course, she knew the poem by heart -- but it was different somehow, seeing those words in black ink slashed into the yellowish, slightly crinkled papyrus. *Equal to the gods he is, I think, when he sits near you, hears that voice...* Maybe Ares still had everything -- and she had lost it, and would spend the rest of her life writing about love instead of living it.

Gabrielle wandered back to the sitting room and stood still for a while. She could go back... *To what?* Living side by side with her rival? Being driven insane by jealousy and anger and resentment? Doing things that would make her ashamed to look inside herself?

She grabbed Xena's scarf from the couch and tied it around the scroll, and stalked over to the fireplace. There was still a good fire going -- Aphrodite had taken care of that. The heat rolled over her as she stood close to the flames, making her skin feel tight and sunburned. *Go back or move on.*

She held out the scroll and the scarf, as if making a sacrificial offering on some godless altar.

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"It's good," Xena said.

Ares shot her a wry look and swallowed another spoonful of chicken soup. "If you're going to lie, you'll have to be more convincing than that," he said. The meat had nearly turned to mush, and he had definitely gone overboard with the salt and spices. "Besides, it's not worth it. Compliments on my cooking don't do a thing for my ego."

"Deal." She was smiling. "I'm cooking tomorrow."

"Oh no. You're not allowed. Mortal life is short enough as it is."

She chuckled and dipped her spoon in the bowl.

Other than this sorry waste of the chicken bought from the ever-helpful widow next door, things were pretty good. They had been on the farm for two days, after a five-

day trip from Athens. Xena had her mind set on fixing up the place; Ares wasn't sure why, and he wasn't going to ask. The suspicion that she might still be thinking about dumping him there came and was quickly chased away. At times her eyes would fade into a distant look, and he knew that she was thinking of Gabrielle -- maybe remembering the days all three of them had spent on the farm, maybe remembering Athens and ... *well, no point in dwelling on that.* Mostly, she was there with him; sometimes they smiled at each other and sometimes they touched, and teased each other and laughed and everything was all right.

They had cleared the charred, jagged remnants of the barn, where the human bones buried among the ashes and dirt served as a reminder of the battle they had fought here; they had put the door of the house back on its hinges, swept away the dust and some of the cobwebs, even patched up the more blatant holes in the walls. Ares had done his share of grumbling about the indignity of manual labor, but it was only for appearances' sake and for Xena's amusement. Manual labor wasn't all that bad when they were working side by side, and when there was something to look forward to at the end of the day. Actually, it hadn't even taken until the end of the day, only until they took a break from work and Xena went to fetch water from the well. Now, a few hours later, the memory of it tightened inside him, taking away his breath for a moment -- her smile as he drank from the dipper in her hands, the cool freshness of her mouth as they kissed, the chill of her hands on his back, his own impatience as he untied the laces in the front of her dress.

Now, the hot day was fading to a mellow evening, and they were sitting in the almost-cleaned-up kitchen eating chicken soup. It occurred to Ares that if someone walked in and saw them right now, they could be taken for a peasant couple. Strangely, the thought of it wasn't altogether annoying.

"Hey."

He looked up to see Xena smiling at him; she reached over to pick it up a small piece of chicken meat he'd dropped on the table, and lifted it to his mouth. He licked it off her fingers and kissed her palm, and heard the low satisfied hum in her throat -- and then shifted his eyes for an instant and saw, in the open window, Gabrielle's face.

For a moment his breath stopped and he wasn't sure she was really there. But she was, her face and her hair pale in the twilight.

Shit. He wasn't sure if he was afraid that she would stay, or run. Would she think that he had asked her to come back just to play a nasty joke on her, to flaunt their happiness in her face?

"What is it?" Xena asked. Then she turned to look at the window.

She didn't move. He wasn't sure she'd noticed that he had let go of her hand. Almost inaudibly, she murmured, "Gabri-" -- and trailed off.

Gabrielle's face was gone from the window, and Ares wasn't sure how long it was before he heard the front door open and her steps creak on the floorboards. He turned toward the doorway of the kitchen; Xena turned around too, slowly, rigidly, as if she were afraid that if she relaxed for a moment her body would not obey her. The

shadows in the doorway thickened into Gabrielle's form, her face a gray blur in the half-darkness. She stood still for a moment, then stepped closer and stopped again, her hands clenched in front of her; she was wearing her Amazon outfit, the red velvet top and the short skirt, but her hair was still long, pinned at the sides and falling down to her shoulders.

"Gabrielle..." This time Xena said it, or rather gasped it as she bolted to her feet. The two of them stood face to face, and Ares was reminded suddenly of the power he once had to make time stop -- of strolling through a stilled battlefield where warriors lunging at each other were suspended in mid-charge. Then time unfroze, and they were holding each other's hands. Ares lowered his eyes.

"You're back..." Xena muttered, her voice shaking. He looked at them again, and saw Gabrielle try to smile as she started to open the satchel at her belt.

"I thought you might need your scarf," she said, with a short nervous chuckle.

Xena's mouth twitched into a crooked grin. "Uh -- thanks, I don't know what I'd do without it -- here on the farm especially..."

Gabrielle dropped her hand without ever reaching into the satchel, and looked around. "You've fixed up the place..."

"Yeah," Xena said. "Another month of hard labor and it'll look brand-new."

After another short silence Gabrielle said, "Can I have something to drink? I've been riding -- "

"Sure." Xena walked to the table and picked up the jug of fermented cider, and poured it into the clay cup she had set out for herself -- her hands didn't shake but her movements were sharp, almost jerky -- and handed it to Gabrielle. Gabrielle drank slowly, her eyes half-closed, as Xena watched her.

"Welcome back," Ares said. The sound of his own voice startled him, as if he hadn't been entirely sure that he was in the room -- as if he had spoken to remind them, or maybe himself, of his presence. Gabrielle darted a quick glance at him and put the cup down. Xena looked at him too, only it was still as if she didn't quite see him.

"Back..." She straightened her shoulders and looked down; when she raised her head again, her face had hardened in resolve. "I can't let you do this, Gabrielle. I can't let you ?- "

"Xena, wait." Gabrielle put her hand on Xena's arm. "This once -- let me decide for myself." She took a deep breath, clasping her hands on her stomach, as though about to deliver a speech. "I want to come back. My life" -- her voice broke off for a moment -- "I can have a life without you, Xena. I know that now. Even a good life... it's just not the life I want. Don't -- don't say anything yet. I know you think I was losing myself before... and I *was*. But it doesn't have to be that way. I think I finally know who I am..." She paused, giving Ares time to think, *Took you long enough*. "... and you're a part of that. But you're not all of me. I forgot that before. I won't again."

"Gab--"

"Wait. I know Ares loves you and -- I know you love him. Xena -- I've accepted it. It can't hurt me anymore."

"No," Xena said softly, shaking her head. "No, you can't -- "

"I have something for you."

Xena looked up at her sharply. This time, Gabrielle did reach inside her satchel; she pulled out a scroll with a piece of flimsy black fabric tied around it.

"Here," she said.

Her hands stiff, Xena untied the scarf, letting it slither down to the floor, and unrolled the scroll. It was that poem, the one Gabrielle had gotten in Megara and lost at the tavern; somehow, Ares just knew. It was vaguely disconcerting that Gabrielle would give this to Xena in front of him -- and that he still remembered it. *Equal to the gods, I think, he is -- when he sits near you, hears that voice -- and velvet laugh, which makes my heart tremble so wildly...*

Xena started to read, and glanced rather sheepishly at Gabrielle.

"Go on," Gabrielle said. "Read it."

For when I dare to look at you -- if only for a moment's span -- the words break silent on my tongue -- and leave me speechless... Thin fire runs beneath my skin -- and thunder pounds against my ears -- chill sweat breaks out all over me -- my eyes see nothing... He had forgotten what came after that. Just as well; that was all he needed, to have this thing knocking about his head.

Ares looked at Gabrielle. She stood straight, her hands clenched and her head tilted down, her tension a palpable thing; and suddenly he had a too-vivid memory of how they tussled over the scroll, of the anger and the hot stab of lust he'd felt lying on top of her. It made his cheeks burn. He shifted his eyes back to Xena, who was still reading, her face hidden by shadows.

Then it came back to him. *My body shivers head to foot -- and I grow paler than the reeds -- until I'm lost -- and then I feel that death is near me.*

Xena looked up, and even in the darkening room, Ares could see the streaks of tears on her face, the quivering of her lips.

"It's -- "

"It's us," Gabrielle whispered. "It's about us -- you see?" Xena nodded, speechless indeed, as she slowly put the scroll down on the table. For a moment Gabrielle was silent too; then she said, "I love you."

"Gabrielle..." Xena's voice was raw with longing and ache and joy. "I've missed you so much..."

They hugged, Xena's cheek resting on the top of Gabrielle's head, her eyes closed; then she pulled back and looked at Gabrielle, and stroked her cheek and whispered, "You're sure -- ?"

"Yes..."

There had been times when Xena had looked at him that way too, her face changed by tenderness, stripped of all defenses; and it occurred to Ares that she could look at him like that because she could look that way at Gabrielle, because Gabrielle had coaxed the Warrior Princess out of her armor. There was something maddening about this thought -- but before it could take a clear shape in his mind, he was struck by something else. *I know Ares loves you and you love him...* He had heard Gabrielle say it, of course, but it was as if he had only now realized that she was talking about him -- and, as he grasped the full meaning of her words, he felt a discomfiting warm rush of gratitude.

There had to be something he could do besides sitting there. He got up, swept some junk off a chair in the corner and pushed it up to the table.

"Thank you," Gabrielle said. She walked over and sat down; she looked at the window where the evening was starting to thicken, then down at her hands, and finally at Xena, who remained standing. "Xena -- there's something I need to tell you. I can't ... we can't go on until you know everything..."

Xena didn't move but he could see the tension in every muscle of her body, in the rigid line of her mouth as she said, "What is it?"

Maybe she thought the girl was about to confess to some sexual tryst. But that wasn't it, of course; even before Gabrielle spoke again, Ares knew what she was about to say.

"Back in Maroneia ... I gave that priest the ambrosia."

"*What?*" Xena's voice was a frightened rasp.

"The ambrosia at Ares' temple. It was me. I stole it from the Amazons and gave it to Geryon because I -- "

"No. No, Gabrielle -- you couldn't have -- it can't be -- " She looked at Ares, as if for support -- but his expression must have told her something else, because there was a quick flash of pain in her face and her voice broke off. Gabrielle turned to him too.

"I told Ares before I left. I made him promise not to tell you..." She smiled at him wanly. "Thank you -- for keeping your word. I was going to tell you, Xena... when the time was right."

Xena was still staring at Ares.

"You mean" -- she spoke slowly, numbly -- "it's true."

"Yeah," he said.

He wasn't sure if he'd ever seen such pain in her face, except when she stood looking at the bodies of villagers crucified by her own daughter. He wished he knew what to do, what else to say.

Xena came up to Gabrielle and knelt on the floor, and took her hands.

"Xena -- " Gabrielle looked down at her, her anguished look a softer reflection of Xena's own; then she slid off the chair and she too was kneeling on the splintery grimy floor, facing Xena, clasping her hands. From where he stood Ares could barely see their features now, just the two dark gray profiles against the almost-faded daylight from the window behind them.

"I'm sorry," Gabrielle said.

Xena brought her hands to her mouth and kissed them.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle -- so sorry..."

She would never love him like that -- never love him so much that she would take the blame for something he had done to hurt her... but that was all right, he didn't want that from her anyway -- it was enough that she didn't blame him for the things she hated in her past...

Ares picked up the flint-stone lighter from the table and lit the lamp. As its glow spread around the kitchen, blackening the shadows on the walls and in the corners, he saw the two women embrace, their heads resting on each other's shoulders; Xena's face was hidden from view but Gabrielle's eyes were closed, tears shimmering on her cheeks, the corners of her mouth lit up slightly by a smile. They pulled apart, their eyes locked on each other. He shivered, and wondered if he should put on his shirt. Then, for a brief instant, Xena turned her head and looked up at him, and it took his breath away.

Gabrielle stroked Xena's face, and ran a finger over her lips. Then she said, "Let's go to bed."

He gaped at her, the initial shock followed by a jolt of anger. *Dammit, she could have waited until they were alone. This was definitely a new Gabrielle ... a Gabrielle he might have appreciated under different circumstances, but right now -- it was a little too much -- too soon.* Xena probably thought so too, because she looked rather alarmed. And then it got worse: Gabrielle looked directly at him and smiled. She was actually taunting him -- the little bitch.

"What, you want me to join you?" he said, his voice edgy.

She flinched a little, and nodded.

Was she serious? *No, she couldn't possibly --* but before he could think anything else, he felt such a surge of desire and fear that his knees buckled and he had to sit down.

Xena looked from Gabrielle to him and back, her eyes wide.

"Wait -- you mean, you want -- you and me and -- "

"Xena," she said pleadingly. "Don't you see -- it's the only way we can make this work -- if -- if -- we're all in this together..."

So the girl had really flipped. There was no way Xena was going to let this happen. Ares managed to find his voice and sound reasonably casual.

"Now there's a whole new meaning to that -- "

Xena cut him off. "*No.* No, Gabrielle -- you don't mean that -- "

"Yes, I do."

His heart was beating painfully fast, and in spite of himself his mind conjured up a jumble of images that inflamed him even more.

"You can't," Xena said. "Not you -- this isn't right ..."

"How can love be wrong?" Gabrielle said softly.

Oh, she was serious all right -- very serious -- leave it to her to come up a sappy line for something like this...

"Come on." Gabrielle rose and held out her hand to Xena. Xena looked up at her, a quick grimace flitting across her face. Then he knew, incredulously, that she had decided. After a moment she took Gabrielle's hand and got up, and then they were both looking at him, their eyes sparkling in the lamplight.

Ares stared back at them, unable to move, unable to ask if they were both out of their minds.

Xena stepped toward him and leaned down, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"Do you want this?" she asked, in a voice that wasn't teasing or seductive but tender and, somehow, unsure.

All he could say was, "Do you?"

She leaned closer still, and, shutting his eyes, he felt the warmth of her mouth on his lips.

There was no point in trying to think. He got up, picked up the lamp and followed them.

Once they were in the bedroom, he wondered if he should have brought the light; but no one said anything about putting it out, and he set it down on the bedside table he and Xena had fixed the day before. Then he turned toward the two women.

The three of them stood staring at each other. For a moment Ares thought, with a

touch of relief amidst the disappointment, that nothing was going to happen because no one would have the nerve to make the first move. His arousal was ebbing, and the thought of Xena trying to get him hard while Gabrielle looked on didn't help one bit.

"Well, at least the bed is big enough," he said; he had meant for it to be funny but it came out as funny in all the wrong ways. There followed an even more uncomfortable silence, specked with little creaks and taps that seemed to come from everywhere in the house. *Mice? Tartarus -- what a time to think about mice...* No one moved, except that Xena shifted her feet and raised her hand a little, then let it fall. *He could just walk up to her and kiss her ... if he had the nerve.*

It was Gabrielle who pulled off her top with an abrupt, almost defiant gesture; she dropped it on the floor and looked up, her lips twitching a little, a deep blush spreading from her face to her neck. Ares realized he was staring at her breasts, and quickly shifted his eyes to Xena. She was already undoing the laces of her dress, and when she slipped out of it she stood naked, her hair falling about her shoulders. He felt a brief pang at the memory of that afternoon, when they were working in the yard and she was naked under her dress -- *naked for him, only for him --*

The dull thud of Gabrielle's boot hitting the floor snapped him out of it. She kicked off the other boot, then pushed down her skirt and undergarment and stood up straight, staring at Xena, looking for all the world as if she were about to jump off a cliff. It was only an instant before Xena took her in her arms, so quickly that Ares wondered if she wanted to shield the girl from his eyes.

They sank down on the bed. This was it, the vision that had so often tormented him in more ways than one -- Xena and Gabrielle in each other's arms, melted into each other's kisses, each other's touch -- only now it was real, right in front of him ... and it left him cold and limp. He sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, still wearing his pants, watching as they kissed, as Xena ran her hand over the curve of Gabrielle's hip.

Then, Xena looked up at him and froze for a moment.

She rolled over and sat up next to him.

"Come here," she said, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "Come here."

Ares felt her breath on his neck, and the softness of her kiss. She turned his head toward her and pressed her mouth to his, gently but insistently sliding her tongue between his lips. That was more than enough to make him want her again. He turned around and held her, closing his eyes so that it was just the two of them, pressing his cheek to her warm hair; and after they'd stayed like that for a while, Xena leaned back, pulling him down with her. She helped him out of his pants and he kicked them away.

There was another moment of awkward waiting as they all lay still, with Xena in the middle. The bed-sheet felt rough and slightly damp. A night-bird shrieked nastily outside, and Ares flinched at the sound. Finally, Gabrielle moved closer and kissed Xena's neck, reaching to stroke her breast. After a last brief hesitation he started to kiss her too, licking the soft skin of her neck, planting small kisses on her shoulder. Her sharp gasp made him look up; her mouth was open in confusion and alarm.

"You all right?"

She nodded almost guiltily; it made Ares wonder if she had thought about this before, had wanted this, the two of them making love to her at the same time. He kissed his way down to her breast and took her nipple in his mouth, licking and nibbling lightly, feeling the shudders that ran through her body. His eyes half-closed, he saw dimly that Gabrielle's mouth was on Xena's other breast. They continued like this, caressing her until her husky broken breaths turned to moans, until she raised her hips, desperate to be touched, and Ares slid his hand down her stomach. His hand collided with Gabrielle's.

Her fingers stiffened instantly; and, just as they both jerked their hands away, he glanced up and found himself staring into her eyes.

The pause was probably much shorter than it seemed, but it was long enough for Xena to lift her head and murmur, "We can stop -- we don't have to -- "

"Shh..." Gabrielle breathed. "I don't want to stop."

Xena looked from her to Ares, her eyes misty with tenderness and uncertainty, and started to sit up. "Then let me -- "

"Lie back." Gabrielle pressed her palm into Xena's chest. "Just lie back."

She gave Xena a kiss that lingered a little too long, then raised her eyes toward Ares as she moved her hand downwards. He looked back at her in tacit agreement.

Xena cried out at Gabrielle's touch and arched her neck, unable to hold still as Ares stroked her thigh and teased her nipple again, sucking it hard, then barely grazing it with his tongue. There was something peculiarly helpless about the low little sounds she made with each breath, and it was driving him wild; it was all he could do to restrain himself from thrusting against her.

"Oh don't stop -- " Xena cried hoarsely, and he wondered if Gabrielle wanted him to take over; but she had stopped only to slide down and settle between Xena's thighs. The sight of her dipping her head down, her hair trailing over Xena's glistening skin, almost finished him off. Xena was making those sounds again, and Ares felt another stab of jealousy at the thought that he wasn't the one to coax them out of her -- *but he would see her face when she came -- he could kiss her...* He placed quick hungry kisses on her jaw, her neck, her breasts -- she was shaking uncontrollably now -- *so close, so very close* -- he noticed that she was clutching Gabrielle's hand and moved up to seize her mouth, feeling her cry vibrate in his throat. He broke the kiss to watch her pleasure-racked face, to whisper in her ear, "You're so beautiful -- " and in the next instant she was overcome completely.

Gabrielle pressed her cheek to Xena's stomach and lay still, her eyes closed, reluctant to move. A slow warmth was dissipating through her body, as if she had shared in Xena's pleasure, the two of them truly a part of each other, just like it had always been. Finally she sat up -- and saw Ares holding Xena, her head resting in the crook of his shoulder, saw him stroking her hair, pressing his lips to her forehead. It hurt. *Let go of her*, she screamed inside. *No ... no, this was why she had wanted this, so that she*

could accept seeing Xena in Ares' arms, learn to see him as one of them, part of them. Suddenly conscious of being naked, and in the presence of a naked and aroused man, she hunched her shoulders and folded her arms over her chest; but there was really no point to it, and Ares wasn't looking at her anyway. Dropping her arms, she crawled up toward Xena and stroked her cheek. Xena raised a hand to touch her face, smiling faintly. Then Ares moved aside, and Gabrielle settled next to Xena, hugging her, snuggling up to her.

She raised herself a little and stared into Xena's still-mellow eyes, and reached up to kiss her.

"Xena," she said, just to hear the sound. "Xena. I love you."

Xena caressed her face again, tracing her features with her fingertips, moving back her hair.

"I love you too..." Then she shifted her eyes to Ares, who was still holding her other hand; she squeezed his fingers and took a deep breath, and said softly, timidly, "I love you both."

She could accept it. Gabrielle looked at Ares and saw the emotions struggling in his face, jealousy and love and anxiety and desire all laid bare; and then something moved her to lean over and kiss him on the mouth.

The stifled sound he made was like an exclamation of shock -- but in the next instant it turned passionate, and he shuddered as he licked her lips and swept his tongue against hers. Taken aback at first, Gabrielle felt her cheeks burn when she realized what had made him respond this way; it was intensely embarrassing and upsetting and, to her dismay, exciting.

Her mind whirling, she broke away. As she regained her bearings, she saw Ares glance nervously at Xena -- and saw the shocked, even scared look on Xena's face. Was she thinking that the two of them -- Gabrielle and Ares -- ? Gabrielle shook her head, smiling, stroking the back of Xena's hand.

"It's all right, Xena -- everything's all right..."

Xena sighed and smiled back as the brittle wariness retreated from her face, though there was something bittersweet and almost guilty about her smile.

"Xena -- " It was Ares who spoke this time; his voice was thick and ragged, and he looked like he was in a desperate state. Xena turned toward him and kissed him, weaving her fingers through his hair. Then she pulled back, suddenly rigid with tension, and glanced at Gabrielle.

"Xena," he said again. "Please..."

Gabrielle put a hand on Xena's shoulder.

"It's okay," she said. In a low murmur, feeling herself blush in spite of everything, she added, "Go on."

She looked on quietly as Xena climbed on top of Ares; he bucked under her and made a strangled sound in his throat, and she whispered, "Shh," stroking his face, wiping the sweat from his forehead, kissing his cheek. Then she raised her head and gasped a little, her lips parted; reflections from the lamp bathed her face in a tender glow and made tiny golden stars shimmer in her eyes.

In the past, haunted by thoughts of Xena and Ares together, Gabrielle had imagined their couplings as rough and fierce, as combat of a different kind, frightening, alien, nothing like the love she and Xena shared. Now that she was watching them -- and a part of her still couldn't believe that she was -- it was shocking and moving, and somehow troubling, to see them being so gentle with each other. As their excitement rose, she saw something of the wildness she had expected. There was a moment when Xena bent toward Ares, brushing her lips over his only to move out of reach when he tried to kiss her; she grinned at his frustration and toyed with him again, this time nipping lightly on his lower lip, and by the time she let him have her mouth he was almost in a frenzy, his hands clenched hard on her arms. Yet there was so much tenderness underneath all that, such care in the way they touched each other, that it made Gabrielle want to weep.

Xena's eyes were veiled now, her lip curled, her voice joining Ares' deeper cries, and Gabrielle wondered if Xena had forgotten that she was even there -- much as she herself had forgotten about Ares' presence before. She reached out and touched Xena's shoulder, stroking her hair. Xena shivered and spun toward her, trying to catch her breath; then, in a quick gesture, she turned her head and pressed her warm lips to Gabrielle's hand.

As Gabrielle took her hand away, her eyes did brim with tears; it was through their sparkling haze that she saw Ares grip Xena's shoulders, pull her down and kiss her fiercely, almost brutally, and still with that heart-tugging tenderness.

Ares swept away Xena's sweat-dampened hair and covered her neck with kisses. *She was going to come -- if he could only go on a little longer...* by now it was sheer agony trying to hold back. About to lose control, he clutched her tighter and groaned, "I love you -- I love you so damn much..." She shuddered and sought his mouth again, and then it was happening, she was shaking in his arms and he let go and they were falling into each other.

He lay back with his eyes closed, the full length of her body pressed into him, skin on hot skin. Then, much too soon, Xena stirred and squirmed out of his arms, and he heard her mutter, "Gabrielle..." It felt as if a blanket had been yanked off him on a chilly night. He looked at them, and glimpsed Gabrielle's tear-filled eyes before she hid her face in Xena's hair. *She had just watched him and Xena -- had heard him beg for relief, seen him lose it completely --* the thought of it, at the moment, was alarming if not downright sickening. Worse, he found that he couldn't take his eyes off the two women as they embraced next to him, no matter how much a part of him wanted to look away.

"I'm all right, I'm all right -- I wasn't -- " Gabrielle's voice was muffled by Xena's embrace, and then became a barely audible mumble. Xena held her, stroking her hair and back, kissing her, rocking a little, murmuring something tender that he couldn't

make out. Soon Gabrielle was breathing faster and whimpering a little; Xena rolled on top of her and captured her mouth in a long kiss, then let her lips wander gently over Gabrielle's face and neck. She pulled back to look at Gabrielle, and this time it was Xena's eyes that glittered with tears.

"You're beautiful," she said, "beautiful..."

She slid down to kiss Gabrielle's breasts; and, as Gabrielle shook and arched, it struck Ares that she *was* beautiful -- her eyelids fluttering, her lips bright and swollen from kisses and open in a silent cry, her hair tangled -- a beautiful woman, not a girl; the woman Xena loved. He wondered if he could touch her. But he had no idea if she wanted it, or how Xena would react; and, even though a warm tide of arousal was starting to spill inside him again, he could still think straight enough to know that it wasn't a good idea.

Xena shifted further down, and then, shuddering a little, Gabrielle touched her cheek.

"No, don't ..." Xena raised her head sharply and she stammered, "I want to look at you ?- "

Xena smiled a little, her eyes tender, and moved up to lie next to Gabrielle; this time Gabrielle had ended up in the middle, and Ares wondered uneasily if Xena had done this on purpose to let him see them. He watched Xena caress Gabrielle's breasts and stomach, the pale skin rippling with little spasms under her touch, and then part Gabrielle's thighs as she kissed her mouth again, silencing her soft moan. It was turning him on, of course; but apart from that, the strange gratitude he had felt before washed over him once more, the feeling that Xena could love him because she and Gabrielle loved each other, because they'd let him into their life. He should have resented this thought, but there was, for the moment, no anger left in him. Now he wanted to see it all, every kiss, every touch -- they were so hot -- so beautiful -- Xena so anxious to give pleasure, Gabrielle so far gone, her cheeks flushed, her hips lifting off the bed as Xena stroked her in little circles and slid her fingers inside her, her nipples taut and wet from Xena's mouth.

Ares rolled over on his side, watching them. He wanted to join them, to lie behind Xena and wrap his arm around her and touch her while she caressed Gabrielle, to press his mouth to Xena's shoulder and neck; or to join her in pleasuring Gabrielle, kiss Gabrielle's breast and taste its silky sweaty skin, suck hard on her nipple while Xena brought her over the edge -- *dammit, he wanted to join them!* He wasn't sure how much more of this he could take, especially when Xena looked up at him, her mouth on Gabrielle's breast, and he saw a mischievous sparkle in her eye; or maybe it was just the flickering light of the lamp. Then, mercifully, it was over; Gabrielle's body shook and went rigid, her voice hoarse as she almost sobbed her pleasure, until she stilled and pressed, trembling and gasping, closer to Xena and hid her face in Xena's chest.

"Are you okay?" Xena whispered, stroking her hair.

"Yeah..." Gabrielle looked up and they kissed; and Xena took her face in her hands and said, almost inaudibly, "I love you."

When she let go, Gabrielle sighed and eased down on her back, her hair a tousled heap on the gray pillow. She turned her head, and Ares found himself looking straight into her eyes, dark and deep in the dusky shadows that fell across her face. She shivered a little; then she moved closer and reached out hesitantly to touch his cheek. His heart jumped at the memory of how she had kissed him before. He had no idea what she was up to, or how far she wanted to go; he knew only that it would change things, and maybe not in a good way. Yet if he backed away ?- that would be it, and he would never know what would have happened if he *had* gone along. Either way, it could ruin everything.

"We can love each other too, right?" Gabrielle said. "Because we both -- "

Her voice trailed off as she glanced back at Xena. The thought of a clever comeback dissipated in Ares' mind before it could even form into actual words. There was a fleeting struggle in Xena's face. She took Gabrielle's hand and held it for a long moment, squeezing it gently. On impulse, Ares reached out toward them, and saw a smile of encouragement flicker in Xena's eyes. He put his palm over their entwined fingers and felt the tender touch of Xena's thumb caressing the back of his hand -- and then, still with a slight shock, Gabrielle's fingers grazing his.

* ~ * ~ *

Pulled back into awareness, Xena lay still. She felt drained of all strength, yet somehow it was good.

Even with her eyes shut, she knew the sun was high and streaming in through the window at the head of the bed. She also knew that last night had been no dream; she could feel Gabrielle nestled by her side, her head resting on her arm, Gabrielle's even breath brushing gently over her skin -- and on the other side of her, Ares, his arm lying across her stomach, his heat seeping into her.

She hadn't dreamed it, any of it. Ares' and Gabrielle's hands moving over her body, their mouths on her breasts, their kisses burning and soothing at the same time, filling all of her with a fever that rose to an ever-higher pitch. Making love to Ares and then to Gabrielle, all of them in the same bed; meeting Ares' gaze while she caressed Gabrielle, the intensity in his eyes shocking her with a new jolt of desire. And then ... and then, Gabrielle and Ares in each other's arms, touching each other with an awkward, nervous affection, with a kind of curiosity, and then with a growing excitement that seemed to take them both by surprise. The memory of that wormed its way into the quiet morning-after haze, nudging and tugging inside her.

Xena opened her eyes and winced at the bright flash of sunlight. A droplet of sweat trickled from her forehead down the side of her face. Ares and Gabrielle... She had no right to feel jealous ... but, right or wrong, it still scratched at her heart, still made her afraid -- greedily, selfishly. What if the two of them wanted to spend the night together and she'd be the one lying restlessly awake, wondering... ? It would serve her right, after what she'd put them through. She shifted a little; her arm was getting stiff but she didn't want to move it, or she would disturb Gabrielle. What if... It would be her fault if she ended up alone ?- only she didn't want to be alone ... maybe she'd lost the knack for it by now.

What a stupid thing to worry about, anyway. They were all together ... maybe everything was all right, maybe she could just let it be. Closing her eyes, Xena drifted back to the last foggy moments she remembered from the night before, when the three of them lay in a drowsy embrace, unwilling to separate, kissing gently, stroking, touching as they let sleep take them.

Would it still be all right when they woke up? She opened her eyes again and tilted her head to look at Gabrielle, her face mostly hidden from view by her hair, her bare back and shoulder lit up by a sun-patch that made the down on her skin a soft white. Gabrielle was about to wake up in bed with her and Ares... Gabrielle, who would have been the last person in the world to want such a thing -- who knew nothing of desire without love, had no experience with sex except for their life together and her one-night marriage to Perdicas.

A more distant memory pushed into Xena's mind: the orgy at Caligula's palace, the gaudy banquet hall abuzz with voices and music and drunken laughter, the air thick with the smell of wine and incense and perfumes and sex. Amidst the embroidered rugs and cushions, there were writhing half-naked bodies, many in heaps of three or more; sometimes a reveler would crawl or stumble over from one group to another and it made no difference, just some extra body parts to be groped and prodded and tongued. She remembered the shocked revulsion in Gabrielle's face, and her own disgust at the spectacle. Maybe what they had done was no different; maybe Gabrielle's life with her had come to *this*. But it wasn't the same ... it couldn't be. Last night had been about love -- Gabrielle had known that... *How can love be wrong?* It had been about being together -- staying together.

Ares sighed and stirred next to her, and Xena knew he was awake. She turned to him, suddenly worried again. He looked up, squinting at the sun, and gave her a dim sleepy smile; and then, Xena knew exactly when it all came back to him, because his eyes snapped into focus and for an instant he looked as if he were trying to wake up for real. He pulled his arm back and turned on his side, raising himself on his elbow.

She lifted her hand, a little awkwardly, and brushed the back of her fingers over his face.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Good question.

He felt strange -- different, somehow. There was the stark fact that he was in bed with Xena and Gabrielle, with Xena next to him and Gabrielle, still asleep, snuggled up next to Xena. There was -- last night.

Had he wanted this all along? The memory of the two of them caressing Xena -- of holding her, kissing her breasts while Gabrielle slid down between her thighs, watching her face when she was coming -- made him dizzy and stirred him again, getting the better of his exhaustion. And there was more.

There had been the moment when Gabrielle moved into his arms and they lay together, their lips touching in a brief, warm, clumsy kiss that neither of them would deepen; then she pulled back and her hand roamed tentatively over his chest, grazing

his nipples, and he began touching her too, stroking her shoulders, her back, her soft hair. Her hand moved down to his stomach, making him breathe harder and tighten his grip on her shoulder; she froze for an instant, and then resumed her fumbling about. He couldn't stifle a moan; it was bad enough that her touch could do this to him (*Tartarus, this was still the annoying blonde!*) but she would probably drive him insane and leave it at that. His eyes met Xena's unreadable gaze, and he felt as though he were silently begging her for help -- or not so silently because Gabrielle's fingers actually brushed his groin and he moaned again. Gabrielle paused, and Ares felt her tremble and squirm a little. When he looked at her, her expression was startled and embarrassed and tender, and a kind of tenderness for her came over him, too. He hugged her closer and pulled her up on top of him, and kissed her cheek and then, impulsively, the tip of her nose. She chuckled and nuzzled his neck, and it was all very well except that he was desperate for relief; if she'd been deliberately trying to tease him half to death, she couldn't have done better. It made him reckless enough to rub against her thigh; Gabrielle gasped a little, her eyes widening, and shifted to the side -- and just when he thought he had scared her off, she slid down a little and put her hand on his cock.

She started to stroke him, hesitantly at first. Turning his head toward Xena, Ares saw the shock in her face, and the anxiety; but he also knew her well enough to see the excitement. Tiny jets of fire were shooting through his blood, and he didn't know if it was from Gabrielle's touch or from the knowledge that Xena was watching them, that it was turning her on. "Is this okay?" Gabrielle asked in a near-whisper, and he turned to her and blurted out hoarsely, "Oh yeah -- it's good -- " She grew bolder and more eager, and he raised his head to kiss her shoulder and finally worked up the nerve to cup her breast. She flinched slightly and he gasped, "Don't stop" -- but she wasn't stopping, instead she leaned down and ran her warm tongue over his nipple. Part of him still felt hazily dismayed at the thought that he was pleading with *Gabrielle*, that she had him at her mercy -- but dammit, she was making him feel so good -- he lay back and let her go on, his hand wandering over her back, her waist, her hip. Sometimes their eyes met and Gabrielle gave him an uncertain smile, and he did his best to smile back at her; a few times he noticed her looking over at Xena, Xena's eyes shining softly in response. Already on the verge of coming, he pulled Gabrielle closer, his fingers tangled in her hair, clutching at the nape of her neck; just then, his eyes met Xena's again, and stayed locked on hers the whole time as the heat rippled through his body.

He remembered it all now, as he looked at Gabrielle nestled on Xena's arm: how he touched Gabrielle's face afterwards -- how she turned away shyly but then looked up and stroked his cheek; how she shrank back a bit when he moved down and brushed his lips over her inner thighs, how she thrust herself toward him later. It still felt strange, to know that he and Gabrielle had touched each other this way; it hadn't been at all like anything he could have fantasized or imagined or dreamed. But it didn't matter; he was awake, and Xena lay next to him, and everything was all right.

Ares smiled at her, his heart wobbling a bit when she smiled back. He wanted to hold her tight, hug her, rock her in his arms; but he didn't want to wake Gabrielle, not yet. He leaned toward Xena and kissed her soft yielding mouth, then trailed his lips to her ear.

"I've got you, haven't I?" he said quietly.

"You've got me." Laughter bubbled under the surface of her voice; she sounded moved, and -- happy. He pulled back so he could see her face. She slid her hand up his back and ruffled his hair. Love and joy and hope welled inside him, making his chest ache, choking him for a moment. Just then Gabrielle sighed and shifted in her sleep, wisps of blond hair stirring slightly on her naked shoulder. Xena tilted her head, pressing her cheek to Gabrielle's forehead; and Ares knew that some of the tenderness he felt was for Gabrielle, too.

"I understand," he said.

She gave him a puzzled look, and he nodded toward Gabrielle. Xena's lips tightened, her face clouding over with doubt.

"You know," she said, "this is crazy."

"Completely crazy." He grinned at her. "All of it. You and me, you and her -- the three of us -- "

His words trailed off into a quiet that filled with sounds from outside: a scattering of birdsong, a splash of wind in the trees. Xena's look was still thoughtful and a little distant, yet almost serene.

"You actually think it can work," she said.

"Why not?" Ares touched the back of his hand to her cheek. "We can all settle down here, fix up the place -- raise chickens -- get a dog -- have a dozen kids -- "

"Stop that." She tugged at his ear.

"Ow. All right -- we don't have to raise chickens."

Xena chuckled indulgently. "You *are* crazy."

"It can work." He paused. "Just one thing..."

"What?" She glanced at him a little anxiously.

"Will I still have you all to myself once in a while?"

She didn't smile; but there was relief in her eyes, and warmth and a bit of mischief.

"I think -- that can be arranged."

Xena raised her head and kissed him, tugging gently at his lower lip as she pulled away, and he wanted her right now; and then Gabrielle moved with a sleepy little moan and turned on her back and opened her eyes.

A swirl of dust mites shimmered before her in a burst of sunlight. Looking away, Gabrielle saw the patched-up brownish blanket and the coarse, unpainted wooden floor; this was definitely not her house in Athens. Then she felt Xena's warmth next to

her, and remembered.

She was in bed with Xena and Ares.

She had done it -- gods -- she couldn't believe she had actually done it. Xena -- what was she going to say to Xena now? She couldn't believe it at first when the idea first came to her, back in Athens -- that they could all be together and maybe that was the way to make it work -- she couldn't believe that she would even think of such a thing -- and now -- and now, here she was.

Her chest tight with panic, Gabrielle turned to Xena; her face was tender and worried and her eyes the lightest misty blue, and she looked as if she wanted to smile but didn't quite dare to. Ares darted his eyes away and then, after a moment, gave Gabrielle a rather sheepish look. She realized that the blanket had slipped down to her waist; her face flushed with heat, especially when she remembered that he had touched her breasts, had planted light hot kisses on her nipples -- and she blushed even more when Xena pulled up the blanket for her.

Gabrielle sat up, clutching at the blanket, and pressed her other hand to her face, covering her eyes, rubbing her forehead. It felt like remembering a drinking binge the morning after -- except that her memories weren't foggy, they were jumbled but sharp and clear ... looking through the window into the dusky house to see Ares taking a piece of food from Xena's fingers, and the steaming bowls on the table -- ridiculously, heartbreakingly domestic -- enough to make her feel like an intruder, to make her want, for one dizzy instant, to turn back to Athens. The way Xena had looked at her later, with such quiet intensity in her eyes that it was unbearable -- *until I'm lost, and then it seems that death is near me...* The three of them in the bedroom, staring at each other -- the thumps of her own boots falling on the floor -- the moment when she and Xena sank down on the bed and it didn't matter that Ares was there, it would always feel right being in Xena's arms no matter what ... except that Ares *was* there and it *did* matter -- their eyes had met while they were both kissing Xena's breasts, their hands had touched while sliding over Xena's body... She remembered how it had both frightened and excited her to see Xena so out of control -- how stirred and helpless and confused she had felt watching Xena and Ares make love -- how, the warm glow of pleasure ebbing slowly inside her, she suddenly cringed at the thought that Ares had seen her like this, had seen *her and Xena* share something that was supposed to be theirs, only theirs ... how, somewhere in the whirl of things going through her mind, the thought had taken shape that she and Ares should be with each other, too.

It had felt so odd, to be in his arms -- to feel the awkward gentleness of his hands on her back, the hardness of his chest against her breasts -- to put her hand on him and feel him pulse under her touch ... odd because she wasn't in love with him -- and yet she did love him in a way, enough to want to give him pleasure, enough to be moved by his helpless, shocked response to her. And still, after all that, she had been taken aback when she realized what Ares wanted to do -- when she felt his mouth on her thighs, the startling roughness of his beard and mustache on her skin... she had backed away from him at first -- she was still too sensitive and his touch made her wince, but it wasn't just that... suddenly it was as if he wanted to take something from her that she wasn't willing to give. She turned to Xena and saw her worried look, and took her hand and held it; and then Ares soothed her with small kisses until she relaxed and opened up to him, and Xena moved closer to kiss her forehead and stroke her hair,

and she sighed and closed her eyes in willing surrender.

Now it was morning, and sunlight was seeping in through her fingers, and she felt Xena lay a hand on her back a bit gingerly, the warmth of her palm spreading under her skin. Gabrielle sighed and opened her eyes, taking her hand away from her face. She turned toward Xena and Ares; they were both looking at her expectantly, nervously, as if waiting for her judgment. At that moment she knew that she didn't regret it; in some way that she could only begin to grasp, she felt even closer to Xena than before -- and, after all the anger and bitterness between her and Ares, she could look at him now and feel something like love. Light-headed with relief and with the sheer strangeness of it all, Gabrielle gave a short, half-sobbing laugh; Xena and Ares both looked startled, and then she grinned and they were grinning too, and Xena sat up and hugged her and everything really was all right.

Or maybe not yet, because now someone had to get out of bed first. The three of them exchanged a long uncertain look. Finally, Ares threw the blanket aside, and Gabrielle's first instinct was to look away but she kept her eyes on him -- *she could look at him now, couldn't she? Did she want to -- ?* As he got up, the sweat on his body glistened in the sun, and she noticed that he was half-erect; her nerve failed her and she blushed, especially when she looked up and their eyes met, and Ares cleared his throat and turned away. He looked around, and Gabrielle realized that his pants were on the floor by her side of the bed. She reached down and picked them up; then she froze for a moment, not sure what to do. Xena took the pants from her and tossed them to Ares, and he slipped into them, still avoiding her eyes.

"I'll get water for the bath," he said.

"Hmm." Xena nodded rather distractedly. "Good idea."

Then he was gone and the two of them were left alone, and Gabrielle's mouth went dry. They both sat up, and she realized just how much she did need a bath; she felt muggy and sweat-glazed, her hair limp. Xena was looking at her with a kind of puzzlement, and before she could speak Gabrielle said, "I'm okay with everything." She paused. "Are you?"

Xena looked lost for words. "I -- "

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like -- *you dragged my soul into some horrible pit of darkness.*" She dropped her voice to a mock-tragic sing-song and made a spooky face. Xena grinned in spite of herself, but the grin faded quickly; she winced a little, as if Gabrielle had stumbled on a painful truth, and looked away.

"*No.* Look at me, Xena." Gabrielle reached out and touched Xena's cheek, turning her head so that Xena would face her. "I am ... *I am the keeper of my soul. I know what I'm doing... I know what I want.*"

* ~ * ~ *

"You're making breakfast?"

Xena broke another egg and poured it into the bowl. Then she turned and looked at Ares. He was grinning at her, slightly breathless, wiping the sweat from his face -- he had been busy hauling the water and tending to the horses while she had taken a quick bath. It felt good to see him like this. Maybe in a few weeks or a few days it would all go to Tartarus. But for now --

"Yeah," she said.

Ares picked up a jug from the table and took a few gulps, the water trickling down his beard and dripping down his chest. "You want to give her food poisoning for her homecoming?" he said, catching his breath.

"*Homecoming*," she whispered. It was strange, to think of Gabrielle *coming home*, of any of them having a home. But that wasn't really what he meant.

Xena turned back, stirring the eggs with a wooden spoon as Ares came up behind her and put his arm around her waist.

"Fried eggs, cheese and bread," she said. "You can't go too wrong with that."

Ares rested his head on her shoulder and she felt his body against her, his breath on her neck, the cool wetness of the water on his skin.

"*You can*," he said, his voice husky.

She leaned back into him, rubbing his bare foot with hers, closing her eyes for a moment before she snapped herself out of it and stood up straight. Behind the wall in the small room where Gabrielle was bathing, she could hear the water splash and Gabrielle's feet plop down on the floor.

"Get me the frying pan, will ya?"

"Hey." Ares moved back a little. "Was it something I said?"

She chuckled and elbowed him lightly in the chest. "I wouldn't need a frying pan."

Just as Xena put the skillet down on the hot stove, the door creaked open and she looked up to see Gabrielle step into the daylight, wearing a knee-length olive-green dress embroidered with golden thread.

"I'm done." She glanced at Ares and added a little awkwardly, "Next?"

"That would be me," he said.

Gabrielle smiled and pushed back her damp hair, her face and her bare arms glowing

with freshness. She looked young and lithe and lovely; and Xena felt so many things at once that she had to turn away.

She picked up the spoon and poked at the bubbling egg mix in the pan. Out of the corner of an eye, she saw Ares pick up the bucket with the water warmed up for his bath, walk to the door and close it behind him. She could hear Gabrielle walking around the cramped kitchen, aimlessly moving the jars and bowls on the table, as if this place really were her new home and she were trying to get used to it. Finally Gabrielle came up to her and asked, "Need some help?"

"No -- no, I've got it under control." Xena shook her head. "Listen -- I'm sorry I haven't been helping enough all these years -- "

Gabrielle smiled faintly. "Come on, Xena, it's not like you were slacking off. We both know this isn't one of your many skills -- "

"No, it's not just that. I took you for granted."

"You did not."

"Gabrielle, look -- I wanted to tell you...." All this time since she had woken up, something vague had been churning inside her -- something she *had* to say to Gabrielle. "I want you to know that I never wanted you to be any different than you are..." She paused. "I could never want -- anything more than you've given me."

She half expected Gabrielle to say, "*But it wasn't enough -- you still wanted Ares...*" But Gabrielle said nothing; she nodded and stroked Xena's shoulder, smiling a little smile that said, *I know*.

And then, before she could think, Xena blurted out, "Why do you love me?"

There was surprise in Gabrielle's face, but only for a moment; and then only love.

"Xena..." She sighed, and said simply, "You have a good heart."

Xena felt an odd dizzy lightness inside, as if she could faint, or fly. After a moment Gabrielle reached up and ran her thumb over Xena's cheek, and Xena realized she was wiping off a tear. She raised a hand, letting her fingertips rest on Gabrielle's wrist, feeling the gentle beat of her pulse.

She rescued the eggs just in time.

As Xena put the frying pan down on the table, the scroll Gabrielle had given her -- the poem -- caught her eye; it was balanced precariously on the table's edge, as if it could tip over at any moment. She moved it back, the breath catching in her throat; and then she knew what else she needed to tell Gabrielle.

The saddlebag was in the next room; it took only a few moments of hurried digging to find the scroll. Back in the kitchen, Gabrielle stood at the table slicing the cheese, her wet hair and her shoulders touched by the sun. Xena came closer and stopped, no longer sure of herself, fear prickling at her back; her first impulse when Gabrielle

turned around was to hide the scroll behind her back, like some schoolgirl with a love note. But she held it out.

"It's for you," she said. "It's -- it's... I -- " She wanted to say, "I got you a poem, too," but that felt so stupid -- as if it was some kind of exchange.

"Let me see."

She didn't move; Gabrielle took the scroll from her hand and unrolled it. After a moment Gabrielle raised her eyes. There was helplessness in her face, and she spoke in a near-whisper. "A poem?"

Suddenly, she needed to explain. "I got it in Athens..."

A slight twitch ran across Gabrielle's face. "Athens..." she breathed out, and Xena cursed herself for mentioning it -- but then the shadow passed, and Gabrielle was smiling.

"You got me a poem..."

"Funny, huh?. I bet you weren't even sure I could read." She tried to grin but quickly gave up. "Gabrielle -- you know I'm not good with words -- but when I saw this -- "

Gabrielle put a hand on her arm. "It's all right... you don't have to explain -- "

She looked down at the scroll again, and Xena couldn't look away; not even when Gabrielle began to read, her voice falling lower still.

Some say an army on foot, or upon

Horses or fleet ships

Is on this black earth the fairest sight;

But I say: it is the one you love...

Her voice choked off and she read the rest in silence, absent-mindedly swiping the tears from her eyes.

When she was done, she looked up again and murmured, "Xena, I don't know what to -- " She trailed off, shaking her head a little. "It's the most beautiful -- "

And at that moment it was the most important thing in the world, to have Gabrielle look at her like that.

Something made Xena shift her eyes, and she saw that the door to the next room was ajar and Ares was looking at them, his face still wet from the bath and lit up by a quiet warmth like a hidden smile. She wondered how much he had heard. Gabrielle turned and saw him, too; and somehow, this moment between them was not shattered.

Then Gabrielle rolled up the scroll and put it aside, and Ares stepped out into the

kitchen, the cotton pants clinging to his damp skin, the dagger pendant on his chest gleaming sharply in the sun. Birds chattered outside. Xena suddenly realized that the fried eggs were getting cold, and that she was getting ravenously hungry.

"Let's eat," she said.

They sat down, and as Gabrielle helped herself to the fried eggs and Ares poured apple cider into his mug, he looked up and said, "You know, we'd better set down some rules around here. No mushy poetry before breakfast."

Gabrielle wrinkled her nose at him. "All right then -- only after breakfast. And for the rest of the day."

* ~ * ~ *

Sunrise was near when they left the farm; the sky had turned a bluish white, with a flush of deep pink spreading over the hills. The past few days had been hot, and Xena had wanted to leave early so that they could put in a few hours of riding before the sun became too scorching.

They rode side by side with Xena in the middle. It was good to see her in her leathers and armor again, with the chakram at her belt and the sword at her back. When Ares glanced at her, she seemed lost in thought; once, he saw her turn her head and look at the farmhouse when it was still within sight. In the dawn's light, her face looked soft and her eyes were very clear.

Six days had passed since Gabrielle's return. By some unspoken agreement, they had stayed on the farm, fixing up the place. By an equally unspoken agreement, it was understood that they would come back here on occasion; maybe even, at some point, settle down here for good -- though at the moment, the idea of settling down anywhere seemed unreal ... *as unreal as the idea that he was a god once*. With that in mind, an impressive brand-new padlock acquired from the local blacksmith was slapped on the door as they were leaving; arrangements had been made for a neighbor to keep an eye on the property.

They had spent those six days together; working together, eating together (Gabrielle had quietly taken over most of the cooking), and for the next two nights after the first time, sleeping together as well. Finally, Ares had taken the initiative and told Xena and Gabrielle that they probably wanted some time alone, hoping that Gabrielle would return the favor the next night. She did.

Now, they were heading south, with no specific purpose in mind; Xena would eventually find a mission, no doubt, or the mission would find her.

"Look." Gabrielle pointed to a flare of orange above the black treetops of a distant forest. "The sun's coming up."

"Yeah," Xena said, the corner of her mouth curving in a small smile.

They rode at a slow trot down a grassy hillside. The wind whooshed in a sparse grove nearby and ruffled Xena's hair; she swept it back, baring her shoulder, and Ares' chest

tightened as memories from the past nights swarmed in his mind.

At the bottom of the hill, a peasant girl was driving a flock of sheep out to pasture, a large black dog running at her side; the faint din of bleating and barking rippled through the early-morning quiet, gradually growing louder. As they came closer, the shepherd, a freckled-faced blonde in a blue dress, gaped at them with unabashed curiosity and perhaps a touch of awe.

They passed a sleepy village huddled in the distance and rode on as the sun rose and heat filled the air. After a while, Gabrielle suggested a rest stop, and Xena pointed out a shady spot under a great oak.

They stopped under the tree, and Ares watched Xena dismount in a swift, graceful motion. Out of the corner of an eye, he noticed that Gabrielle was watching her, too. Xena stretched a little, and then looked up at them and smiled.

"Come on," she said.

Mortal life was good.

THE END