

~ Fight for Hope ~

by Red Hope

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Violence: There is violence in this story.

Subtext: Any subtext becomes main text here.

Summary: The sequel to [The Loudest Silence](#). Xena and Gabrielle are headed to the Amazons for a visit, but visited by an unwelcomed guest, Hope. With the death of the Olympian gods, Dahak has been freed and Hope is reborn, but this time she awakens with new eyes. Dahak orders Hope to capture Gabrielle so that Gabrielle may be infected again. However Hope refuses and instead pursues the bard and Warrior Princess to protect them from Dahak. Can Hope truly earn the heroes' trust and protect her mother?

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Started: September 6, 2000

Ended: September 6, 2000

Revised: January 4, 2009

Series 6: **Thick as Blood** - Story #2

Chapter 1

Xena and Gabrielle just finished getting their camp prepared for the night. The warrior was debating what she should get for dinner while her partner was busy getting the campfire better under control. Gabrielle stood up after she finished.

Xena tilted her head and softly asked, "What are you hungry for?"

The bard stared into the fire, as if she didn't hear, and she considered the request. "Some tuna would be great." She flashed a glance at her soul mate.

The Warrior Princess rolled her eyes then tilted her weight to her right foot.

Gabrielle chuckled at Xena's look then honestly reminded, "You asked what I wanted."

"Let me try that again," Xena started, "what would you like that I can hunt from around this general area?"

"How big do you mean when you say 'general'?" the bard taunted.

The warrior slotted her eyes, yet her grin creased her full lips. She casually strolled over to her partner then murmured, "Generally I mean relatively close to the camp."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to further her smart comments, but she stopped because she knew the teasing could get ugly. She simply smirked and honestly stated, "Quail would be nice." She then touched Xena's arm. "You don't mind waiting a minute, do you? I just want to go down to the stream and clean up."

The warrior bent forward and placed a soft kiss on the bard's temple. "Take your time." She then decided she'd spend the time brushing Argo down.

Gabrielle appreciated her partner's consideration. She first retrieved a small towel and soap from the saddlebags then she headed to the stream. The short journey allowed for her to reflect on her recent vacation with Xena on the island. She felt like a lot had changed for her and the warrior but for the better while they were on the island. The past year, minus the twenty-five, were rough on them both, and their relationship had become fragile.

The bard knelt beside the stream and placed the soap and folded towel on a large rock. She then cupped her hands in the water, splashed her face once, and used the soap to clean off the grime from the road travel. Afterwards, she dried her face and set the towel back on the stone, but she continued to stare at the calm water. She studied her reflection and considered how much she'd changed over the years. She grunted at the old memories of being a starry-eyed hero worshiper to becoming Xena's partner; a very dependable and needed partner for Xena.

Several recent memories overwhelmed the bard, and she shook them away for the most part except for one. Gabrielle dipped her right hand in the water then dampened her short bangs back on her head. Then slowly her fingers combed through her hair and stopped at the back of her head. She could still feel the faint scar left behind from Xena's chakram. It was funny how Ares's immortality sacrifice didn't seem to fully heal the scab.

Gabrielle released a sigh, but she wistfully smiled because she felt a lot better about her relationship with Xena now. She could tell Xena wanted this to work for them and to resolve their issues. She almost felt like thanking Aphrodite for it, but she knew it was Xena's decision wholly.

The bard's thoughts faded away but it seemed her memories would not. She oddly stared at her reflection when her former, younger self mirrored in the water next to hers. She blinked when her younger image gave her a raised eyebrow. Then suddenly Gabrielle's heart jumped into her throat when all her senses came to life. She instantly recalled that very familiar sensation that she thought would never plague her again.

In expert motion, Gabrielle went for her sais, rose up, and faced her opponent. She clenched her teeth when she took in her younger self standing before her in full life. She inhaled sharply then her tone laced with venom when she whispered, "Hope."

Hope stood motionless and passive, and she simply greeted, "Hello, mother." She even wore Gabrielle's former green haltertop and skirt plus the boots.

"By the gods," Gabrielle uttered when she realized she wasn't daydreaming. Her heartbeats became wild, yet she remained quite calm externally. "How are... what do you want?"

Hope noticed how her mother remained poised in a defensive stance and sais at the

ready. She kept her distance. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?" She tilted her head then mentioned, "You've hardly aged."

The bard ignored the gibberish and instead flipped her sais out to reveal her blades. "What do you want?"

Hope almost replied, but she stopped and turned her head to the left. She slightly grinned and called, "Come join us, Xena."

The Warrior Princess nonchalantly approached with her sword's blade leaning against her right shoulder. She took her spot beside her partner and coldly assessed Hope from head to toe. "You just can't stay dead, can you?"

Hope smirked at the remark. "I take after my mother."

Gabrielle slotted her eyes at the comment. She stepped closer and became more threatening. "Tell us now why you're here or—"

"I'm here to protect you," Hope cut off.

The bard wavered, and the mounted tension filtered through her but returned. "Protect me from what?"

Hope was quiet for second then she finally answered, "From Dahak."

Xena briefly glanced at her soul mate so she could gauge Gabrielle's reaction and emotions. She deciphered that the bard wasn't buying it by a long shot, and neither was she. She decided silence was best so that she could determine Hope's motives.

Gabrielle shook her head then stepped back to Xena's side. She didn't feel threatened but not completely safe so she merely lowered her weapons to her side. "You've always been loyal to him, Hope. I'm not about to believe otherwise." She didn't like the mention of Dahak since she had the feeling that he was most likely trying to return to earth again.

Hope stepped closer then her stone features broke with hidden emotions. "You're at risk." She glanced up at Xena then amended, "You both are. Dahak has ordered his disciples to bring you and Xena to him. You're to be..." She stopped and her eyes lowered then met Gabrielle's passionless eyes. "You're to be infected again. And Xena's death is the welcoming sacrifice."

"Let's pretend I believe you," Gabrielle started, "why does Dahak need me infected again?" She quickly thought it out and couldn't believe what she was concluding.

Hope shook her head then informed, "You could say I'm not daddy's little girl anymore." She went silent and seemed to grow uncomfortable. "We've had difference of opinions lately. So I left the cult to find you when he told me his wishes."

Gabrielle smirked then snidely tormented, "You're not so keen on a replacement huh?"

Hope suddenly became angry and snapped, "Do you think that's really it?" She came closer but stopped when the warrior lowered her sword as a warning. She focused back on Gabrielle. "I would have walked away from the cult and not bothered to find

you. Dahak will have me killed for this." She clenched her hands at her side. "I've spent over six days tracking you down."

The bard did grant that much to the demi-god. She peered up at her silent partner then grabbed Xena's arm. She ordered to Hope, "Don't move."

Xena took several paces away from Hope and turned to her partner once they were out of earshot.

"What you think?" the bard quietly questioned and fully trusted Xena's opinion.

The Warrior Princess honestly considered all things then replied, "I'm not exactly sure."

Gabrielle glanced at Hope then up to her partner. "I'm glad I'm not the only one then." She tapped a sai's handle against her thigh then whispered, "If Dahak is trying to come back then we have to stop him."

The warrior consented with a faint nod. "And what about Hope?"

The bard blinked at Xena's open question because she didn't expect Xena to remain calm about this. She wondered if she wasn't the one acting angrier than Xena about Hope's arrival. "We can use her," she softly planned aloud, "even if she's setting up a trap for us. We need to find the cult and quickly."

"We need to stay on our guard." Xena's eyes sparkled an ice blue, which meant she was solely the warrior now. "Who knows what powers she has."

"It'll be safer if we take her to camp," Gabrielle muttered, "as much as I don't want to. It'll be dark soon."

The Warrior Princess didn't like it either, but she agreed with her soul mate's logic. "Alright." She stepped away then approached the woman, who's features were exactly like her soul mate's younger days. It also reminded her of a very hard year in her life and in Gabrielle's.

The bard decided to take the initiative so she spoke first. "We can talk about the rest of this in our camp." She waited a beat and explained, "Tomorrow you're going to take us to the disciples."

Hope narrowed her eyes then argued, "You'll be walking into your death. I didn't find you so I could get you killed."

Gabrielle huffed then snapped, "I don't remember you ever not trying to kill us." She then stepped to her right to go towards the camp. She stopped after three steps, turned, and held out her arms. "Either way, Xena and I plan to find the disciples... with or without your help." She turned and continued to the camp.

Hope's jaw was locked tight then her fiery green eyes met the warrior, who she loathed more than anybody on this earth. She held a long stare with the warrior.

Xena used all her will to hold back her dying urge that wanted to attack the demi-god. She gripped her hilt so tightly that her knuckles were white. She lifted her chin slightly then urged her legs to carry her away. She turned to her right then followed

Gabrielle's cold trail back to the camp.

Hope's internal struggle raged for awhile, and she began to breath heavily. She shut her eyes and listened to the last footsteps of the warrior. She took a deep breath then forced her hands to unclench. Finally, she opened her eyes, turned to her left, and went in the assumed direction of the camp.

Gabrielle tensed when the demi-god entered their small camp.

The warrior already sensed Hope's arrival, but she didn't acknowledge her and instead continued to aimlessly root through her saddlebags.

Gabrielle realized the sunset would be in a candlemark so she turned to her partner. "You should go on the hunt."

Xena stopped what she was doing then twisted her head to her partner. She merely arched an eyebrow.

Gabrielle understood her partner's concerns so she assured, "I'll be fine... we need to eat, Xena."

The Warrior Princess briefly glanced at Hope, who remained on the edge of the clearing. She sighed then straightened up completely. "Holler if you need me." Despite she knew how dangerous Hope could be, she also didn't feel any major threat plus Hope was rarely known for attacking Gabrielle. So Xena silently disappeared into the woods.

Gabrielle went to the abandoned saddlebags and searched for her cooking supplies. "You can sit down." She didn't bother to look in Hope's direction.

Hope, not sure what else to do, followed Gabrielle's instructions. She came a few paces into the camp then sat on the log near the fire. She carefully watched what Gabrielle was doing, as if completely interested by it.

The bard carried her cooking supplies to the campfire. She set them down in a particular way since she had a certain rhythm down to her cooking these days. She then squatted in front of the fire and picked up the stick that rested near by. She poked the live stick into the fire and merely toyed with it.

Hope carefully watched the bard's movements and tried to predict what Gabrielle may be thinking, but she wasn't sure.

Gabrielle quietly sighed then removed the stick from the fire. "I thought Dahak was destroyed by Hercules...?"

"Not exactly," Hope explained, "After Hercules defeated Dahak in his realm, the Olympian gods banished Dahak into another realm. He couldn't escape it."

Gabrielle finally turned her gaze to her younger mirror. "How'd he escape then?"

"What lock the Olympian gods had on the realm suddenly vanished." Hope seemed to considered another fact then mentioned, "It seems most of the Olympian gods are... gone."

Gabrielle lowered her head and bit the inside of her mouth. Then it struck her blindly

so she dropped her head and almost felt like crying right there. Of course Xena's ability to kill the gods led to the death of the Olympian religion and now the rebirth of Dahak. When the gods were killed, Xena had inadvertently freed the dark one-god and just when she thought it was getting better.

Hope easily detected the bard's distraught, but she didn't say anything.

Gabrielle shoved her emotions down, opened her eyes, and she met Hope's stare with an expressionless face. "How were you reborn?"

"Once Dahak was free so was his will." Hope watched the realization wash over the bard, but she still explained it anyway. "His temple has been long forgotten but one day a farmer passed it. The farmer became curious and Dahak's will pulled him in closer. The next day, the farmer brought his friends, and those friends brought more."

Gabrielle imagined it would have been simple to do since there was no prominent religion in Greece anymore. There were so many changes these days. "The temple was repaired then?" After Hope's nod, she summarized the rest. "The disciples found your remains... and brought you back." She became irritated because if she and Xena hadn't been away then they may have found out sooner and diverted this entire mess.

Hope then decided to change the topic as something still struck her odd. "It's been twenty-seven years but you've only aged a few years." Before she even saw Gabrielle down by the stream, she already had suspected something strange had happened because her powers granted her further insight.

Gabrielle poked the fire again with her stick then quietly stated, "Xena and I slept away twenty-five years in ice tombs."

The demi-god absorbed the information, which made perfect sense to her now. That was the exact amount of time Hope didn't feel Gabrielle anymore then it suddenly returned to her like the sun rose over the horizon.

"How did you find me?" Gabrielle murmured who now stared peculiarly at Hope.

Hope tilted her head to the right. "You know how I found you."

And the bard did know, but she hated to admit to it and hated to think it was real. Ever since Hope's conception, she's always had some deep internal link with Hope that helped her sense Hope's life or presence. It was the same bond that told Gabrielle, years ago when she and Xena tried to stop Hope, to walk away from Xena near Dahak's temple and meet Hope in the woods. She'd felt it again when she was on the island with Xena, but she merely brushed it aside because she thought it was her imagination. She needed to trust her senses better.

Gabrielle snapped out of her thoughts when she heard Xena enter the camp. Some of her tension washed away despite she knew Xena had been standing on the camp's edge for most of the conversation. She loved how her and Xena could communicate anymore without so much as passing words. "Find something?" the bard inquired.

Xena held up her trophy dinner. "As requested."

Gabrielle slightly smiled at seeing the little birds that were ready to be skewered and cooked. She met her partner halfway and took the quails. She actually counted six so

she knew Xena had gotten extra for Hope. This shocked her, but she didn't question it either. The bard prepared the quails with herbs then placed it over the fire. She then sat on the ground by the fire and idly listened to Xena sharpening her sword. She briefly glimpsed at her soul mate as if she considered something.

The warrior paused then met her lover's gaze. She tilted her head slightly then returned to her sharpening.

Gabrielle knew it was easier for her to talk to Hope merely because Hope became more open with her. She turned her head to the demi-god. "How big is the cult?"

"No bigger than last time... but Dahak's will is growing stronger." Hope's ruby lips thinned then she added, "This is no different than last time."

"It's a lot different," Gabrielle coldly rebuked. She stood up then went to the saddlebags. She retrieved the waterskin because she'd become so parched.

Xena didn't stop her work, but she civilly questioned, "Does the cult know you left to protect Gabrielle?"

"By now, yes," the demi-god answered. "Originally I told them that Dahak's will was to find you both. They are hunting for you. I then left after I felt they were well distracted... the priests are in charge." She then lowered her stare to the fire, which was giving off the added scent of poultry. "Dahak knows my will is not his."

The bard finished corking the waterskin. She tucked it away while she spoke. "Then he'll order the cult to kill you...?"

"Most likely," Hope agreed.

Gabrielle came back to the fire and rotated the meat. She glanced at her soul mate. "We need to destroy that temple... once and for all. If Dahak doesn't have a way to channel his will to the people then he has no access."

The warrior stopped sharpening, and she stared across the camp to Hope. "He still has one channel even if we destroy the temple."

Gabrielle followed her lover's gaze to the dark demi-god. She felt Hope become tense and defensive, and their bond maximized it for Gabrielle. Then she experienced something in the bond that she'd never felt before, it was pure fear.

Hope climbed to her feet then hotly threatened, "If you kill me again then my spirit returns to Dahak's realm. He will be sure to then alter me for his own means so that I am completely under his control." She stopped because she could tell her flare of temper wasn't helping the situation. She took a deep breath then reminded, "You can never truly kill Dahak because he is darkness... the darkness that you hold closest to your heart. You can only lock him out."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes at her younger reflection. "Then you're the key to truly locking Dahak out." The realization hit Gabrielle hard, and she felt every weight push down on her.

"I am," Hope softly relented.

"And what makes you think," Xena coldly informed, "that we're going to let you roam this earth freely?" She stood up and sheathed her sword. "I can think of a few places you'll be comfortable in for the rest of your life." She stepped up to her partner's rigid back.

The demi-god took in a few deep breaths to calm her anger. She didn't need this right now. She decided to focus on Gabrielle, who she prayed would listen to her over Xena. "I've changed... can't you see that?"

The bard didn't reply and remained close to her partner.

Hope clenched her hands at her side then stepped closer to the pair, but she remained centered on the bard, her mother. "You can feel it too... you know."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and turned her head away. She then shook her head and decided a distraction was in order. She went to the fire and checked on the quail. She turned them and determined they only needed another minute. She kept her attention on the fire then emotionally whispered, "I don't know what I feel." She met Hope's desperate features. "But I do know what I remember about you. You've always been Dahak's... and you always will be. I'm not about to fool myself otherwise."

"And as if Xena is so innocent," Hope shot back bitterly.

The Warrior Princess reigned over her anger but just barely.

However Gabrielle didn't, and she growled, "Do not even compare Xena to you. She is nothing like you." She then spat, "Nothing." She then removed the quail from the fire, and her hands trembled from rage.

Hope briefly watched how the warrior remained protective over her mother and how Gabrielle remained close. Not only could she see the deepened bond between them, but she could feel it. "It's always been her... it always will be."

Gabrielle finished setting the quails down on the plate. She was squatting down, and she closed her eyes. She willed her rage to remain somewhat capped. It was just too hard. She stood up then slowly approached the demi-god.

Hope stiffened when Gabrielle's furious expression struck her.

Gabrielle stood toe to toe with Hope and silently stared into matching green eyes.

Hope's earlier anger completely died upon Gabrielle's smoldering rage. She held her ground though.

Gabrielle leaned in closer then hotly whispered, "You're right... it'll always be Xena." She searched Hope's eyes, and she never thought she'd see so much inside of Hope like she did now. "You can't even begin to understand what Xena and I have been through. And what we have yet to go through. Do you think I would throw all that away? Especially to somebody, like you, who has tried to rob me of her?"

Hope turned her head away.

Gabrielle wouldn't allow it because she reached up and turned Hope's face back to her. "You brought all this on yourself, Hope. I took responsibility for your mistakes, and I

won't anymore." She leaned in closer then whispered, "I've always wanted a child, and I risked everything for you... but you tried to take everything from me. I won't allow you to do that again... not just to me but to anybody else."

Hope closed her eyes then felt Gabrielle walk away from her. Then the familiar anger possessed her, and she almost gave into it. Instead she silently repeated to herself that she had to stop this cycle or else she'd lose. Hope lifted her bowed head then turned as her eyes opened. She silently disappeared into the dark woods.

Gabrielle remained knelt beside the wood plates. She paused between her preparations of the dinner then she felt a strong hand on her shoulder. She tried to keep organizing the dinner, yet Xena wouldn't allow her so she was hauled up to her feet.

Xena said nothing as words were useless right now. She pulled Gabrielle into her body and just held her. When Gabrielle's face touched her neck, she felt the acid tears touch her skin, and Xena bowed her head closer to Gabrielle's. She knew how it felt after recently confronting Livia.

After awhile, the couple separated and Gabrielle finished the dinner up. She and Xena then sat and quietly ate their meals. Gabrielle had a hard time eating, but she knew she needed the food. She then collected the dishes and was about to take them down to the stream.

Xena stopped her partner and took the plates from her. "I got this." She then signaled the remaining two quail on the other plate in hidden gesture.

The bard sighed as she understood what Xena's intentions were, which again surprised her. She decided to give into Xena's idea so she picked up the plate, grabbed a linen napkin, and quietly left the camp in the same direction Hope had gone.

Gabrielle didn't follow any trail in the woods, but she followed a beacon inside of her. She spotted Hope's seated and slumped form on a large rock. She didn't need to say anything to make her presence known because she knew Hope detected her already. So she simply knelt beside the demi-god and held out the plate as a peace offer.

Hope turned her head and stared at the older woman.

Gabrielle waited a beat then gently tried, "I know even a demi-god gets hungry."

Hope sighed then after a moment, she accepted the plate and napkin. She had to admit she was fairly hungry as she hadn't ate since she left the cult. The quail and herbs just smelled too good to be ignored.

The bard sat down on the ground beside the rock and leaned against it some. She stared straight ahead where the western sun's rays streamed through the forest. While she sat there, she considered who was beside her and how strange it all seemed. She shook her head some.

Hope carefully pulled the meat off the small bird. She'd never tried quail before, but the tender, almost sweet meat melted in her mouth. She sadly smiled when she realized she hadn't ate one of her mother's meals since she was a child.

Gabrielle kept quiet, which gave her time to think over things. She logically worked through the recent events this evening. She hated to admit it but maybe Hope was

being honest about her changes. It wasn't just that Hope had every opportunity to attack them and hadn't, but it was because she felt the shift. When she gazed into Hope's eyes she didn't see that eerie, possessive darkness but there was a light to them. It seemed so impossible yet so real and very plausible. She knew because she'd witnessed it from two others in her life; Xena and Eve.

Hope finished the meal, cleaned her hands, and placed the napkin on top of the plate. She gingerly sat the plate down on the ground just to the left of her feet.

Gabrielle watched the motions that seemed so foreign. She brushed her bangs back then hoarsely pleaded, "Tell me why you're here to protect me. Why now, Hope?"

Hope briefly glimpsed at the bard then focused back on the red and orange streams coming through the trees. She swallowed then uttered, "Does it really matter?"

"It matters to me."

"I told you I would never hurt you," the demi-god murmured. She received a sarcastic grunt from the bard, but she continued to speak anyway. "I just didn't understand that I already had... I couldn't see it. I only understood that I wasn't harming you physically."

Gabrielle dipped her head and continued to listen carefully. She gave Hope the room to speak despite so many comments ran through her head.

Hope peered over at Gabrielle and studied her briefly. She clenched her right hand in her lap and whispered, "Twenty-seven years of being trapped in that realm is a long time to think." When the bard's slightly surprised features met her, she finally revealed, "I know now the pain you've suffered because of Dahak and me. When he ordered to have you reinfected I... I couldn't... I can't let it happen to you again." She turned her head away then muttered, "I've destroyed your life enough."

Gabrielle used all her strength to keep from crying before her daughter and enemy. She would not do it here, not before the woman she loved and hated all at once. And the woman, who perfectly mirrored her younger self when her world was so much more innocent, before Dahak. She breathed deeply.

Hope never felt so many emotions bombard her at once. When she followed Dahak it was so much more simpler because she was blindly guided by the dark shadows. Now she felt so alone and almost desperate, but she held tight to the fact that maybe Gabrielle's love still resided somewhere between them.

"Just after you were born, everybody seemed to know what you were... the cloth you were cut from. Xena and I ran from the people in the port town. My pregnancy was quick and soon I had you." Gabrielle emotionally told, "When you were born, Xena protected you from these knights in the castle where I had you." She swallowed down her feelings when the painful memories came to the top. "Xena started to fear that maybe you weren't innocent because you were from Dahak. I told her she better not come between you and me."

Hope had never heard the entire story of her birth and what'd proceeded afterwards. She just listened and waited for the end she knew.

"There were these... immortal spirits called banshees, and they wanted to protect you

and me. They wanted to make sure you survived. At first I didn't let them then when Xena tried to attack you I took their help. I ran from Xena, but I knew she'd catch me and that I wouldn't be able to stop her." Gabrielle paused and took a few moments to calm her surge of emotions.

Hope stopped staring at the sunset's last rays. She rasped, "Then you put me in the basket."

"I did," Gabrielle softly agreed, "and I lied to Xena. I told her you turned on me, and I threw you over a cliff."

"You should have thrown me over the cliff," Hope confided.

The bard's head snapped up when she heard the honest words. She opened her mouth to say something, yet she had no words. She closed her mouth.

Hope saw it, but she said nothing to it. Instead she urged, "Don't go after Dahak... if they capture you...."

"It doesn't matter," Gabrielle argued, "I have to do this. Xena and I are the only ones that will stand up to him. We won't let him sweep across this earth like a black plague."

The demi-god knew the bard wouldn't stand down, and she'd already predicted that sooner. She just didn't want Gabrielle to be harmed. She shook her head then finally promised, "Tomorrow I'll take you to the temple."

Gabrielle understood what this meant, not just for her and Xena but for Hope too.
"You don't have to... Xena and I know the way."

"No," Hope murmured, "two people protecting you is better than one."

Gabrielle decided it was best not to discuss it anymore. She climbed to her feet, picked up the plate, and subtly offered, "The camp will be warmer tonight than out here."

The demi-god peered up at the bard then faintly nodded. She stood and quietly followed along side Gabrielle.

Gabrielle had no words, and she wanted no emotions but that's all she had in her. She wanted to ignore them just like Hope, however that wasn't an option. She had to face the light. She had to face Hope's light.

Hope realized she wasn't the only one that'd changed greatly over this time, but also Gabrielle. She never thought the world and certain events could have such an impact on one's life, but it most certainly did on hers and Gabrielle's.

Xena lifted her head when her partner entered the camp with Hope at her side. She tried not to be too defensive. She sensed the slight mood change between the women so she figured they'd come up with some middle ground.

The bard set the plate down by the saddlebags so that it'd get cleaned tomorrow. She then unhooked the extra fur and bedroll then went to Hope. "You can sleep on the other side of the fire."

Hope accepted the items and was inwardly surprised by the gesture. She didn't require much sleep compared to most normal mortals, but she would tonight. She'd been traveling nonstop to find Gabrielle so she was quite worn. She went to the other side of the fire, as told, and she opened up the bedroll.

Gabrielle took her spot beside her partner on the log. She brushed her shoulder against Xena's.

The warrior stretched her legs out in front of her. "We'll leave at first light?"

"Yes," Gabrielle gently agreed. Her gaze flickered to Hope then back to Xena. "All of us."

Xena nodded her understanding and willed herself to accept the bard's choice. She knew Gabrielle wouldn't have agreed to Hope coming unless it served a good purpose. She didn't fear Gabrielle coming between her and Hope, not anymore.

Hope had her boots off, set aside, and she rested on the bedroll and in the warm furs. She was on her back and stared at the canopy of stars above her. It was truly the first time she'd ever stopped to notice them in her life. She couldn't fathom how many were up there and for a brief second she tried to count them but obviously failed.

Gabrielle's view wandered over to the dark demi-god. She sighed then leaned into her partner's body.

Xena lifted her right arm and brought it across the bard's shoulder. She leaned over and discreetly kissed her soul mate's temple. She hated seeing Gabrielle so torn and the constant torment there. If Xena couldn't take it away, she wanted to fix it. And when she gazed over at Hope. She knew Hope wasn't somebody she nor anybody else could fix, but she could take Hope away if she had to again.

Gabrielle tilted her head back and quietly asked, "Are you tired?"

"In a bit," the warrior replied.

The bard agreed then mentioned, "I'm going to take a walk... I'll check the perimeter."

The Warrior Princess understood her partner's need to have space and time alone. She nodded discreetly after she removed her arm.

Gabrielle climbed to her feet, stepped over the log so that she faced the woods, and her right hand rested on her soul mate's shoulder. Her fingertips grazed over Xena's back until she was too far, and she disappeared into the black forest.

Gabrielle moved stealthily and silently through the woods. She'd learned to use the shadows and carry her feet lightly. Xena had taught her much of it and some from the Amazons. What she truly learned from the Amazons was how to take to the trees, which she proceeded to do. She neatly landed on a sturdy branch then quickly moved along the branches until she came to a large tree. Gabrielle stopped and leaned her shoulder against the tree's trunk. She enjoyed the beautiful crescent moon that peaked through the leaves.

It was rare anymore that Gabrielle ever took the time to embrace nature. Lately her life hadn't allowed it, but she reminded herself to stop now and again. The moon's

crescent shape and mercury color filled the bard's creative eye. She loved it.

Then something prickled Gabrielle's back neck, and she hunched down. Her fingers played with her sais, yet she didn't draw them and waited for any signs of danger. She saw nothing and certainly didn't hear anything. She concluded it was something completely else.

Gabrielle effectively jumped out of the tree and quietly hit the ground. She turned in a full circle then called, "Aphrodite, I know you're here."

Suddenly a pink cloud of sparkles appeared and shaped into the Goddess of Love.
"That's so wicked how you do that, Gabs!"

The bard folded her arms then shot a smug look at her godly friend. "It's a bard thing."

Aphrodite shook her hips and held out her arms. She closed in the distance while crying out, "How about that bardie hug thing!"

Gabrielle couldn't resist a laugh or the goddess's hug. She warmly greeted her friend, who she hadn't seen in some time. She withdrew then stepped back once. "How have you been?"

"Bitchin'," the goddess replied.

The bard crinkled up her nose then she teased, "How's Ares?"

"Oh by me," Aphrodite ranted, "He's being such a baby. Like he totally can't do the mortal thing."

Gabrielle laughed but more because she loved the fact he was getting a taste of the mortal life. Yet she sobered and cleared her throat. "Well if he gets in a bind... Xena and I are around to help him."

Aphrodite waved her hand. "I check on his hairy ass all the time... he's totally fine." She then rested her hands on her pink hips. "So how you been, Gabs?" The bard only shrugged to her, which made Aphrodite worry. "Like I know what's happening..." She sighed then murmured, "With Dahak and all."

The bard shifted her weight around on her feet because she was slightly uncomfortable. She dipped her head for a beat then looked up again. "It'll be alright, Aphrodite... Xena and I will take care of him."

"I know," Aphrodite agreed. "I tried to like keep him locked away but... love just ain't enough against the darkness."

Gabrielle sadly smiled at her friend's attempted efforts to help. "Thank you for trying."

The Goddess of Love brushed her curly hair back then mentioned, "Like it was all fine before... before the deaths. We never thought Herc would have killed Zeus." She sighed sadly at the memories from years back. "After Zeus died, we all totally got together and like we kept Dahak locked in the realm. But when..."

Gabrielle stepped closer and touched her friend's smooth arm. "Once the other Olympian gods were killed then the lock broke." Aphrodite's nod made Gabrielle frown deeper. She released the goddess. "I suppose this is one of the prices we'll pay

for it."

The goddess grew dark at the emotions she sensed from her friend. She then became nervous about something, which she received a look for from the bard. She held up her hands and said, "I know about Hope."

Gabrielle slotted her eyes at the goddess. "What..." She wasn't sure what she needed to ask, but she knew something was out of place.

Aphrodite groaned and grabbed the bard's shoulders. "Like totally promise you won't flip when I tell you this?"

The bard's face darkened, yet she nodded and promised, "I'll try not to. Now what happened?"

The Goddess of Love freed her hands and walked away in a nervous fashion. She waved her hands at her side then turned around to the patient bard. "Well you see... like... well since I couldn't keep Dahak locked away I kinda did something else." She laced her hands together and her apprehension further showed.

Gabrielle took a steady breath then carefully urged, "What did you do?"

If the goddess had pockets in her frilly, pink dress she would have shoved her hands in them. Instead she kept toying with her fingers and cautiously revealed, "I like did the only thing I could do." She bit her lower lip then confessed, "I freed Hope's heart and soul from Dahak."

"You... what?" The bard stared oddly at her friend then took a menacing step closer. "Aphrodite, she has neither."

"Yes she does, Gabs," the goddess argued. She dropped her hands to her sides finally when her backbone grew. "Dahak took them from her so that he could control her." She shook her head, which caused her curly locks to fly about. "She's your daughter, Gabrielle. Don't you think some of your passions would have been translated into her?"

"She is not my daughter!" the bard yelled. She stepped closer, and her hands fisted at her side. "She is nothing but a vessel for Dahak's evil." Her statement echoed Xena's from years ago.

The goddess stared horrifyingly at her friend, who she never expected to be this way. Aphrodite saw the bard as one of the few mortals in this world that had the truest heart. She actually became enraged. "I freed her from Dahak so that you could have her back, Gabrielle."

"I never had her," the bard confessed. "She's a curse, Aphrodite."

The Goddess of Love's powers gave her a deeper insight to the bard's defenses. She realized much of it was due to the past and how much Hope had hurt Gabrielle. "She's not the curse, Gabs... Dahak is the curse."

"How can you say that?" Gabrielle shook her head. "You don't know what Xena and I have been through."

Aphrodite dipped her head and murmured, "I never thought I'd see the day when you'd close your heart up." She revealed her broken features to the bard. "I thought that was Xena's job."

Gabrielle reacted as if she'd been struck across the face. She turned her back on the goddess and put a few paces between them. Her shoulders lifted into a tense position.

Aphrodite took a hesitant step, but she stopped. "She's very human, Gabrielle... I've seen it in her."

The bard turned her head sidelong and just listened.

"Do you remember how she acted when she was reborn the first time?"

Gabrielle swallowed then huskily uttered, "She seemed so... lifeless."

"That's because she was, Gabs... that was Dahak's control." The goddess came slightly closer and revealed more of the truth. "Then when she survived the fall in the fire pit she went to your family." Aphrodite's eyes glossed over from old memories when she watched Hope from her invisible position. "Hope could have birthed the Destroyer anywhere, but she chose your town. She was curious about your life and family, Gabs. She wanted to know what it felt like to be apart of a family."

The bard's throat tightened, and she shook her head. "She was going to kill them."

"If she had planned on it, wouldn't she have done it long before?"

Gabrielle turned her head away finally and bowed it. She sealed her eyes tightly and tried to ignore the goddess's logic. She didn't want to believe that Hope was anything more than an evil channel for Dahak.

Aphrodite became bolder. She neared the bard and walked around to the front of her. She reached out to the bard and whispered, "I know you feel her changes, Gabs." She placed her fingertips under the bard's chin and tilted the bard's chin up. "You share a rare bond with Hope... more than a normal mother and daughter do."

Gabrielle faintly nodded then she rasped, "And I don't want it, Aphrodite." She lifted her hands and took the goddess's into hers. "Take it away from me, please. I know you can."

Aphrodite shook her head. "I can't, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle's breaths became more rapid from her tidal emotions. Then tears trickled down her cheeks. "I can't do this, Aphrodite. I don't have that love that you think I have in me... I don't have the forgiveness." She shook her head. "Not anymore."

Aphrodite felt her own eyes sting at hearing her friend's painful words. She gazed deep into the bard's piercing emerald eyes and saw the young girl from Potidaea still alive. "I don't believe you."

The bard gritted her teeth and shook her head.

"You didn't survive all that you have," the goddess urged, "just to lose yourself now."

Gabrielle lowered her head when she suddenly became drowned in memories and

emotions. She felt her knees give way, and she sunk to the ground.

The Goddess of Love quickly went to her knees too then pulled the smaller woman into her body. She silently held the stricken mortal, who she admired more than any other living being, mortal or otherwise.

Gabrielle clung to the goddess and released her quiet sobs. She trusted Aphrodite greatly and nobody else was a closer friend to her outside of Xena. Aphrodite's honest and profound words pierced through her aged armor, and she wept for so many reasons and for so many things. Gabrielle knew she could never return to her former self despite how much she wished those days again.

Aphrodite stroked the bard's short hair and rested her chin on top. She felt the darkened emotions from the bard, and she wanted to take them away. Although she knew the Fates made certain things happen for a reason, and she'd never alter them.

Gabrielle calmed and felt bad about breaking down on the goddess.

The goddess detected it so she promised, "I'm glad I was here."

The bard sniffed then lifted her head. "I'm sorry."

"Come on," Aphrodite argued, "what other rad god do you know would let you cry on them?"

Gabrielle tried to stop her laugh, but she failed. She wiped her face dry then carefully stood back up with Aphrodite's help.

"Gabs, I'm just asking you to at least try and give Hope a chance." Aphrodite rarely pleaded since she was so used to getting her way. She knew though the bard couldn't resist her pleas or her pouty expression.

"What if you're wrong?" Gabrielle glanced away then focused back on the goddess. "I can't repeat the past. I know what's at the end of that road."

"As if I'm ever wrong," Aphrodite proclaimed with her hands up. But then she saw Gabrielle's dubious look so she dropped her hands and sighed. "That's why I said try. Please." She could tell Gabrielle was breaking down. "I know you really don't want to refuse her, Gabrielle." She lifted her right hand and placed it over her chest. "Right here you don't want to refuse her."

Gabrielle bit her lip. She shook her head once. "I've never refused her there. Each day I just try to forget her... but..." She now covered her chest with her hand. "If I try to... it gets really hard to breathe then." She blinked her tears away. "How do you forget somebody that is apart of who you are?"

"You don't," Aphrodite bittersweetly replied.

Gabrielle pat her chest once over her heavily beating heart. She lowered her hand back to her side then fearfully asked, "What about Xena?"

"The warrior babe is more forgiving than most people give her credit for, Gabs." The goddess smiled because it was something she'd figured out by watching Gabrielle and Xena share their lives together. "Plus she's learned a lot recently from her experience

with Eve."

"Eve and Hope are different."

"Not by much." Aphrodite negatively moved her head at the bard's doubtful look.
"Eve has Callisto's soul and her mother's legacy. How's that much different than what
Hope faces?"

Gabrielle inhaled deeply then released it until her shoulders were slumped in defeat.
She closed her eyes then painfully confessed, "This will kill me, Aphrodite if it turns
out bad." She met the goddess's gaze again.

The goddess understood her friend's underlying meaning, yet she had every faith in
Hope's recent changes. She only feared that the demi-god would revert upon
Gabrielle's rejection. Then where would that leave anybody? "I know, Gabs and you
know it'll kill you more if you don't try."

Gabrielle released a single tear then her features twisted tightly from upset. She
nodded because the goddess was right. She gained control over herself then shakily
promised, "I'll try."

Aphrodite brightened upon hearing those beautiful words. She abruptly yanked her
friend into a massive hug and declared, "You're like totally the coolest mortal friend a
goddess could ever have!"

Gabrielle had to laugh because she was so worn from being upset. She returned the
fierce hug, which gave her some strength too. Then she actually felt herself believe
Aphrodite.

Chapter 2

The trip felt extremely long because the three travelers mostly remained silent. The air
around them was fairly tense, and Xena could have cut it with her chakram. She
towed Argo behind her and stayed near Gabrielle's side for moral support.

Hope, however, walked several paces ahead of the pair. She acted as the guide to get
them to the cult despite Xena and Gabrielle mostly knew the way to the temple. She
just didn't feel comfortable enough to be near the couple. It was just easier to have
their dark stares boring into her back, or at least so it felt to her.

Gabrielle's steps brought her closer to her soul mate. She murmured, "You know what
I don't understand?" She peered up into curious blue eyes. "Why does Dahak want to
infect me again?" She briefly glanced at Hope's back then muttered, "If Hope didn't
work out, wouldn't he want somebody else? Besides that I've already lost my blood
innocence to him."

The warrior had mulled over the mystery too since she'd heard about it from Hope.

"You think Hope is lying?" the bard softly questioned.

Xena narrowed her eyes at the demi-god's back then replied, "No." She bit the inside
of her mouth then added, "Maybe it's not about your blood innocence." She met the
bard's gaze. "You're right... he does already have that."

Gabrielle could tell her partner was just as confused by why Dahak would want her again. "There's something we're missing. Maybe Hope knows why...?"

"I don't think she does." The Warrior Princess pressed her lips tightly together. "She would have mentioned it."

Gabrielle's features darkened considerably. "Dahak is playing some game... I can feel it."

"Let's hope we're not playing right into it," the warrior quietly complained.

The bard chewed on her lower lip then briefly brushed her hand over Xena's. She silently communicated her intentions then she walked faster until she came to Hope's side.

The Warrior Princess slowed her pace and created more space between her and them. She respected her partner's needs to work out what was happening. and what to do.

"We should make it there tomorrow," Hope offhandedly mentioned. She finished it with a shrug.

Gabrielle nodded because she assumed the same.

Hope waited a few heartbeats then glanced at the bard before she spoke again. "But that's not why you're walking with me, is it?"

The bard considered when the demi-god ever became so perceptive and willing to try. She felt as if she was dealing with a completely different person now. She just wasn't sure how to handle it or handle Hope. "If you've really changed then what do you expect to do with your life?"

"You mean if Dahak doesn't kill me?" Hope noticed the reminder rattled the older woman some. "I don't know." She brushed her bangs back. "I know I don't have a place in your life."

Gabrielle mulled over the demi-god's words then she honestly stated, "You do have a place... whether or not I want you to." She absorbed Hope's concerned features. "I lost that choice when Dahak raped me."

Hope swallowed those sharp words. "So then what is there to live for?" The greatest weight hit her shoulders when Gabrielle's words repeated in her head. "I'm a product of a rape and the daughter of the one-god of darkness." She flashed an angry look at Gabrielle. "What a legacy."

The bard felt her jaw locked, but the rapid heartbeat wouldn't make her stay silent. She released the honest, true words that her mind told her not to say. "Somewhere in that equation you forgot to factor me in." She realized that perhaps she was the only positive aspect to Hope's life.

The demi-god briefly closed her eyes then opened them again. She inhaled a shaky breath then released it.

"I just don't understand," Gabrielle hoarsely started, "How you can be one way then another way the next."

Hope didn't understand either, but she tried to explain what she did know. "The days I spent on earth are a blur to me... like it wasn't real, and I was numb. Then when I was recently reborn I just felt... alive, really alive." She released a heavy breath because she felt like it made little sense.

The bard recalled her conversation with Aphrodite last night, and it was consistent to what Hope now explained to her. She started to believe that Aphrodite's efforts were not in vein afterall. Just maybe the goddess had truly released Hope from her prison.

Gabrielle kept her voice low when she talked again. "I hated how when I tried to talk to you, reason with you, it was like talking to a wall." She clenched her hands at her side. "It's hard to be a bard and discover your words are so worthless in front of your child."

Hope bowed her head slightly. She took in the information and carefully dissected until she properly understood it. "I heard what you said but it was like another voice was speaking to me too. I couldn't fight that voice."

"Dahak's will," Gabrielle concluded bitterly.

Hope faintly nodded.

The bard clenched and unfisted her hands at her sides. She then curiously asked, "What are your powers now?"

Hope faintly grinned at the older woman then considered the question carefully. "That depends on certain factors."

"Such as?"

"My powers are constantly growing, however they're dependent on Dahak."

The bard shook her head, and her features turned tightly. "What do you mean?"

Hope tried to figure out a way to explain the situation and her powers. "Some powers are only mine while other powers come from Dahak. I do not know where mine begin and end and his begin."

Gabrielle let the explanation marinate for a minute then she found what she believed was a pliable metaphor. "So Dahak is the river and you're more like a stream that branches off."

Hope sadly smiled at the bard's prose. "Yes, actually."

"Well," the bard muttered, "it should be interesting to see what happens when the river is dammed up." She then met the demi-gods curious gaze. "Do you have any idea which powers are yours?"

Hope debated for a few beats then replied, "Most likely my ability to move objects is my own power. I can also heal quickly, which is probably mine too. Dahak doesn't have the strength from his realm to do such things."

Gabrielle almost posed another question but stopped when Xena called her name. She haltered and turned. "What is it?"

The Warrior Princess hastily mounted the mare and replied, "A village is being attacked." She turned Argo to the left, towards the woods, and called, "This way. Yaaa!" She spurred Argo.

The bard glanced once at Hope, didn't say anything, and swiftly chased after her partner.

Hope was stunned by the sudden changes, and she could tell both warriors were used to these abrupt adjustments. She easily followed after them despite she couldn't see Xena or Gabrielle. Her bond with Gabrielle made it simple.

Gabrielle stopped at the top of the ridge and inhaled a deep breath. She watched her soul mate gallop down the hill to meet the enemies in the village. She heard Hope's approach so she ordered, "Stay here. We'll take care of this."

Hope stopped beside the bard. She scanned the men in the town and instantly realized they were disciples. The disciples were clothed in black robes and had red stripes. "It's beginning," she whispered.

The bard glanced at the demi-god, but she didn't have time for this. Instead she ripped her sais free then ran down the hill. As soon as Gabrielle came to the edge of town, two disciples spotted her and came for her. Gabrielle briefly wondered if these disciples knew who she was but she had no time to decide.

Hope remained rooted at the top of the hill. She watched the two heroes battle the twenty or so disciples, who were on foot and wielded swords. The screams of the villagers filtered up the hill and into Hope's consciousness. Then the spark of fire to a barn and house briefly caught her attention. What truly captured her focus was Gabrielle's far improved abilities as a warrior. It was as if Hope visually recorded Gabrielle's every move.

The bard gave a spinning kick and sent the disciple flying through the air. She then flipped her sais out and raised them. She stopped the blade that was coming down on her from behind. She gave a rough kick behind and sent that enemy on his back. Gabrielle continued her pursuit to stop the disciples.

Then several hundred paces away, a girl screamed when a disciple hauled her away from her mother. The girl kicked and screamed but couldn't get free.

Gabrielle felt a sense of déjà-vu, but she knocked out her current opponent. She hastily chased after the disciple, who had the girl. She moved so fast that the disciple had no time to react by the surprise stab in his side. Gabrielle jerked her sai harder into the disciple's side in hopes it'd kill him.

Hope tilted her head when she saw how Gabrielle easily killed the disciple. It made her feel remorse though, and she didn't know why. She then saw the softest change in the bard's mannerism when she went to help the little girl. For a brief instant, Hope was stricken with several unknown emotions as she watched Gabrielle help the girl get back to her mother.

The demi-god snapped out of her reverie when she spotted a horseman spinning his sword. He charged through people then set his sights on one of the heroes, Gabrielle. Hope noticed that Xena was far too occupied, and Gabrielle was suddenly swarmed by

four disciples.

Hope's breath caught, yet her dread made her run down the hill. She knew she couldn't make it in time. "Look out!" she cried to the bard.

Gabrielle's ears rang with the pounding of the hoof beats. She knew the impact was near, yet she was locked in by the four disciples. She grew frantic and tried to cut one disciple down so she could get an opening for escape.

The rider gave a powerful cry and raised his sword. He aimed for the circle, and he didn't care about his comrades. He wanted the warrior.

Hope abruptly stopped when she felt she was in range. She narrowed her eyes at the approaching rider then lifted her right hand.

The horse suddenly whined and reared up because of the mysterious power around her.

The rider screamed in fear when he was yanked from the saddle then thrown through the air for several hundred paces. He hit the side of the burning barn and went unconscious, blood trickled down his face.

Hope lowered her hand and glanced over at the bard, who had taken out two disciples. The demi-god seemed darker as she casually strolled up to the fighting bard and disciples.

One disciple noticed Hope and gaped. His distraction earned him a heavy blow to his head.

The last disciple lunged at the bard.

Gabrielle jumped out of the way and rapidly attacked her last opponent. She spun her right sai back out from under her wrist then surged her blade upwards at the disciple's stomach. Just when her blade would have pierced the man's stomach, he was lifted up in the air, and she missed.

The disciple cried out, and he tried to move his arms but couldn't from some unknown force. He then involuntarily dropped his sword then slowly he was spun around. He stared down at Dahak's daughter, who was smug.

Gabrielle was surprised by the display, but she watched carefully and caught her breath.

Hope stepped up closer to the disciple and ordered, "Tell Dahak's priests that I'm coming for them."

The disciple tried to struggle, his legs slightly moved but suddenly stopped. "Dahak will have you dead for this betrayal," he spat.

Hope smirked then snidely reminded, "Death hasn't stopped me before." She then suddenly used her powers to throw the man across a length of distance. She saw to him getting knocked out but not dead. She looked from him to the bard.

Gabrielle breathed deeply, her body glistened from sweat and the fire from the barn behind her, and she stared oddly at Hope. She tried to think of something to say,

anything really, but she couldn't. She then had wide eyes suddenly. "Duck!"

Hope didn't understand, however she did what she was told. She bent forward just as Gabrielle ran at her, jumped over her head, and struck something behind her. Hope quickly turned around and took a step back.

The disciple that Gabrielle had landed a kick to, stumbled back a few steps, but he raised his sword for battle.

Gabrielle raised her sais.

The disciple briefly glanced between Hope and Gabrielle and realized they looked alike. He pointed his blade at the small warrior. "You're her!"

Gabrielle smirked and remarked, "You get the prize, Plato." She gave a cry just before she landed a perfect kick to his hand.

The disciple's sword flew through the air and landed too far for him to get.

Gabrielle spun her sais out and grinned at the man.

The disciple growled then tried to charge the warrior, he suddenly came to a quick stop. His limbs grew stiff, and he couldn't move.

Gabrielle straightened up and stared at how he was locked in place by nothing, at least that's how it looked to be. She glanced back at the demi-god then to the disciple. She shook her head then quickly landed a solid kick between his legs.

The disciple groaned then unexpectedly fell to his knees in pain.

Hope hadn't expected the bard to pull such a move, which had caused her focus to be broken.

Gabrielle stepped closer then with her right hand she shoved her kneeling opponent by his head. She watched in satisfaction as he fell on his back.

"That's one way to do it," the demi-god murmured at the smug bard.

Gabrielle spun her sais in her fingers then stopped them as she surveyed the village. She heard her soul mate's battle cry then she saw the six or so remaining disciples hightailed it out of the village. She then was happy to see the villagers were trying to put out the spreading fire.

"I'm going to help the people." Gabrielle took a step away but stopped and asked, "Are you coming?"

Hope was planted in her spot and hesitated from the question.

Suddenly there was a loud roar when the barn's burning side started to give out. Gabrielle heard it first and saw it was coming down at them. She glanced once up at the barn, which had a small open door near the top, and her natural instincts took over. She tried to calculate it right as she lunged for the demi-god.

Hope was slammed by the bard's much stronger body. She was forced to stumble back several paces, and she closed her eyes when the heat around her built up.

Gabrielle pressed her body tightly against the same molded body. She found it too eerie. She then straightened out her back when the barn's wall slammed all around her then she was engulfed by heat and flames. She and Hope stood in the only spot that wasn't burning, where the open door way was located.

Hope opened her eyes and took in their immediate issue. She heard Gabrielle hiss in pain from the lapping fire around them, which didn't bother her. She hastily thought out a plan to save Gabrielle before the fire completely took them. "Turn around, press your back into me."

Gabrielle covered her mouth. She started to cough from the smoke then she faintly heard her soul mate's yell for her. She closed her eyes when they stung. "I can't..." She gasped for air.

Hope wasn't bothered by the flames, heat, or smoke. "Keep your eyes closed, just follow my directions." She lifted her arms around the bard then spread out her arms. She watched in satisfaction as the flames parted like water. "Walk forward."

Gabrielle shook her head because she knew it couldn't be safe.

"Trust me," Hope called over the roar of the fire.

The bard inhaled a smoke, which forced her to decide. She stepped forward and felt Hope right behind her and close.

Hope continued to part the fire for them as they slowly moved forward. Behind her the flames touched her back thighs but didn't harm her.

The bard felt her boots somewhat warm but she steadily crossed the hot boards of the barn siding. She cracked her eyes open and saw Xena just ahead of her.

"Come on!" the warrior yelled in panic.

Gabrielle took the last steps, and she was instantly pulled into strong arms. She gasped for fresh air and held onto her partner.

Hope stood on the edge of the barn, completely surrounded by the flames.

Gabrielle gazed back in worry but saw how the demi-god was one with the fire. It made her stomach drop at how Hope casually stepped out of the flames and stood before her and Xena.

"Are you okay?" the warrior asked who tilted the bard's head up.

Gabrielle nodded then offered a smile. "I'm good." She squeezed her lover's arm then separated. She wasn't sure what to do or say so she simply sheathed her sais.

Xena sensed the awkwardness, and she eased it for the bard. "We need to check on the injured... see what we can do to help."

Gabrielle straightened up and nodded. "Maybe there's a healer in town."

"There is," the Warrior Princess firmed then she went to Argo. She went through the saddlebags until she came up with the medical kit.

Gabrielle turned the demi-god. "You can wait for us... we'll be awhile."

Hope noticed how Gabrielle refused to mention what'd just happened. She even stood close to the burning barn siding, which still didn't bother her. "I'll help."

The bard hid her shock well and turned back to her soul mate. "We better get moving." She brushed past the warrior then entered deeper into the village.

Xena finished closing up the saddlebags. She jerked the strap closed then clung to it as she considered what to say to Hope. She sighed and turned her head to the demi-god. "I know she won't say it... but I will." She moved to Argo's front and took the reins. "Thank you." Xena turned her mare around and walked back to the village at a fast pace.

Hope understood what Xena meant, and it bothered her greatly that Gabrielle wouldn't thank her but Xena would. She combed her bangs back then quietly followed the duo so that she could help.

The Warrior Princess found a spot to hitch Argo then she discovered that the injured were lining up at one building. She knew it to be the healer's house. She squeezed past the people and discovered the healer was swarmed, but Gabrielle was already assisting.

Hope paused when she soaked in exactly how many people had been harmed by the small raid. She felt a mix of rage against Dahak and remorse for the villagers. She entered the building and asked Gabrielle what she could do to help.

Gabrielle barely regarded the demi-god and merely responded, "Select which people can be saved and which can't be."

Hope opened her mouth to reply but stopped when she repeated the words in her head. Her eyebrows almost met, and she quietly demanded, "You expect me to select who dies and who lives?"

Xena was nearby, and she couldn't help but listen in on the conversation. She had an awful sensation of déjà-vu.

Gabrielle's head snapped up, her hands those remained on the man's open stomach wound. "You should have a natural eye for it." She was unexpectedly angry, but before she could further snap Hope's head off, Xena touched her back.

"Hope," Xena ordered, "cover this man's stomach with a cloth. The healer will be in here in a minute to stitch him up. Just keep his blood flow blocked."

Gabrielle backed away when her partner relieved her of her duty.

The warrior organized Hope quickly to help the man. Then she stepped up to the bard, grabbed her arm, and coldly whispered, "We need some air."

The bard quickly went outside and left Xena behind her.

Xena was out of the house and hauled Gabrielle back behind the house. She backed the bard up near the house and hotly demanded, "What is going on with you?"

Gabrielle had a built temper, and she snapped, "Nothing is going on."

"The Hades there is," Xena rebuked. "I've seen you treat Callisto better than this."

"And Callisto wasn't my evil offspring," the bard shot back.

"If I remember right, Callisto killed your husband and tried to rob you of your blood innocence. How many times did she try to come between us?"

Gabrielle's breathes were heavy and held her anger. "Hope is just putting an act on, Xena. She always has and always will." She stepped closer to her partner. "She murdered your-"

"No," The warrior cut off. "Stop there." She narrowed her eyes at Gabrielle. "You don't need to remind me what she did. I haven't forgotten." She then pointed at the building behind them. "But that woman in there... that's not the same woman that took Solan from me." She closed in the faint distance between her and Gabrielle. "If that was the same woman I would have killed her already, Gabrielle."

"I don't trust her," Gabrielle argued.

The warrior shook her head then questioned, "What would make you trust her? If Aphrodite came down and told you she's change, you still won't trust Hope."

Gabrielle suddenly felt caught and turned her head away.

Xena quickly picked up on it then it clicked into place. She now knew why it'd taken her partner so long to return from the perimeter check last night. "Aphrodite talked to you last night?" When the bard didn't respond she had her answer. "When did you plan to tell me?"

"We haven't been alone so that I could tell you."

"Bad excuse, Gabrielle," the warrior angrily fired back, "Try something else."

Gabrielle shifted her weight around on her feet then quietly mentioned, "It wasn't that important, Xena."

Xena oddly stared at Gabrielle, who seemed like a stranger to her. "Just when you think you have somebody figured out... they show a completely different side to their character."

The bard's head snapped up at the echoed words from years back. She became slightly distressed because she knew her partner indirectly meant her. "Xena-"

"Don't," Xena hotly whispered. "We've been through too much for these games, Gabrielle." She then walked a few steps away, stopped, and faced the bard again. Xena's face showed nothing but upset, which broke the bard apart. "You want to know something?" She approached Gabrielle again. "You want to know the honest truth about your character, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle dipped her head because she knew she'd hear it even if she didn't want to.

"You're a liar, Gabrielle." The Warrior Princess lowered her head closer to her partner's then whispered, "You're not a liar to me or to anybody else... but you are to

yourself. You really believe that you support the way of love yet your actions are anything but."

The bard raised her head up and met the warrior's emotional gaze.

Xena inhaled deeply at her soul mate's upset, but she wouldn't waver. "I can relate to how you feel about your daughter. My child killed Joxer," she rasped, "and he was my brother."

Gabrielle couldn't hold her tears back any longer.

"Everyday I live with that pain... and so does Eve." Xena paused and tried to gather her strength to say her last, honest words. "But you know what broke my heart, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle wanted to touch her soul mate, yet she knew she'd be refused. She quietly gasped for air as her throat tightened, and her tears wouldn't rest.

"It broke my heart when you told me that Eve was dead and that she wasn't my daughter anymore." Xena clenched her teeth for a beat. "The one person, who I thought always believed in me... who could see past all my darkness to the woman I truly am. Where was she that day I needed her the most... when Eve needed her?" She shook her head when her tears came to her. "She failed me that day." Xena turned and finally walked off. She couldn't take her soul mate's upset any longer. Xena hurt far too much.

Gabrielle stepped back once then leaned against the building. The painful memories crashed into her at once, and she realized what she'd done and who she'd become. The bard raced around the corner to a hiding spot where she became sick. She didn't stop until her stomach was completely empty.

The bard then stumbled back then sat on the ground. She thumped her head against the house and closed her eyes. She never felt so angry at herself. Then her senses prickled after a minute so she whispered, "How long have you been there, Aphrodite?"

The goddess quietly materialized in a pink cloud, her features worried, and she cautiously replied, "Not very long. I..."

Gabrielle shook her head. "Its okay." She then stood up on her weakened legs.

"I'm sorry," the Goddess of Love honestly stated. "I just came to update you on the big mystery."

The bard shook her head then tried to understand what her friend meant. "What mystery?"

"Hold on." Aphrodite lifted her right hand and in her palm, she made a little white pill appear. "Take this... suck on it." She held it out.

Gabrielle stared at the tiny white item in the goddess's hand. "What is it?"

"It's a Tic Tac." Aphrodite beamed and kept her hand out, but she saw the dubious features of the bard. "Oh by me, just try it... you'll totally love it." She decided it was

best not to add her afterthought about how Gabrielle probably needed it.

The bard gingerly took the item then popped it in her mouth. She was quite surprised by the sudden wash of powerful, minty flavor.

Aphrodite's head bobbed, and she declared, "Bitchin' huh?"

Then it struck Gabrielle why the goddess wanted her to probably suck on the strange thing. "You're somethin', Aphrodite." She sniffed between the powerful flavor in her mouth and from the earlier crying.

"Ooo stop." The goddess giggled and waved at the bard as if she'd received a compliment.

"So what's this mystery?" Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest, and she rolled the Tic Tac around in her mouth. She had to admit, it did have a nice taste.

"I totally figured out why Dahak wants to reinfect you." Aphrodite grew excited, unlike the bard. "Like Dahak knows you're my chosen." She held out her arms in declaration as if her words shed a great light on the mystery. Then she flopped her arms to her side when her friend became more confused.

"Since when have I been your chosen?"

The Goddess of Love laughed and waved her hand at the bard. "Duh, Gabs." Then she realized the bard was being serious. She placed her hands on her hips. "You didn't know? Like who doesn't know?"

The bard put her hands on her hips and tilted her head. Slowly her eyebrow arched up perfectly.

Aphrodite sighed dramatically. "The Fates declared it when you were born." She shook her head then further explained, "Like who else could it have been? There's no other girl, who could have unchained the warrior babe's heart."

"I thought Hercules did that," the bard remarked.

Aphrodite sputtered with laughter then joked, "As if! Herc just unchained her armor."

Gabrielle covered her mouth with her left hand. She was glad she'd already thrown up otherwise she'd done it again. "Please," she muffled between her hand then dropped it. "How does me being your chosen fit into this?"

The goddess sighed quite dramatically then mentioned, "I guess being intelligent wasn't one of the requirements for being my chosen. I'll have to update the Fates on not picking anymore blonds."

"Aphrodite," the bard snarled and took a menacing step.

Aphrodite jumped back and held up her hands. "Chill, Gabs... can't you like take a joke?" She dropped her hands then quickly explained, "Dahak thinks that since you're my chosen that you are the weakest mortal."

Gabrielle settled into her standing spot and carefully listened. "He thinks love is weak."

"Totally!" The goddess then laughed at the Dahak's theory. "What a dweeb too. So the idea is that any child you have will take on your passionate, trusting, and good hearted qualities." She bit her lower lip, but finished her explanation. "Dahak thinks if the child is that weak then it's easier for him to manipulate them. He takes their heart and soul from them because that's where all your loving qualities rest. As soon as he does that then he controls them, they're kinda brainwashed, and won't fight his will because they have no strength. Like supposedly!" She sighed sadly then muttered, "That's exactly what he did to Hope."

"But you were able to free her," Gabrielle argued. She paused when she realized she finally admitted to the fact that Hope was free.

Aphrodite crookedly smiled at the bard when she heard those words. She didn't say anything about it. "I totally didn't know this but like Dahak was counting on me to do it."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes at the goddess. "It's a game." She dipped her head and quietly asked, "What'd my blood innocence have to do with it then?"

"Your blood innocence just welcomed Dahak's will into the world. He had no will in this world but when he had your blood innocence it gave him access."

"Gods," the bard muttered. She touched her forehead when the information hit her hard. "You said he was counting on you to free Hope...?"

Aphrodite frowned because she never liked being duped but it happened to her. "Dahak figured out Hope was straying from his will... because of you. She's always wanted you to be her mother, and she's refuses to harm you. Dahak has wanted you dead since Hope's birth because he knows you can turn Hope against him."

Gabrielle huffed then shook her head. "I don't think so."

The goddess stepped closer and touched the bard's forearm. "Gabs, he's playing a dangerous game with you and Hope. He let me free her because he knows he can't lose. If you reject Hope as your daughter then Hope will return to Dahak... completely. She'll give up her fight against his control if she thinks you've given up on her." She then bit her lower lip then whispered, "But if you accept her then Dahak knows you've opened your heart again. He'll be able to infect you once he has you."

The bard furrowed her eyebrows and argued, "If Hope didn't work out then how would another child work?"

Aphrodite sadly sighed then whispered, "It'll work this time because your heart knows darkness after all these years."

Gabrielle pulled away from Aphrodite and put some space between them. She briefly had her back to the goddess but slowly turned around again. "Either way, he'll win."

"Not if you accept... forgive Hope and stay away from his temple." Aphrodite then argued, "Let Xena deal with the temple."

"I'm not letting her do that alone, Aphrodite... you know I won't."

The goddess did know, although she'd prayed the bard would listen to reason.

Gabrielle had a lot to weigh, but she gently spoke again. "Thank you for telling me." She studied the goddess's concerned features. "How'd you find this all out?"

Aphrodite stuck out her right hip, lifted her hands, and beamed out a smile. "I totally had a blond moment." Her joke paid off when the bard's face broke into a faint smile. She chuckled and lowered her hands then sobered. "It just pays to be the Goddess of Love cuz nobody takes you serious." She wrinkled up her nose and smirked. "Nobody notices me snooping around." She winked then said, "I'll catch ya on the flip side, bardie."

Gabrielle kept her thin smile and watched the goddess sprinkle away.

"And Xena loves you... no matter what you do or say," floated the goddess's voice.

Gabrielle brushed her bangs back which fell on her forehead again. She felt some relief in Aphrodite's last, true words. "The Fates should have picked a different chosen for you, my friend," she muttered then went back to the front of the house.

Xena stepped out of the healer's hut and only a few beats after her was Hope. She spotted the bard coming towards them so she meets her halfway. "Everybody has been healed."

Gabrielle's confusion flashed over her face. "Wha..."

The Warrior Princess glanced at Hope then to her soul mate. "Hope healed everybody." She explained nothing else and walked past. She headed for Argo. She prayed by her lack of presence that Gabrielle would say something to Hope.

Hope watched Xena recede then she focused on the bard.

Gabrielle opened her mouth but said nothing. She bit her lower lip for a second. "I didn't know you could heal others."

The demi-god discreetly nodded and considered how to respond. "It takes a lot of energy, but I can do it."

That's when Gabrielle did notice how Hope seemed drained plus her skin was paler. Gabrielle bowed her head, and she briefly internally argued with herself. She met Hope's watchful gaze. "We should get going... we won't go far."

"We won't make it to the temple then," the demi-god reminded.

"I know... it can wait one more day." Gabrielle started the walk towards Xena, but her steps were small as she waited for Hope to join her side. "We can't fight them at night, and we're all pretty tired from today."

Hope couldn't debate that either. She did feel exhausted especially after using her powers to heal so many people. Strangely enough, she'd been relieved when Xena entered the healer's house and commanded people to back away from her. The villagers had been so excited by her ability to heal their wounds that they swarmed her. Xena backed the villagers away from her and removed her from the house.

The Warrior Princess had mounted Argo and remained poised in a ridged manner. She kept her sights locked on the approaching women that seemed like twins to an unknowing person. When they were in earshot, she informed, "We'll travel about half a candlemark then make camp."

Gabrielle tried to figure out when she'd become so great at knowing Xena's plans. She'd promised Hope that they'd make camp soon, and she was none surprised when Xena confirmed such. She came up to her mounted partner, and she lightly brushed her fingertips over Xena's knee in hidden signal. She didn't stop though and kept walking towards the hillside.

Xena sadly sighed because she knew that was Gabrielle's way of saying sorry and that she needed to talk later. She had every intention of fulfilling her partner's needs. She briefly glimpsed at Hope then urged Argo to go ahead.

The demi-god remained behind the soul mates as her gate was slow. The trek up the hill then onto the road didn't help her weariness. She briefly brushed back her damp bangs and wondered how using her healing powers could have affected her so badly. She'd used them in the past with Callisto, and it hadn't hindered her. The brief thought of Callisto made her muse about whatever happened to the rampaging goddess.

Xena tapped Argo's sides, and she trotted down the road. She slowed Argo beside Gabrielle then peered down at her quickly.

The bard sighed then quietly mentioned, "Aphrodite sprinkled in after you left."

The warrior tilted her head but asked, "What'd she say?"

"She figured out that Dahak's plan to infect me is actually plan b."

The Warrior Princess didn't like the sounds of this information. "What's plan a?"

Gabrielle sighed then peered up at her lover. "Plan a is that I don't forgive and accept Hope then Hope gives up her resistance to Dahak's will." She lowered stare. "Part of plan b is that I accept Hope, which means I've opened my heart again."

Xena weighed it, yet she still found a hole. "If Hope didn't work what makes him think another child from you would?"

Gabrielle licked her dry lips then murmured, "Because now I have darkness in me too."

Xena's eyes flickered shut upon hearing the truth. She opened her eyes then stared straight ahead as she weighed the facts.

"Dahak picked me," the bard mentioned, "because I'm Aphrodite's chosen." She combed her hair back, which felt slightly messy. "Dahak's theory is that love is the weakest emotion so that means I'm weak by being Aphrodite's chosen."

The Warrior Princess followed the line of thinking. She then grunted and remarked, "But when you put your mind to something, Gabrielle you typically see it through."

Gabrielle tasted some of the witticism in her partner's honest words. "Now there's the pot calling the kettle black."

Xena shot a smirk down at the bard. She then twisted in the saddle and saw how far back the demi-god was now. "We better stop."

Gabrielle nodded then followed her partner off the road into the woods. She walked closely to the horse because of the dense woods. "Xena?"

"Hmmm?"

"Did you know that I was Aphrodite's chosen?" The bard was truly curious because Xena didn't seem remotely surprised by the information.

The warrior briefly pretended not to hear the question as she glanced back for Hope.

"She's coming," Gabrielle promised.

The warrior didn't argue but finally replied, "Yes, I did. You didn't?"

Gabrielle tilted her head then narrowed her eyes up at the warrior. "Of course I knew." She turned her focus away. "I just didn't know if you knew."

Xena scanned the trees and saw a large enough clearing just ahead. She halted Argo and dismounted easily. She pulled the reins from over Argo's head then tangled them in her hand. "Who else could unchain the Warrior Princess?" She strolled off and left a stumped bard.

Gabrielle sighed because she didn't understand where everybody's faith in her was coming from. She truly needed a minute alone with her partner. With that decided, she quickly caught up with Xena.

The warrior had stopped on the edge of the clearing. She was in mid-motion of untacking her mare.

Gabrielle touched her soul mate's arm then softly mentioned, "You were right... about what you said back in the village."

When Gabrielle pulled her hand away, Xena finished removing the tack from Argo's face. She lowered her hand with the tack. She turned to her partner. "I just... I never thought I'd see the day when I'm the one that fights with the open heart, and you with the closed heart." She shook her head then murmured, "It shouldn't be that way."

Gabrielle sighed then thought about an old memory from an old enemy. "It's funny what Caesar told me about you." She peered up into unsettled blue eyes. "He told me that your fatal flaw were your emotions... and that those weren't good attributes for a true warrior." She bitterly laughed then reminded, "He didn't have any and now look at where he is."

Xena figured out the bard's point to the speech. She sighed then stepped closer to her soul mate. "I think you need to find your balance, Gabrielle. You're not the same woman you were when you left Potidaea, and you can't go back to that but don't become too much of a hardened warrior. I know where it leads."

The bard slowly nodded her head and tried desperately not to get upset again. She touched her lover's left arm and whispered, "You're right." She sadly smiled as she squeezed the muscular arm. "I'm sorry for what I said about Eve. I... I can't take it

back, but I'm glad I was wrong."

Xena reached up and took her partner's hand into hers. "It's good to be wrong once in awhile... it reminds us all that we're not perfect." She squeezed the small hand. "Just... don't stop believing in me, Gabrielle. There won't be much left for me if you do."

The bard's grip tightened, and she lifted Xena's linked hand to her lips. She kissed the warrior's knuckles then whispered, "I won't." She ran her thumb over Xena's hand. "I'll always see you as my hero."

Xena smiled, and her eyes stung. She knew much had changed between them over the years, yet she never imagined the bard still saw her in that light. There were times she faltered in the past and would do it again, but Gabrielle stood by her anyway. She couldn't ask for more.

Gabrielle moved in closer than Xena met her for the gentle kiss. She felt relief at having Xena's lips against hers. Just as she withdrew, she sensed that Hope had finally caught up to them. She focused past Xena and spotted Hope only several hundred paces away.

The warrior already knew so she released Gabrielle's hand then finished up with Argo.

Hope entered the clearing; she had a worn face.

Gabrielle actually felt a touch of concern so she offered, "Go sit down." She pointed at the large rock.

The demi-god debated it then relented. She went slowly to the rock.

The bard turned on her heels, and a wound on Hope's backside caught her eye. She quickly turned to Xena and asked, "Where's the medical kit?"

The warrior briefly caught Hope's back before she sat down. She hastily pulled out the medical kit that now weighed more thanks to the healer's gratefulness.

Gabrielle took the leather bag then hurried over to the demi-god. When she was upon Hope, she sharply asked, "Why didn't you say anything?" She came to stand behind the seated, young woman.

Hope twisted her head up but could barely see the bard. "About?"

Gabrielle frowned then instructed, "Lean forward."

The demi-god consented. Quickly small hands checked over her lower back, just below her halter top. She inhaled sharply from the sting produced by the bard's probing. It was the first time really noticed the dull ache of pain from her back. "It'll heal over soon enough," she murmured, "you don't need to bother."

Gabrielle wasn't satisfied because she took a moist rag and proceeded to clean it. "It could get infected. You need to be careful." She pulled the red tinted rag away and briefly caught sight of the separated skin mending together. A brief shiver passed down Gabrielle's back.

Hope quietly asked, "Are you mothering me?"

Gabrielle was bent over and had dug out the salve. She paused but straightened up with the open jar. At first she wasn't sure how to reply, but she finally answered, "I suppose so."

The demi-god turned her head away and lowered it. She closed her eyes when she felt a sense of relief pass through her. She'd expected Gabrielle's answer to be a solid no, but it hadn't. She concentrated on the feel of Gabrielle's tender touch, and she was amazed by how much she missed it.

Gabrielle finished rubbing the salve into the wound. She suspected the wound had been made by the barn when it'd fallen around them. She sealed up the jar then tucked it away in the medical kit. "Just stay put. Xena and I will take care of the camp." Then she left the demi-god alone to her thoughts.

Hope merely observed how the couple was able to put the camp together without so much as passing a single word. She suspected that they'd worked it down to a set system after all the years. She considered if Xena had certain duties and Gabrielle had her own set.

Xena met Gabrielle by the fire and softly asked, "What you want for dinner?"

The bard had kettle in her right hand but she peered up at her partner. Her eyes were bright suddenly, but not from the fire. "Some halibut would be great."

The Warrior Princess placed her hands on her hips when she felt last night's conversation repeating.

Gabrielle cleared her throat and reminded, "You asked."

Hope curiously watched and listened to the pair. She couldn't decipher if Xena was angry or not, but by Gabrielle's body language she knew it was okay.

Xena remained cool, but internally she was happy to see the banter from Gabrielle again. "How about something from this general area?"

The bard considered the trees behind her partner then focused back on her. "I wouldn't mind some boar... I'm sure there's one around here... in this general area, I mean."

"I left my bow and arrow back in the ice tomb," the warrior retorted.

Gabrielle crinkled up her nose at her lover. "Well, I'm sure you could use your round thingy to kill it."

"Gabrielle," the warrior warned.

Gabrielle was about to continued her smart remarks, but she was left with her mouth hanging open.

"How about salmon?" Hope piped up.

Xena's head snapped to the right, and she instantly replied, "Wrong kind of creek. Wrong season. Wrong-"

"Trout," Gabrielle cut off. She slapped her free hand on the lover's stomach. "Can you

handle that?"

The Warrior Princess lowered her gaze to her soul mate. "Your wish is my command." She smirked, side stepped the bard, and headed for the creek that she knew was near.

"And no eel!" Gabrielle hollered after her partner.

Xena spun around, walked backwards a few steps, and her devilish features clearly showed. She turned then broke into a jog for the creek.

Gabrielle proceeded to get the kettle hung over the fire. She kept her back to Hope, but she questioned, "Do you want some tea?"

The demi-god had a confused look. "Tea?"

The bard finished getting the kettle over the fire then she faced the demi-god. "Its a warm drink from Chin."

Hope debated it then nodded. She hadn't tried many foods or drinks since she'd never had the chance or desire. Now she realized there was much she'd indeed missed out. "Please."

Gabrielle wasn't use to such a polite manner from the demi-god. She went over to the saddlebags then worked to get her cooking supplies together. "So you know about salmon though?"

Hope certainly did as it was a food that her disciples often brought her. She'd come to like it quite a bit, and she couldn't imagine if this trout would taste like it. "The few times I've eaten it's usually been salmon."

Gabrielle thought the information was interesting, but not the salmon itself. "How often do you have to eat?" She came back to the campfire and lined up her cooking supplies along with the pouch of tea leaves.

Hope stretched out her legs and crossed her ankles. "I can typically go seven days without eating or sleeping."

The bard faintly shook her head because she felt like she was relearning Hope's mysterious life. She couldn't understand how this was her child, and yet she knew so little about Hope. She knelt beside her cooking supplies and opened the pouch of tea leaves. She placed enough into each of the three mugs.

Hope finally stood up because she felt the urge to move around. She approached the campfire and Gabrielle.

Gabrielle had been reaching for the steaming kettle but the demi-god's movements distracted her. She caught her hand on the scalding kettle and inadvertently knocked the kettle off when she burned her hand. "Gods be damn it," she growled and retracted her aching hand. She clenched her teeth from the sharp, burning pain, and tears welded in her eyes. Then she recalled the kettle, and she quickly lifted her head. She stared in shock at how the kettle hovered over the dancing flames.

Hope kept her focus on the kettle and moved it through the air, past the fire, and

lowered it to the ground by the mugs.

Gabrielle released a deep breath but studied her injured hand. She mentally berated herself for not being more careful. She started to go for the medical kit, yet Hope's voice stopped her.

"Let me see." Hope came closer then held out her hands, palms up. She detected the bard's fear, yet she wouldn't break her steady gaze with Gabrielle.

Gabrielle swallowed then removed her uninjured hand from the scolded one. She placed her very red hand into the demi-god's smooth, soft hands.

Hope shifted the bard's hand into her left then she placed her right hand on top. She closed her eyes then focused her powers on the quickly shaping burn in the skin.

Gabrielle gasped when the brief, sharp pain passed over her hand then it all stopped. The ache was soothed away then the cool air met her hand when Hope relinquished her hold. Gabrielle held up her hand and clenched it into a fist. She was amazed.

The demi-god slightly smiled at Gabrielle's dazzled features. The bard's look made her feel good because she knew she'd helped.

Gabrielle lowered her healed hand to her side and sincerely whispered, "Thank you."

Hope's earlier smile grew, and she merely nodded since she didn't know what to say.

Gabrielle turned and knelt down so she could finish up with the tea.

Hope backed away and took to one side of the campfire. She intently watched Gabrielle's movements with making the tea. She then subconsciously raised her right hand and submerged it into the fire, which didn't harm her. She lowered her gaze to the fire and watched how the flames danced around her hand. She felt some strange comfort in controlling the fire.

The flames flowed around the demi-god's hand. They danced for her and painted unknown objects much like clouds in the sky. Suddenly the flames shifted rapidly then the orange and red colors shaped into a very distinct face.

Hope's eyes widened when the face of Dahak smirked at her in the flames that rested in her palm. She gasped, jumped back from the fire as if burned, and she gulped for air.

Dahak's face melted away into the flames then it was as if nothing was ever there.

Gabrielle had jumped up and spun around when she'd heard the noise. She held one sai in her right hand and took in the demi-god's fearful look. "What happened?" She noticed how Hope wouldn't stop staring at the fire in a horrified manner. She glanced at the fire but saw it was fine.

Hope swallowed then brushed her bangs back. She wouldn't look at Gabrielle, although she muttered, "Nothing." She backed stepped from the fire then walked away; she returned to her seat.

Gabrielle spun her sai, knelt, and sheathed it. She took two tea mugs and left the third

for Xena when she returned. She went over to Hope and held the mug to her.

Hope gingerly took the offered mug and the aroma floated around her. The scent seemed to still her earlier apprehension.

The bard sat on the ground beside the demi-god. She sipped on her tea first, which gave her a moment to mull over Hope's earlier actions. She peered up and mentioned, "I'm not so great at lying." She had a crooked grin. "You're not much better at it."

Hope glanced to her right when Xena arrived back in the camp.

"Your tea is by the fire."

Xena flashed an appreciative smile to her partner and headed right for the campfire. In her hands, she carried three cleaned trout. Gabrielle had taught her to place oil and herbs on them then put them on the fire. What she couldn't seem to learn was how long they should stay on the fire for or when to rotate them. She decided to leave that up to the bard's many skills.

Gabrielle peered back up at the demi-god then whispered, "So are you going to tell me what you saw in that fire?" She noted Hope's slight surprise that she'd figure it out, and it was fairly easy for Gabrielle to guess what'd happened.

The demi-god had yet to try the tea, and she played with the mug. "I just saw Dahak's face."

Gabrielle nodded once as she'd suspected such. She then gently questioned, "What do you expect to do tomorrow? When we get to the temple."

"Stop the disciples," she whispered to the bard.

"You'll be closer to Dahak's will," Gabrielle reminded, "and that's dangerous."

Hope studied the bard when she heard the honest words. She peered into the mug and studied the contents, which she hadn't tried yet. "I refused his will in the temple. I can still do it."

Gabrielle had taken a drink of her tea then set the mug down. "So long as you have your own will." She stood up then mentioned, "Try the tea." She then went to the fire and helped her lover with the trout.

And Hope did try the tea. She only tried a small sip at first then enjoyed the flavor, especially the sweetness. She hadn't suspected the sweet tint to it, but it was nice and the warmth soothed her. She continued to sip on it while she watched the soul mates.

Gabrielle rotated the skewered fish then straightened up.

Xena slipped her arm around the bard's waist and drew her closer. She didn't care that Hope was here because she enjoyed Gabrielle far too much.

Gabrielle smiled up at her partner and snaked her arm around Xena's midback. She leaned into the warm leather body that was so familiar. "I'm worried about tomorrow." She stared into the fire and tried to see Dahak's face like Hope had earlier, but she saw nothing.

Xena lowered her head closer then murmured, "We've done this before."

"How many times are we going to keep doing it?" Gabrielle rested her head on Xena's chest. "How many times will Dahak sneak up on us?" She peered up at her lover. "Even if Hope is free of him, it doesn't mean he won't try some other way."

"It'll be a lot harder for him," Xena reminded.

Gabrielle wasn't satisfied though and whispered, "Now he'll haunt Hope."

Xena felt the remorse in the bard's words which meant Gabrielle was indeed opening up to Hope's changes. Xena had a mix of comfort and displeasure about it, but she kept rational. She knew Gabrielle's position after she'd struggled to find Eve inside of Livia. "At least she'll be free from him."

The bard listened to her soul mate's steady heartbeat. She digested the words and felt the same way too. "If this is real, Xena... if she's really changed. Then where do we go from here?"

Xena didn't have the perfect answer. She lowered her head, kissed the bard's head, and murmured, "It'll be up to you, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle listened then heavily considered the words. She shook her head then peered up into soft blue eyes. "No," she whispered, "it'll be up to us... all of us."

Xena had a wistful smile at the bard's declaration. Her gaze wandered over to the demi-god, who remained on the rock and carefully studied her and Gabrielle. In the brief instant that she locked eyes with Hope, she knew her entire life would be altered by this demi-god birthed by her soul mate. Now she just needed the time to accept the changes that most likely rested ahead.

Chapter 3

"Time to get up... up, up." Xena grabbed the furs and tried to take them from her partner.

Gabrielle had grown fast in her years so she snatched the furs back before she could get a shot of morning cold air. She knew Xena's trick too well. She curled back up in them and sighed happily. "Another hour, Xena."

"No, we have disciples to stop," the warrior reminded who was fully clothed and armored. "Come on."

Gabrielle buried her head deeper into the furs. "Make breakfast," she sleepily muttered.

Hope was prepared to leave too, she stood off the side, and her hands on her hips. She shook her head then asked Xena, "Does she always act this way when the fate of the world rests in your hands?"

The Warrior Princess peered down at her sleepy partner then back at the younger reflection of her partner. "Pretty much."

"The fate of the world can wait one more hour," the groggy bard complained, and she proceeded to roll over so her back was to the pair.

Hope then had a wicked grin when an idea came to mind. She narrowed her eyes then focused her powers on the furs. She happily watched as the furs lifted up into the air.

Gabrielle may have been sleepy, but she recovered swiftly and snatched her covers back down. "The more you bother me the longer I'll get to sleep."

Xena smirked over at the demi-god, who was shocked. She almost wanted to laugh because there was nobody, no power, or thing that could get her soul mate out of bed until she was quite ready.

Hope let out a frustrated breath then muttered, "We'll see." She then concentrated more of her power but this time directly on the bard.

Gabrielle's right side felt cool surprisingly, and she squealed when she opened her eyes and saw she was floating in midair.

Xena had wide eyes, but she started to quietly laugh.

Gabrielle struggled some but stopped when her bare feet met the foot of the bedroll, and she was now standing up. She blinked then her shocked features centered on Hope. She stood with the furs clung to her front side and her short hair very messy.

Hope couldn't stop it if she tried, and she bent forward and laughed hard. The image of Gabrielle's expression and the messy hair just wouldn't leave her.

Xena joined in the laughter, but she covered her mouth to muffle the laughs when she saw Gabrielle's now angry features. She knew just how grumpy the bard could be when she was woken up. She held up her hands at the bard, backed one step, and still chuckled.

Hope sensed the mood change so she calmed down then took in Gabrielle's angry expression. She bit her lip.

Gabrielle pointed a finger at the demi-god but still held the furs up too. "You think Dahak is the problem?" She quickly balled up the furs then threw them at Hope.

The demi-god instantly reacted but without so much as moving a muscle.

The furs abruptly stopped in midair then hovered there for a brief instant.

Gabrielle's eyes widened at her mistake then she caught Hope's wicked smirk. "Oh no, don't you dare!" She tried to jump out of the way when the furs came back at her, but it was useless. She was hit by the furs and became entangled in them then fell onto her butt. She tossed her arms about and desperately yanked the furs off her head and body. She gasped for cool air then glowered at the amused pair.

Xena raised an eyebrow slowly when Gabrielle's head came out of the furs. She bit her lower lip.

Hope covered her mouth with her hand so that she wouldn't laugh, and she stared at how Gabrielle's hair stuck straight up in the air thanks to the rubbing motions of the

furs.

Gabrielle growled and snapped, "What?"

Hope snickered then quickly walked away before she caused anymore trouble.

The bard focused her temper on her smug partner.

Xena cleared her throat then tried to seriously ask, "What would you like for breakfast from this general area?"

Gabrielle blew air up at her bangs, which were standing up right. She didn't reply and only glared at her amused soul mate.

"Come on, breakfast is almost ready," Xena offered in peace. She flashed a smile at her grumpy partner then went to the fire.

Gabrielle sighed and finally dragged out of the bedroll. She went to the saddlebags and gathered a soap and hand towel. She rammed her feet into the boots, didn't bother to tie them, and went down to the creek.

The Warrior Princess was busy cooking the quail eggs that she'd scrounged up in the woods. She flipped the egg over in the worn pan and cooking eggs was one of her many skills. It was pretty easy for her to tell when they were ready to be eaten.

Hope turned her head away after Gabrielle disappeared in the woods.

"Don't talk to her unless she talks to you first. Once she eats her breakfast then she's suitable to talk to," Xena advised.

Hope chuckled and took a seat on the rock.

The warrior finished off the two eggs, and slid them onto the plate. She'd already eaten some dried jerky as she was never much for breakfast anyway. Gabrielle thought she would have her set mood for the day depending on how her breakfast went. Xena had figured out that secret years back and always endeavored to make the bard's breakfasts substantial so there wouldn't be any moodiness. It was also the reason why Xena had figured out to cook eggs and in different ways.

The bard returned with a more pleasant demeanor plus her hair was organized. She'd obviously wet it and took control of it. She quietly put her things away then she straightened up to find her partner beside her.

Xena held out the plate of eggs, a Roman fork, and she did her best not to smirk.

Gabrielle silently accepted it then took a seat beside the demi-god.

The warrior had already put the kettle back over the fire. She'd had tea already and knew Gabrielle would like some too. While the water boiled, Xena gathered up the bedroll and messy furs.

Gabrielle idly watched her soul mate efficiently gather up everything and have Argo tacked up. She was almost finished her eggs but peered up at Hope. "Did you eat?"

Hope shook her head. "I'm not hungry since I ate last night."

The bard couldn't imagine not being hungry. She focused back on her last egg and happily enjoyed it. Just when she set her plate down, Xena came to her and gave her a mug of tea.

Xena then used the time to put out the campfire.

Hope was amused by watching the pair work so well. She recorded how the couple silently understood each other and had come to an understanding. She imagined it'd taken a lot of time for them to figure each other out.

The bard finished her tea then set the mug down on the plate. First, she rapidly laced up her boots then climbed to her feet. She went back down to the creek with the dirty dishes.

Hope stood up and brushed her skirt back in a habit Gabrielle would have done.

Xena had caught the motion and the eeriness passed her. She towed Argo closer then opened up the saddlebags just in time. Gabrielle gave her the cleaned dishes, and she put them away.

"Xena, where are my..." Gabrielle sheepishly smiled when the sais' handles were in front of her face.

The warrior smirked and released the weapons after her partner had them. She then guided Argo back to the woods.

The bard finished sheathing her sais then took off at a jog. "Come on, Hope... no time to dawdle when the world's fate rests in our hands."

Hope gaped briefly, but she sprinted after the warriors. She noticed she actually felt more relaxed around them and probably because Gabrielle was calmer around her.

The small group traveled only a few hours when they came upon the familiar area. Xena ducked into the woods after she dismounted Argo. She guided everybody through the woods and came to the edge before the hill down to the temple. She inhaled deeply and stared at the rebuilt temple.

Gabrielle came to her lover's side and studied the temple. "Gods... it hasn't changed."

Hope stood beside a tree but stared at the temple. She clenched her hands at her side when she felt Dahak's will flowing off the temple and spread across the lands. The temple was a beacon.

"What's the plan?" the bard asked.

Xena waited a beat as she considered it, but she looked to Hope. "How many disciples are there?"

The demi-god did a quick mental count. "At least twenty... maybe more by now."

"There were almost that many at the village," Gabrielle recalled.

"There were only six left by the time we finished." Xena sighed then glanced at her partner.

Gabrielle lifted her head and seemed to read her soul mate's thoughts. "That's good odds... for us." She chuckled at Xena's suddenly smug expression.

"Here's what we'll do," Xena mapped out aloud, "I'll go into the temple and draw them out. We'll have a better chance to beat them in the open." She then glanced at her partner. "You two stay up here until I get them out."

"What about the temple?"

"We'll worry about that last," Xena replied.

Gabrielle gazed beyond the temple and observed the ledge to a cliff side. Then beyond that was the great sea. She peered up at her lover. "Maybe we can toss them off the cliff...? They won't exactly scramble back up to get us."

"If there's a sandy beach below," the warrior agreed.

"There is," Hope confirmed. "There is a rocky bottom in one area but the rest is just beach."

"Alright," the Warrior Princess whispered, "you two lure them down there. It'll be like herding sheep." She then smirked at Gabrielle. "You should be good at that."

Gabrielle slotted her eyes at the joke. "Baa." Then she shoved her partner away from her. "Go on, Warrior Pain in the Butt."

Xena smirked but quickly hitched Argo to a low tree branch. She started in a jog but called, "Don't cry wolf until I get down there."

"What's that suppose to mean?" Gabrielle muttered.

Hope's eyes followed Xena until the warrior just seemed to disappear somehow. She focused back on Gabrielle and questioned, "How good are you with those sais?"

Gabrielle mimicked her soul mate's arched eyebrow.

Xena sprinted through the woods that wrapped around the front and sides of the temple. She came down the hillside then stopped on the wood's edge. She knelt down and watched the few disciple guards walking past. She rolled her eyes at how incompetent the men were, but it was her luck. Once they were out of visual range, she popped out of the woods then neared the right side of the temple. She dropped her head back and gauged how high the round, open window was at the peak of the temple.

Xena back peddled until she was by the wood's edge. She then made out the voices of the guards coming back so she hastily acted. She sprinted and launched straight up for the open window.

Gabrielle nudged the demi-god and commanded, "Let's go." She raced through the woods and felt Hope on her heels.

Hope ducked under a few low branches, but she kept up easily.

The bard stopped at the hill's edge and noted only a few trees went down the hillside. She turned to her right and saw how close they were to the temple on this side. She

then prepared to jump into the tree until a small hand grabbed her arm.

"Are you sure about this?" Hope asked.

Gabrielle turned back and answered, "Just don't spin me too much or I might get sick."

The demi-god couldn't help a laugh. "Be careful." She squeezed then let go.

Gabrielle swallowed, yet she came closer and whispered, "You too... and stay away from the temple." She searched the demi-god's soft green eyes. "I don't want to lose... to lose this." She turned away then gave a few wide steps and jumped into the tree.

Hope was quite impressed with Gabrielle's new abilities. Then her attention was swiftly drawn down to the temple's main entrance.

There was a loud war cry known only to the Warrior Princess.

Gabrielle knelt on the thick branch. She extracted her sais but flipped out the blades, which briefly caught the sunlight. "Come on, Xena," she muttered.

The a wave of disciples flowed out of the entrance and some stumbled backwards. Three of them were trying to stop the warrior that'd flushed them out. Then the earlier stunned guards joined in the fight.

Gabrielle stood up and mentally prepared for her great feat. She glanced down at Hope. "Ready?"

"Yes, go."

The bard inhaled deeply and prayed that her trust was properly instilled in the demi-god. She started an amazing run down the tree branch towards the temple. She gave a piercing cry then launched off the branch.

Xena's head snapped up when she heard the cry. She jumped back from a sword catching her, but she had time to watch her partner explode out of the tree leaves and sailed.

Gabrielle stretched out her arms so that her sais were the first thing ahead of her. Just as she felt her body about to drop, a strange sensation lifted her up and kept her flying momentum forward.

Several disciples spun around when they heard the smaller warrior. They had swords out and prepared for the unknown attack. They then became confused when the warrior wasn't falling to the ground but instead seemed to fly.

Hope kept her powers focused on the bard's body, which was heavier than she'd expected. She felt the beads of sweat roll down her brow, yet she didn't waver. Hope then narrowed her eyes when she added the last element to their surprise attack.

Gabrielle was close to the stunned disciples and suddenly her body began to spin. She clung to her sais with all her strength when she plowed through the disciples. She took out their swords and knocked over plenty of them. She then landed perfectly on top of one disciple, who had ducked down to dodge her. The bard rammed her boots into him then effectively jumped off him and flipped in the air. She came to a light landing

beside her partner, and she straightened up with her sais at the ready. She smirked at the half beaten disciples.

Xena had furrowed eyebrows then asked, "How'd you do that?" Then she realized it and almost felt like smacking her forehead.

Gabrielle smirked and wickedly replied, "I have many skills."

Xena rolled her eyes then taunted, "Come on, sheep girl." She charged the disciples.

The bard quickly joined the fight.

Hope remained slumped against the tree. She heaved a few deep breathes then muttered, "It shouldn't have been that hard." She brushed back her damp bangs. She gazed down at the warriors fighting the glob of disciples, and she knew she was the bait.

The demi-god shoved off the tree then hurried down the hillside. As she approached the fight, she saw that several disciples recognized her, and she grinned at them.

"Help her," Xena instructed to her partner.

Gabrielle had already planned on it since Hope was defenseless except for her powers. Gabrielle knocked out her opponent then dodged around several others. She met up with Hope, but remained a few steps ahead of her.

"Get them!" a disciple yelled who recognized the fact that Gabrielle and Hope looked alike. "Dahak wills it!"

Gabrielle kicked at the disciple that lunged at her then she turned to Hope. "Let's go." She grabbed the demi-god's wrist and hauled her off towards the cliffs.

Hope ran beside Gabrielle, and she occasionally shook her head.

Gabrielle noticed it and rasped, "What... is it?"

"Dahak's... will," the demi-god simply explained.

The realization hit the bard, and she ran closer to Hope. "Just fight it." She glanced back and saw most of the disciples were coming for them. She guessed that Xena had a few left with her.

Hope stopped when she saw the cliff's edge was only several hundred feet away. She faced the oncoming disciples. "Stay behind me."

Gabrielle tucked her blades under her wrists but stood just behind the demi-god.

Hope took a deep breath then counted the heartbeats until it was the right moment. She suddenly surged her powers at the disciples.

Terrified screams rang out when the disciples exploded into the air then came tumbling down to the hard ground. The disciples that'd been on the edge of the invisible explosion quickly came after the demi-god and bard.

Gabrielle moved past the paled demi-god and prepared to stop the few incomers. She stopped two blades then kicked at the third opponent's spear he had which flew up

into the air.

The bard gave a butterfly kick and took out another disciple. She landed on her feet, put the sais into both hands, and caught the spear when it was beside her. She spun and tossed the spear at the demi-god. "Defend yourself!"

Hope caught the spear just as two disciples came at her. She jumped away then lifted the spear as if it were a staff. She briefly shook off Dahak's calling will then raised the spear horizontally to stop a blade.

Gabrielle heard her partner's sharp warcry, and she thanked the gods. She backed away when five disciples targeted her. She back stepped again when one disciple was far better than the other four. She blocked his blows effectively.

Hope hissed when one disciple's blade caught her arm. She glanced at the bleeding wound then her features darkened considerably upon witnessing the disciple's glee.

Gabrielle had seen it, which caused her to lose focus. The expert disciple came for her, and she backed away but stopped when she felt the ledge near her.

Hope easily followed her body's natural motions with the spear. She didn't understand how she knew to use it like a staff, but she kept her opponent's back.

Xena came into the thick of the fight, and she spotted Gabrielle far to close to the ledge. She frantically tried to press forward so she could get to the bard.

Hope heard Gabrielle's brief yelp when Gabrielle teetered on the ledge. She was surprised the disciple was trying to shove Gabrielle off. Suddenly her attention was taken away by the three disciples that were upon her.

The bard saw the disciple's blade coming at her chest, and she lost her last bit of space. She tried to hold her balance when her right heel went off the ledge. "Xena!"

The Warrior Princess saw her soul mate fall back, and she yelled, "Gabrielle!" She desperately surged against her opponents but she was too far.

Hope caught sight of Gabrielle slipping off. She threw her spear at her enemies then she turned. She took a running jump and flew off the ledge just after Gabrielle fell over.

"Gabrielle!" Xena cried out just when she came to the ledge. She briefly watched Hope fly fast towards her soul mate, who was aimed for the jagged rocks. She turned back to the disciples that came at her.

Hope used her powers to pull at the beach below so that it made her fall faster. Her body seemed to blur, yet she stretched out her hands and grabbed the bard.

Gabrielle quickly clung to the demi-god even though she didn't know what would happen.

"Hold on," Hope instructed. She then focused her eyes on the jagged rocks that were closing in on them. She willed all her strength into her powers. She clenched her teeth as she fought against the powerful momentum that they'd picked up from the fall.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and buried her face into Hope's neck. She prayed that the

rocks would only cut through her and not rob Hope of her life.

Hope gave out a scream when they closed in on the rocks. Then childhood memories of her and her mother together flashed past her mind. She had a sudden rush of strength.

Gabrielle held her breath, but abruptly the wind stopped around her. She still held her breath while her heart frantically pounded. She slowly opened her eyes and took in her surroundings.

Hope remained on top of Gabrielle, her arms encircled the bard's upper body, and her boot tips just passed Gabrielle's. Her blond hair cascaded around the bard's shoulders.

Just underneath Gabrielle's back, a rock's toothy tip was a hand's length from going through her stomach. The women just hovered there above the rocks then slowly they glided forward towards the beach.

Hope lowered them into the sand then she rolled off of Gabrielle's body. She urgently gasped for air and tried to calm the anxiety.

Gabrielle placed a hand over her right chest, and she felt her erratic heartbeat. She'd forgotten her weapons in the sand and recovered from the dramatic fall off the cliff. Her eyes followed the long length of the cliff to the very top.

"Look out below!" Xena called out who flipped a disciple over her back. She then had a beat and checked on the two women down at the bottom. She smirked and called, "Enough lying around down there, get up here and help!"

Hope turned her head to the warrior and asked, "Is she always this demanding?"

Gabrielle couldn't help a grin then a soft laugh escaped her. "That's just her way of showing how worried she was." Then she took a deep breath and flipped up onto her feet.

Hope was less dramatic, and she simply climbed to her feet. After Gabrielle got her sais, she mentioned, "There's a path up the cliff just down here." She noted Gabrielle's curious gaze. "I've been down here a few times," she softly admitted.

The bard walked along side Hope towards the path. "When?" she cautiously tried.

Hope was quiet for a bit as if recalling her faraway memories. "The first time I was reborn then just recently before I came to find you." She scanned the sea horizon and murmured, "I was just drawn to here. Its beautiful... I felt at peace for a little bit."

Gabrielle smiled appreciatively because she understood Hope's draw towards nature. She touched the demi-god's arm and sincerely stated, "Thank you for saving me."

Hope reached up and took the bard's hand into her matching one, although she felt the difference between her soft ones and Gabrielle's worn ones. "You're welcome."

Gabrielle smiled, really smiled at Hope but finally let go. "We better hurry up." She started into a run. "Come on."

Hope took a deep breath then followed.

The Warrior Princess's cry rang out then she grabbed a disciple by the arm and swung him around.

The disciple was rocketed into the air towards the sea. He made a nose dive for the water.

Xena spun her sword then faced off against the remaining twelve disciples or so. She hadn't expected there to be so many disciples, but she didn't have any problem with an extended work out.

Gabrielle reached the top and gave her sais a spin before she charged into battle again.

Hope took a moment to catch her breath as she wasn't in shape like the warriors. She stood away from the battle, but her gaze wandered over to the temple in the background. Her eyes glossed over when she felt that dark pull from Dahak.

A disciple broke away from the fight when he spotted Hope. He came for her.

Hope straightened up and prepared to face him. She centered her powers on the disciple and stopped him dead in his tracks when he was a few steps from her.

The disciple growled and tried to fight the invisible force that stilled him. He couldn't move though.

Another disciple broke away from the group and quickly came at Hope with his sword raised.

Hope was taken by surprise and lost her focus on the first disciple. Suddenly she had both of them coming at her.

Gabrielle reacted when she'd seen the second one break away from the fighting. She chased after him and launched into an air kick. She hit him hard in the back and landed on him. She then perfectly threw her sai at the remaining disciple.

The disciple tried to come at Hope, his sword up, but he lost his sword from the sai. He glanced at his sword far behind the demi-god.

Hope smirked.

Gabrielle though attacked with rapid kicks, and she swiped her last sai at him. She easily confused her opponent, and he didn't realize it until it was too late when he went off the ledge. She then saw the earlier disciple was getting up so she quickly grabbed him by the arm.

Gabrielle mimicked Xena's earlier tactic. She gave the disciple a nice spin by the arm then swung him off the cliff, but not as far as Xena had done. Finally, she picked up her sai and asked, "You okay?"

Hope nodded then replied, "Tell Xena to back away."

"You're going to repeat that same thing?" the bard asked. After Hope's nod, she agreed then raced back into the fight. She made it to her soul mate's side and gave her the hidden signal to retreat. She was glad they'd worked out silent communications incase of such an event.

Xena gave her sharp cry then slashed at her three opponents, which caused them to back off. She grabbed the bard and took off towards Hope.

The twelve disciples yelled in unison then chased after the warriors.

Hope rushed her powers at the nearing disciples. She satisfactorily watched the disciples become airborne and fly backwards. She noted two went off the cliff side.

Gabrielle breathed heavily and grinned at how none of the enemies were getting up. She then smirked up at her lover. "I think Hope has you beat on the skills section, Xena."

The warrior slotted her eyes at the bard, yet she grinned. "Well she can be your partner for now on."

"Touchy, touchy," the bard teased, but she sobered and asked, "What about the temple?"

Hope made her presence known and said, "I will take care of it." She moved away but a nimble hand caught her by the wrist.

"Oh no." The bard pulled the demi-god back to her. "You're not going in that temple." She held Hope but looked to Xena. "There has to be a way to destroy it?"

The Warrior Princess raised an eyebrow. "Do you have a catapult handy?"

Gabrielle's face darkened, and she snapped, "Yeah, back in the saddlebags." She sighed and calmed down. "We have to do something."

Xena glanced over at the now moaning disciples.

Hope tried to pull her arm free but Gabrielle stopped her again.

"You're not going in there," Gabrielle hotly reminded.

Hope set her jaw when her temper flared up in her. She took a deep breath then came closer to the bard. "I need to go in there. I know how to destroy the temple... plus I left something behind."

"If you go in there then Dahak will have you." Gabrielle shook her head. "I'm not about to let you go back to him."

"He can't control me," the demi-god argued, "my will is my own."

"You're easily subjected to it," Gabrielle reminded who had fiery green eyes.

Hope knew if she retaliated against Gabrielle it would get ugly. She stepped closer then tried to be calmer. Her voice was soothing. "I have to do this."

"No you don't," the Gabrielle rebuked.

"I can't be scared of him," Hope explained, "if I don't face him now then I'll live the rest of my life in fear."

"And what if your life ends in there?" Gabrielle hotly demanded.

Xena listened and knew it wasn't her place to speak, but the slowly standing disciples caught her attention. She lifted her sword.

"Then it was meant to be," Hope sadly whispered.

"No," Gabrielle snarled, "I'm not going to lose you to him."

Hope smiled at the words despite how they were said. She had warm features because Gabrielle's true feelings were surfacing. She took the last step and lifted her hands. She placed her palms against Gabrielle's cheeks.

Gabrielle lifted her hands and covered Hope's hands. She searched Hope's eyes for what seemed like some time.

Xena silently walked away and confronted the disciples so that her soul mate and Hope were protected. Her cry was loud yet it barely pierced Hope and Gabrielle's shared consciousness.

Gabrielle lowered her head some just as her tears showed. She shook her head and turned it away.

Hope pulled the warrior into her arms and hugged her tightly.

Gabrielle wouldn't resist so she hugged Hope back. She hoarsely whispered, "Whatever happens, I want you to know that I have and always will love you." She withdrew and touched Hope's cheek. "No matter who you are I can't stop loving you."

Hope collapsed Gabrielle's hand into hers and whispered, "I know." She laced her fingers through Gabrielle's. "This is who I really am... don't forget me."

Gabrielle felt her tears slip more, and she covered her mouth so that her cries were muffled. "I won't," she rasped.

"I'm sorry... for everything," Hope whispered then separated from her mother. She swallowed down her emotions that threatened her too, and she turned away.

Gabrielle remained still. She ached as her daughter grew more distant to her.

Hope started in a jog but then she went into a run. She headed directly for the temple that called for her. She would answer the call but not the will even if it destroyed her being.

The bard finally faced the disciples that were giving her partner a hard time. She placed her sais into both her hands then joined the fight.

Hope entered the temple then weaved through the halls until she entered the main room. Ahead was the altar, which was before the firepits, and kneeling before the altar were the two head priests. She shook her head at them then called, "Dahak's time has come to an end."

The Priest of the Flesh and the Priest of the Blood rose up and faced the demi-god.

Hope stepped back when the priests were not mere mortals anymore. She stared at them and her face reflected horror.

The priests, in unison, declared, "We are the Guardians of the will." They withdrew their swords from their cloaks. "Dahak wills that you return to him, goddess." Their faces were matching, both ugly and similar to the Deliverer's.

Hope shook her head then stoned her free will. "We seem to have a difference of opinions, but I'm willing to bet you two won't win."

The Guardians growled together then came for Hope.

The demi-god pulsed her power at the demons and sent them flying back into the altar.

The stone altar cracked and crumbled under their weight.

Hope quickly lifted the swords from their hands and hover them high in the air. She then easily glided them over the fire pit and released them.

The Guardians climbed to their feet and shook off their daze. They came after the demi-god again but with their clawed hands at the ready.

Hope knew she needed some time for recovery so she briefly glanced up at the balcony to her left. She came towards them then at the last moment, she jumped, landed on one's shoulders, and jumped again. This time her powers gave her an extra boost and sent her higher up. She just made it onto the balcony. She turned and smirked at the stumped demons.

The Guardians exchanged looks then they each went to either side of the wall. Simultaneously the demons rammed their clawed hands into the stone wall then their claw feet.

Hope cursed when the Guardians slowly worked their way up the wall. She felt that her strength was close to full so she mapped out a plan. She pretended to become fearful of the approaching demons.

The demons hopped onto the balcony on either side then raised their claws. They took a step closer.

Hope glanced between them then warned, "Trust me, you don't want to do what you're thinking."

The Guardians opened their jagged teeth filled mouths then slobber showed.

Hope crinkled up her nose then tensed her leg muscles. When the demons leaped for her, she screamed and went over the balcony. She landed on the floor neatly, but she spun around and viewed how the Guardians were tangled up in their own claws and spikes. "I must have received mother's intelligence," she muttered.

The Guardians wailed when they separated then they turned their angry, ugly faces to the demi-god below.

Hope back stepped, past a pillar, and held up her hands. She narrowed her eyes, but kept a careful watch on the angry demons.

The pillar just to Hope's left started to rumble and vibrate. Then cracks ran up the

pillar when the invisible force started to break it apart.

Hope's forehead covered with sweat, yet she wouldn't let up her fight against the pillar.

The Guardians jumped from the balcony and neared the demi-god, one step at a time.

Hope gritted her teeth then rushed her powers in a great strength.

The pillar gave way and tumbled down on the demons.

The Guardians painful cried but went silent and the pillars stilled on top of them.

Hope grinned, yet her victory was short lived. She suddenly fell to her knees when a sharp pain pierced her head. She hunched forward and covered her ears as if she heard something. "No," she rasped.

The firepit roared and a stream of fire snaked over the top then slithered down the steps, over the broken altar, and closer to Hope.

Back by the cliff, Gabrielle took out her last opponent then glanced at her partner.

The Warrior Princess poked the disciple with her sword's tip and tilted her head. She smirked and watched the disciple wave his arms about in the air then he fell off the edge. She turned around and leaned her blade against her shoulder. "That wasn't too bad."

The bard grinned yet lost it when she thought about Hope. "We need to help Hope." She turned towards the temple.

Abruptly the ground started to shake faintly then grew more intense.

Gabrielle lost her balance and fell to her knees.

The warrior tried to stay up since being use to the rockiness of a ship. She gained her balance again when the ground stilled under her feet. She hurried to her partner's side and helped her up.

"By the gods, what was that?" Gabrielle rasped.

Suddenly the highest point of the temple erupted then a fountain of fire spewed from the the opening and spilled out over the temple's roof. The temple was set ablaze.

Gabrielle clutched her soul mate and just as the ground violently shook again.

Xena couldn't hold her position; she and Gabrielle fell to the ground, but she held onto her partner.

"Gods... we have to help, Xena." The bard tried to get to her feet but her partner stopped her.

"We can't go in there, Gabrielle," Xena yelled over the quake.

"I don't care!" Gabrielle tried to stand up despite her partner's strong hold. Then a louder sound from behind them caught her ear.

The warrior gazed back over her shoulder. She watched in horror as the cliff's ledge was collapsing and quickly coming for them. "Time to go!" She forced her legs to lift her and her feet steadied her under the quaking land.

Gabrielle used Xena's body for support then she tried to run.

Xena held onto the bard's hand as they ran together.

The ground gave a sharper shake and sent the bard down onto her ankle the wrong way.

Gabrielle lost her grip on Xena. She hissed in pain and her sais in her right hand almost pierced her. She rolled onto her back and grabbed her injured ankle with her left hand.

The warrior knelt down and balanced her body with her left hand. "Can you get up?"

The bard's eyes welded up with tears between the pain and frustration. "I don't think so."

Xena glimpsed back at the falling cliff side, which was coming closer by the second. She sheathed her sword quickly then took the bard's sais. She sheathed them into Gabrielle's boots then swiftly scooped up the bard.

Gabrielle looked over the warrior's shoulder and saw how near the cliff was growing. "Xena-"

"I know!" Xena climbed to her feet and tried to balance. "Hold tight!" She swiftly ran across the vibrating ground then as she neared the temple she heard the sound of wood cracking.

The hillside that surrounded the temple began to give way. The trees snapped apart and slid down the steep hill then the earth loosened.

Xena stopped when she saw they were surrounded by the danger. She then was forced to kneel when the ground quaked harder than normal.

Gabrielle clung to her soul mate, but she saw what was happening. "Xena, we can't get out of here."

The trees continued to break off and roll down the hill. One large tree picked up more speed than the rest and rolled directly for the soul mates.

"Xena!"

The Warrior Princess urged her legs to lift her up then she growled as the tree came for them. She gave two running steps then pushed off just when the ground violently shook more.

Gabrielle closed her eyes tightly, and the world spun around her. The air was knocked out of her when Xena landed hard on the ground. She opened her eyes and saw they'd landed in between three down trees.

The burning temple rumbled louder and louder then the fire fountain gushed higher up then suddenly back drafted into the temple. Then the roof completely exploded into

pieces, and the stones rained in the air all around.

"Keep your head down!" Xena knelt to the ground and tried to cover Gabrielle as best as she could.

The bard balled up against the warrior's body, and she heard Xena growl in pain. She desperately hoped Xena was okay. She listened to the stones fall around them then it stopped.

Xena lifted her head then looked back at the cliff side.

Gabrielle almost rolled out of Xena's grasp when the powerful quake struck. She stared in horror at the temple that was completely in a blaze then a stream of fire rose up from the ground and seemed to focus on something. "By the gods, no."

The Warrior Princess caught sight of what she thought was Hope standing off against the fire stream. She wasn't sure, but she became concerned about the approaching cliff. Xena rose up to her feet but then a boom caught her attention.

"Xena!" Gabrielle screamed and pointed at the tree that came flying down the hill towards them.

The warrior had no time. She jumped forward and ducked under the fallen tree that was just ahead of them. She tucked Gabrielle far under it then squeezed her body against it as best as she could.

The rolling tree bounced off another fallen tree, flew up into the air a ways, and crashed down on top of the three trees that surrounded the warriors.

Gabrielle couldn't tell if her body shook or if it was the ground. She lifted her head then hastily called, "Xena?" She received a soft moan. "Xena, Xena?" She quickly reached forward and felt her partner's head, and something wet but warm. "No... n-no, please." She realized the light was blocked by the tree over top of them. She used her feet to push her body forward. "Xena?" She received no response this time.

The trunk over Gabrielle's head shifted from the next quake and moved down on her but stopped.

Gabrielle's breath caught then she hastily worked to get her and Xena out of the dangerous position they were in. She used her feet to push off the one tree and pulled Xena's heavy body with her. Her ankle screamed painfully, but Gabrielle didn't care.

Another quake shook the ground harder and the tree slumped a bit more.

Gabrielle screamed, yet she threw all her strength into the next push. She suddenly came out into the light, and she hauled Xena out with her. Just when she and Xena were in the open, the tree fell and just narrowly missed the Warrior Princess's feet.

Gabrielle pulled Xena closer to her and checked the bad head injury. "Xena?" she whispered and tried to brush the blood away. She placed her hand on the warrior's chest and felt the steady heartbeat, which made her calmer. "Come on, Xena." She sadly smiled when hazy blue eyes opened up and slowly focused on her.

"I hate... moving trees," the warrior muttered in a painful voice. "They always come..."

at my head."

Gabrielle laughed despite the situation. She stopped when the earth was shaken the hardest yet.

"Get... up," the warrior mumbled as if a self command. She lifted her body up first with her hands then tried to get her feet under her.

Gabrielle forced herself to get up, although she fell back down when the ground shook her.

Xena caught her partner and tried to help. She then shook her head of the last fuzziness. She realized the cliff was now just fifty paces away from them and just snaked back behind the temple.

"Oh no," the bard whispered.

A shrill scream pierced the air then Dahak's firepits erupted and started to cave in on itself. The ground reacted by another massive quake.

The cliff ate away at the ground and narrowed inland.

The rear of the temple toppled and fell down the eating cliff side. The pillars rolled for some ways then stopped in the avalanche of dirt.

Gabrielle yelled when the tree near them suddenly disappeared down the approaching ledge. Her boot tips were close to it.

Xena grabbed the bard's waist then her foot slipped.

Gabrielle lost her balance then the ground crumbled under her feet. She started to fall but Xena pulled her back from it.

Xena fell backwards from the earthquake, yet she hauled Gabrielle into her body. She scrambled backwards and took her partner with her.

The cracks snaked forward and chased after the pair. The faster crack came right at Gabrielle's feet.

Xena kept backing up until her back met the fallen trees behind them. She picked up the bard into her lap and held her tightly.

Gabrielle clung to her soul mate and closed her eyes.

Xena held her breath when the two cracks met just in front of her feet then they stopped. She remained tensed and waited for ground to open up under her but everything went still and very silent. All she could hear was her and Gabrielle's matched gasps for air.

The bard raised her head up then opened her eyes. Before her was the beautiful sea and the sun was sinking close to it. Her eyes lowered to the ground far below them that'd been made from the earthquake. She couldn't even count the endless trees that'd been swallowed up by the quakes.

Xena felt her heart calm then she whispered, "You okay?"

"I... I think so." Gabrielle took her lover's hand into hers. "Are you?"

"Besides the nasty bump, never better."

The bard then snapped out of her daze and breathed, "Hope." She struggled to get to her feet despite her injury.

Xena climbed to her feet too and helped her partner.

The warriors carefully waded through the mess and made it to the edge of the burning, crumbled temple.

Gabrielle surveyed the rubble and tried to frantically pinpoint the demi-god. "Hope?" she yelled.

Xena touched her soul mate's shoulder in reassurance.

The bard shook her head then whispered, "I can still sense her." She hastily entered the destroyed temple and hunted. "Hope?"

Xena followed and carefully searched for the demi-god as well, but she was worried what kind of condition Hope would be in by now.

Gabrielle climbed over a fallen pillar, and she suspected Hope would be near the main room. She followed the dim connection she shared with the demi-god and it slowly grew stronger. "Hope!"

Xena caught a glimpse of the location where the fire pits typically rested. They were gone now and completely filled by dirt and rocks. She was relieved.

Gabrielle came to a pillar stump, and the rest of the pillar pieces rested in a heap. "Xena, over here!" She knew, she could feel it... she could feel her daughter here.

The warrior quickly joined her partner in shoving the heavy pillars aside. She braced her shoulder against the top one then put all her muscle strength into it. She clenched her teeth and with a powerful push, she and Gabrielle knocked the pillar fragment off.

The bard knelt down beside the unconscious demi-god, who was slumped against the pillar stump. She checked Hope's pulse at her neck and sighed at the steady beat. She then investigated Hope's injuries, which were a mix of bruises, cuts, and smudged dirt.

Xena assisted by running her expert hands over the demi-god's body. She didn't detect anything broken or swollen. "She seems okay."

Gabrielle nodded, and she was going to say something but stopped. There was something in Hope's cupped hands that caught her eye. Gabrielle reached forward and gingerly removed the wooden object from the demi-god's hands.

Xena stared at the wooden lamb in her soul mate's possession. She'd never known what'd happened to that Solstice gift, but it all made sense now. She lifted her gaze and studied her partner's emotional profile.

The bard turned the lamb around in her hands. She knew it was her lamb she'd given Hope as a child. When she turned it over, she ran her fingertips over the small carving

of her and Xena's initials together. Gabrielle originally knew nothing about the added, carved initials that Xena had done back on that Solstice until moons later.

Gabrielle met her soul mate's concerned features; her eyes glistened.

Xena sadly smiled then quickly placed a kiss to the bard's forehead. "Let's get her out of here." She nudged forward and slipped her arms under the demi-god.

Gabrielle stood and backed away. She briefly looked at the lamb again and understood Hope's earlier comment that she'd left something in the temple. Gabrielle would have never guessed it was this lamb, which obviously had a lot of meaning to Hope.

The Warrior Princess rose up and adjusted the demi-god in her arms.

Gabrielle stood up then carefully and slowly worked through the temple's rubble. She bit her lower lip against the sharp pain in her leg. In her right hand she tightly held the lamb. "I hope Argo is okay."

"I'm sure she's fine," the warrior mentioned.

The bard peered up at her soul mate and worriedly asked, "How's your head?" She noted the blood had dried over Xena's right temple.

"Just peachy," Xena joked and showed a crooked smile.

"Hard head," Gabrielle muttered.

"I heard that."

The bard chuckled but reached back and brushed the warrior's arm. She then watched her footing before she made her condition any worse. She briefly held up the lamb to her face then lowered it. "It's going to be okay, I think."

Xena stepped over a large stone first and briefly glimpsed at the unconscious woman in her arms who looked as her soul mate years back. The memories from when she'd carried Gabrielle out of Dahak's temple in Britannia briefly passed through her. She remembered Gabrielle's words that everything had changed and now they have again, but this time it was for the better.

"Yes," Xena softly agreed.

Gabrielle was happy when she was out of the temple, although when she saw the mess ahead of them, she sighed.

Xena paused and looked at the hillside that'd avalanched and had trees thrown over it.

"I really hope Argo is okay," the bard muttered then proceeded the trek to the destroyed hillside.

The warrior grinned at her partner's concern for the horse since the original Argo and Gabrielle never faired at the start. She shifted Hope in her arms and received a faint moan, but Hope did nothing else.

The warriors made it up the hillside after awhile, and Xena gave a whistle for Argo. She was rewarded by a whine then a trotting horse with swinging reins approached.

Xena instructed Gabrielle to ride since her ankle still bothered her. Gabrielle argued that Xena and Hope should, but the warrior won out the debate simply because they both were too tired to fuss. Gabrielle settled the skittish horse down then mounted her.

They only traveled for twenty minutes or so. Xena couldn't carry Hope much more and her body ached, much like Gabrielle. The bard was just happy to put some space between them and the temple. They went into a small clearing in the woodland and slowly setup a camp. The night's usual run of jokes didn't pass between the couple, and they only ate jerky, cheese, and some dried fruit. Xena promised a better meal in the morning.

Gabrielle first had Hope down in a bedroll then covered her with some furs. Then she and Xena spent time checking over their wounds. Afterwards, Gabrielle helped get the campfire built and started then she slumped into her shared bedroll. Gabrielle hadn't felt this sore in a long time, but she found her favorite place right in Xena's arms.

Chapter 4

Hope tightly held to the ledge and below her the flames surged up to her feet. She fruitlessly lifted her body but there was some pull that stopped her. Hope struggled and fought against the pull then she felt the heat coming closer to her feet.

"You have no will!" yelled a dark voice.

The demi-god screamed for help. Nobody answered her cry. The muscles in her arms strained and started to give out.

The flames suddenly soared up around her and snaked around her body. They locked around her waist then with incredibly force, the fire ripped her off the ledge.

Hope screamed in terror, and she was taken down into the fire pit. Her right hand stretched out to the receding top. Then before her world went black, she caught sight of her mother's hopeless face at the top.

Hope screamed again and shot up in the bedroll. She gasped for air then there were tender hands touching her and a soothing voice that called her name. She bent forward and pushed the furs back that made her feel too hot.

"It's okay... it was a dream. You're safe."

The demi-god brushed back her soaked bangs then peered up into concern green eyes. Her memories flooded her again, and she whispered, "Where are we?"

Gabrielle noticed the moisture that coated Hope thanks to the nearby campfire. She pulled her hands away and set them in her lap. She rested on her knees beside the demi-god's bedroll. "We're about half an hour from the temple. You've been out for a few hours."

Hope noted that it was nighttime and the only source of light was the campfire. She recalled her earliest memories, which caused her to survey Gabrielle's body. "Were you hurt?"

Gabrielle had a sad smile at the concern. "I just sprained my ankle... nothing serious."

"What about Xena?"

The bard glanced over at her partner's horizontal form in the mess of furs. "She took a nasty blow to her head, but she has a thick head."

"I heard that," called a deep voice from the jumble of furs.

Hope slightly grinned but lost it after a thought. "I can heal—"

"No," Gabrielle stopped. "We're fine. You need to rest." She pulled the furs back over the demi-god's body. "How do you feel?"

Hope quickly inventoried her body then replied, "I feel really sore."

The bard could sympathize. "You have a few bruises and cuts, I already cleaned them." She paused then gently added, "I'm going to give you some tea that has an herb in it. It'll help you sleep." She caught the slight fear in Hope's eyes. "Trust me, the herb will knock you out, and you won't dream." After Hope nodded, she carefully stood up and limped over to the campfire.

Hope felt a lot calmer now that she knew it was just a nightmare. She looked at her hands and counted the few scratches that trailed over her hands and up her arms. Then a thought occurred to her, but she waited until Gabrielle returned.

The bard sat down beside the bedroll and held out a steaming mug.

Hope received the warm mug, yet she didn't drink from it. Her face was dimmed by concern. "What happened to the lamb? I thought I..."

Gabrielle revealed an upturned smile. "It's in the saddlebags."

Hope nodded and didn't comment further. She tried the tea, which was sweet again.

"I'm surprised you've had it all this time," the bard mentioned.

Hope stared into the dark mug, and her response was quiet. "It was the only thing I had to remember you by." She locked her eyes with Gabrielle's. "I've kept it hidden in the temple... mostly."

Gabrielle moved her head in surprise, but she ordered, "Drink the tea."

The demi-god didn't argue and finished off the tea fairly quickly. She had to admit she was tired, and the tea seemed to be working.

"Get some rest." Gabrielle pushed Hope's closest shoulder after she took the mug. "We'll see how you feel in the morning."

"I should be... fine," the demi-god murmured.

"Go to sleep." Gabrielle carefully worked to get back on her feet, but Hope stopped her. She came back down and tilted her head.

Hope rested on her back and had her head turned to the bard. "Thank you, Gabrielle."

The bard searched Hope's eyes for a long moment. She understood that Hope thanked

her for the trust and the new chance. But what ached against Gabrielle's heart was that Hope called her by her name. She bent over the demi-god then whispered, "Thank you... for fighting and proving me wrong." She brushed Hope's furthest cheek and smiled.

Hope placed her hand over top of Gabrielle's and mirrored the smile.

"Get some sleep," the bard softly instructed. She picked up the mug again, although she didn't move. Instead, she locked eyes and the tenderness melted into her voice. "By the way, it's not Gabrielle... it's mother." She didn't wait for a response and stood up. She went to the campfire, set the mug down, and slowly made her way back to her shared bedroll.

Xena lifted the furs and welcomed her soul mate into the warmth. She drew Gabrielle in deep and brushed her lips over the bard's ear. "S'okay?"

Gabrielle curled up against her partner first. "Mmhmm." She tangled her legs with Xena's. "Xena?"

"Mmmm?"

"Don't wake me up tomorrow," the bard warned. She felt the silent laugh when Xena's chest shook against her body.

"Promise," the warrior agreed. She sighed contently then sleepily whispered, "Love you."

Gabrielle was almost halfway asleep, but she caught the words. She lazily smiled and murmured, "I love you too." Then she faded into her dreamscape. And it was hours after dawn before the bard woke up. When she did, she found Xena already moving about and Hope sat cross legged in front of the fire.

Xena straightened up after she placed the kettle over the fire. "Mornin', dear."

Gabrielle glowered at the joking endearment from her partner. She made no response and followed her usual routine. She shoved on her untied boots, passed Hope and Xena, and went into the woods.

Hope shook her head and muttered, "I'm glad I'm a morning person."

"That's because you require less sleep than Gabrielle," the warrior remarked. She stood away from the fire enough but poked the ashes with a live stick.

Hope thoughtfully considered this perspective. "Maybe."

Xena faintly grinned. She set the stick aside then knelt down by the mugs, tea leaf pouch, and other cooking supplies. "Do you want any tea, Hope?"

The demi-god played with her hair, yet she smiled at how the warrior was trying with her. "That'd be nice. Thank you."

The warrior briefly peered up with hooded eyes and continued to organize the mugs of tea. She soon had the steaming kettle and filled the mugs up. She then approached the demi-god and handed her a mug.

Hope smiled appreciatively as she took it. She then was surprised when Xena sat beside her, although there was plenty of space between them. She sipped the hot tea and tasted the sweetness in it. She couldn't hold her tongue anymore, so she asked, "What's sweet in here?"

Xena almost choked in her tea because she was taken aback by the question. She swallowed her tea then lowered the mug from her lips. "Honey."

"Honey?" the demi-god repeated then became bewildered.

The Warrior Princess slightly grinned when she realized Hope didn't have much knowledge about certain things in the world. And food happened to be one of those areas. "It's..." She couldn't find the words to describe what honey was; it just was in Xena's mind.

Gabrielle slowly entered the camp, and instantly she was bombarded by a question.

"Gabrielle, what's honey?"

The bard stopped halfway into the camp and stared at her soul mate like she was crazy. "What?"

The warrior sighed then signaled Hope and explained, "Hope doesn't know what honey is." She waved her freehand and ordered, "Do the bard thing."

Gabrielle shook her head at her partner then curtly replied, "Please?" She threw her damp towel at her partner.

Xena snatched it in midair without even thinking about it.

The bard limped over to the campfire and picked up her mug of tea. She also picked up the tiny jar that was currently lidless. She came over and sat on the other side of Hope. She handed the jar to Hope. "That's honey."

Hope peered into the jar and saw some gooey, yellow content in it.

"It's made by bees," the bard explained.

"Bees?" Hope shook her head then stared oddly at her mother.

Gabrielle's mouth hung open then her eyes flickered to her amused soul mate.

Xena shook from her silent laughter, and she just happily drank her tea in peace. She also enjoyed her partner's long winded explanation about what bees were, hives, and her idea about how bees made honey. Although Xena suspected that Hope didn't believe that bees somehow made honey from flowers, but Gabrielle insisted it was true. Xena ended up leaning close to Hope and softly reminded Hope that her mother was a bard.

And Gabrielle shot a very dark look at her partner for the smart remark. She then snapped, "Well what's your theory, Plato?"

Xena held up her freehand. "Oh no, I'm still back working on how the stars in the night sky might actually be other earths like ours." She arched an eyebrow. "Or that latests theory about how there's some invisible force that makes things fall and if it

wasn't here we'd all float around instead."

Hope bit her lower lip and leaned back so that she wasn't between the couple's debating space.

"Oh like your theory that the earth goes around the sun is really up there," Gabrielle shot back. "I'm surprised Apollo doesn't come down here himself."

Xena rolled her eyes and ignored the bard.

Hope held up her freehand between the soul mates then declared, "Now, children."

Gabrielle sighed when she caught Hope's smug features.

"She started it," the warrior muttered into her mug.

The bard calmed down then civilly asked, "So what's for breakfast?"

"You're drinking it," Xena replied.

"Xena," the bard warned as if a prewarning to her grumpy mood.

The warrior sighed then in a defeated voice, she offered, "I'll go hunt for some quail eggs." She finished off her tea then set the mug aside by the towel. "Are you hungry, Hope?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Hope offered a smile.

Xena stood up while she remarked, "Maybe I'll take you over your mother." She then hightailed it out of camp before Gabrielle chased after her.

Hope tilted her mug around so that the last of her tea swirled around in the mug. She quietly asked, "So what now?"

Gabrielle set her mug aside, next to the jar of honey. "Well, Xena and I were originally headed for the Amazons. So that's where we're going now." She leaned back until her hands met the ground behind her. "You're welcomed to come with us."

Hope toyed with the mug then decided it was better to set it down. "Is Xena okay with that?"

The bard grinned and answered, "Xena and I are kind of a two for one deal. We never disagree about anything."

Hope stared at her mother with dubious expression.

Gabrielle let the silence pass then she amended, "Okay so 'never' is a strong word, but we talked about this already." She smiled and sat up again. "She's okay with it."

"So the Amazons huh?" Hope tilted her head and her spawning imagination was sparked. "Hmmm." She lifted her mug then slowly tilted it back against her lips.

"It'll give you the chance to meet Xena's daughter too," Gabrielle further mentioned.

Hope suddenly choked on her tea and bent forward when the warm liquid went down wrong.

Gabrielle hadn't expected the reaction. She quickly patted her daughter's back to help her. "Drink the rest of the tea, it'll help."

The demi-god did so and cleared her throat afterwards. Once she had the cough under control, she hoarsely questioned, "Daughter?" She had eyes wider than the sun when she focused on her mother.

"Mmmm." Gabrielle stretched out her legs. "Her name is Eve."

Hope silenced her rapid questions in her head then just asked, "She's an Amazon?"

"It's... complicated," the bard replied.

"You're an Amazon, right?" Hope tried.

Gabrielle slowly nodded then clarified it better. "I'm actually the queen of this particular tribe."

Hope grinned because she didn't know that about her mother. "You've done a lot."

The bard felt self conscious about the comment. She scratched her nose for a distraction then rested her hand in her lap. "You could... say that, yeah."

"I meant to ask," Hope started, "what's happened to Callisto?" She felt slightly lost besides the fact that she knew the Olympian gods were dead and gone.

"Well..." Gabrielle wasn't sure where to start, and she tapped the rim of her mug. "It's a really long story." She slightly grinned and offered, "I'll tell you on the way to the nation... it'll help pass the time."

"Promise?" Hope mimicked her mother's grin.

"Definitely," the bard promised. She reached over and squeezed Hope's knee. "You feel better?"

"Almost a hundred percent," the demi-god answered. "Let me see your ankle."

Gabrielle shook her head then rebuked the offer.

Hope sighed then urged, "We can do this the hard way or the easy way."

The bard narrowed her eyes. "Is that a threat?" The glow in her eyes gave her away easily.

Hope smirked then replied, "It's a promise." She then sighed and fussed again. "Stop acting like a stubborn warrior. Let me see."

Gabrielle held her chin up. "You forgot please."

"Oh for gods' sakes." Hope went ahead and started to remove the untied boot.

Gabrielle just let her daughter go, and she couldn't resist her grin.

"Straighten your ankle out," Hope instructed. She then moved her hands down on either side of Gabrielle's ankle until she heard a faint hiss. She briefly glimpsed up at

the painful look on her mother's face. She then focused back on her task.

Gabrielle clenched her teeth when that similar sharp pain like yesterday repeated. She let out a deep breath when it was over. Then she gave her ankle the test by testing the range of motion; nothing hurt.

Hope put the boot back on and grinned at her mother's happy expression.

"You know," Gabrielle mentioned, "I could get really use to that trick." She then smiled when her partner came back. From her seat by the fire, she counted five eggs. "Four for me and one for you?"

Xena arched an eyebrow and turned her right hand over so that three eggs faced the ground. "What was that, dear?" She pretended that she was going to drop the eggs.

Gabrielle glanced at Hope then back at her partner. "I wouldn't."

The warrior's eyes flickered to Hope then back to Gabrielle. She wagered whether or not Hope would use her powers to catch the eggs.

Hope's lips thinned as she considered her position of power between the couple. She then innocently asked, "What do I get if I do or don't catch the eggs?"

"I carried you here," Xena mentioned, "while your mother rode the horse."

Gabrielle's mouth hung open. "You told me to!"

The Warrior Princess smirked then she decided to end the debate before it grew ugly. She swiftly moved her right foot, flipped the frying pan up into the air, and her hands blurred. Within a few heartbeats, she had the eggs cracked open, in the pan, and the pan in her left hand.

"Scrambled," Gabrielle mentioned smugly.

Xena smirked and went to work. She and Gabrielle then shared the eggs. After the breakfast, the group slowly broke camp. They weren't in any real rush either. Gabrielle midway pulled out the empty waterskins except for one full. She went to Hope and asked, "Can you fill these at the lake?"

The demi-god took the three skins. She carried them by the leather straps and went down to the lake. She was a bit slow with her task because she'd never dealt with a waterskin before. It wasn't alchemy, but she figured it out after a few extra minutes.

Hope corked the last skin when it was finished. She then took a moment to stare at her reflection in the water. She would never understand why Dahak had her reborn in the exact form as her mother. She sometimes wondered if it wasn't to bother her more than Gabrielle or Xena. Anytime she saw her reflection, she automatically thought of her mother. Where as previously it made her ache, but now she couldn't help a smile. Despite she looked exactly as her mother, she knew she was anything like her mother and her past history saw to that.

Hope couldn't imagine being happier now that she felt free from Dahak. She felt more alive than past times and certainly more in control of her words, movements, and even her thoughts. Best of all, she had her mother again; the one person that truly loved her.

She smiled at that notion. Just then, Hope furrowed her eyebrows when her mother's face shined in the water next to hers.

"I was wondering what happened to you." Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest.

"Just daydreaming, I guess." Hope stood up with the waterskins, which hanged from her right hand.

Gabrielle retrieved them and mentioned, "About anything in particular?"

Hope's head moved up and down several times. "Just how good it feels to be here... and to have you."

The mother stepped closer to her child and touched her child's cheek. "I don't know... I think it's me that finally has you."

Hope weighed it then shook her head. "We've always had each other... we just had Dahak between us."

Gabrielle sadly smiled then lowered her hand. "I think you're right."

Hope then noticed the instant shifted in her mother.

The bard quickly turned to her left then called, "Okay Aphrodite, you can stop hiding."

The demi-god was bewildered, but then she faintly stepped back when a cloud of pink sparkles appeared then shaped into human form.

Aphrodite wiped a tear away and declared, "That was a touching mother, daughter moment."

"You really do have some timing, Aphrodite," the bard chided.

The goddess smirked then thoroughly teased, "As if! I could pick way more inopportune times like when you're totally straddling the warrior babe."

Gabrielle instantly blushed then hissed, "Aphroditeee!"

Aphrodite covered her mouth then muttered, "I forgot... the child is around now." She held up her hands and acted innocent. "My bad."

The bard rolled her eyes then reminded, "Hope is a little older than that."

Aphrodite grinned at the demi-god beside her mother. "Fer shur." She scanned up and down Hope's entire frame. "Bitchin'." She shook her curly locks. "You take that meaning 'like mother, like daughter' to a whole new level."

Gabrielle groaned but turned to her child. "I'm sorry, Hope. This is Aphrodite." She held out her hand to the pink, frilly goddess. She then introduced, "Aphrodite, this is my daughter."

The goddess beamed and sashayed forward. She gingerly held out her hand. "Aphrodite the Goddess of Love and Virgin Termination."

Hope blinked and wasn't sure what to do or say, but she politely shook hands. She was

surprised to feel some strange, power surge from Aphrodite when they touched.

Aphrodite stepped back and waved a hand at Hope and gushed to Gabrielle, "She's speechless... who'd thought since she's your daughter."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes then informed Hope, "You get use to her after awhile."

Hope nodded and still kept quiet.

Gabrielle decided to fill in the gap. "So did you come by just to torment us?"

"Like, oh me! As if. I came to see how my two favorite blondies are doing." Aphrodite smiled brightly and put her hands on her hips. "I was thinkin' we should seriously start a club." She stuck out her chin then bobbed her head a few times. "Blonds Anonymous."

Gabrielle grunted then said to Hope, "Let's go." She grabbed her daughter's wrist and tried to get around the goddess.

Aphrodite sidestepped in front of the bard. "Come on, bardie." She pouted. "I came to see you and your daughter."

The bard dramatically sighed then released Hope. "Well we're fine, we stopped Dahak, and the sun is still going around the earth."

Aphrodite narrowed her eyes at the bard then mentioned, "Um, hello? The earth goes around the sun, Gabs. Duh!" She laughed at the bard then teased, "What planet have you been living on?" She then smirked at the bard's irate features then she turned to the silent demi-god. "So, do you talk?"

Hope exchanged looks with her mother but finally answered, "When my mother lets me."

Aphrodite just hooted with laughter and bent forward to cover her stomach.

"That's it!" Gabrielle threw up her hands, along with the skins, and took off for the camp. "Official pick on the bard day."

Aphrodite turned then chased after the bard.

Hope hadn't lost her smug look but she quickly focused her powers on her mother. She developed a wicked grin when Gabrielle's feet lifted off the ground.

Gabrielle kept walking despite she was going nowhere then it occurred to her. "Hope!" She then suddenly stumbled when Hope dropped her to the ground.

Aphrodite had wide eyes when she figured out what'd happened. She grinned at the demi-god and praised, "Nice one!" She beamed and crinkled up her nose. "I totally love your daughter, Gabs."

Hope approached the pair rather casually. She rested her hands on her leather belt.

Gabrielle sighed then muttered, "Well isn't that super."

"So what other..." Aphrodite waved her hands at the demi-god. "Things can you do?"

"A few other tricks," Hope joked.

"Biiitchin'!" The goddess head bobbed up and down. "Can you transport?"

Gabrielle blew air up at her bangs then sighed. "No, she can't, Aphrodite... we all can't travel by pink sprinkles."

"Way harsh, Gabs." Aphrodite wagged a finger at her friend. "And like I think your daughter has her own mouth piece."

Gabrielle clenched her jaw and mentally counted to ten then repeated the process a few times and even counted backwards just to be safe.

"Anyway." The Goddess of Love smiled at the demi-god. "So how's it feel to be livin' the mortal life?"

Hope chuckled and shrugged. "I'm happy."

The goddess couldn't lose her smile, and she gushed, "I totally love happy endings." She turned to the bard and mentioned, "I'm happy for you, Gabs. I know this is what you've always wanted."

Gabrielle felt slightly open when the goddess said that, but it was true. She nodded then emotionally replied, "It is." She swallowed her emotions down so that she wouldn't get upset. "Thank you, Aphrodite for your help."

Hope carefully listened to the conversation.

The bard turned to her daughter and explained, "Aphrodite broke Dahak's control he had over you."

"No," the goddess cut in, "I freed her heart and soul, Gabs." She placed her hands back on her hips. "That's all I did... it was up to Hope to break Dahak's control." She then frowned and further mentioned, "It's not easy breaking away from a god's control. I've seen it before and only a few have done it."

Gabrielle felt a newer sense of pride in her child. "And Hope is one of the few huh?"

"Fer shur!" the goddess beamed.

Hope was slightly red around her cheeks because of the admiration. "I had help," she admitted then took her mother's hand.

Gabrielle shook her head then argued, "You did it on-"

"No," Hope cut off, "I had help or else I wouldn't be here." She squeezed her mother's hand. She would have given up if she felt her mother didn't love her anymore. Yet the entire time she sensed the buried love in Gabrielle through their bond. She now knew that Gabrielle greatly struggled between what her heart wanted and what her fears told her.

The Goddess of Love sighed quite happily and came between the women. She threw her arms around both the equally short women's shoulders. She jerked them close and guided them towards the camp. "So you're a two blond family now, huh Gabs?"

The bard chuckled and replied, "Yup."

"Thank me huh? You don't have to put up with those brunettes by yourself."

Hope suspected the goddess may have meant Xena's daughter, Eve. She listened carefully again for more information since she had a lot of catching up to do.

Xena remained casually leaning against a tree. She had her arms folded over her chest, Argo's reins tangled in her hand, and the mare huffed impatiently. Xena glanced at the horse and silently agreed.

"Like sorry about that," Aphrodite offered the warrior, "we were having our first, secret club meeting."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, which made Xena grin.

"Let me guess," Xena taunted, "Blonds Anonymous?"

The Goddess of Love's jaw dropped. "How'd she..."

Gabrielle chuckled and patted the goddess's arm over her shoulder. "She has many skills." Then she slipped away and went to Argo. She worked to get the skins stowed away.

Aphrodite released the demi-god then approached the warrior. "So how's it shakin', warrior babe?"

"Bitchin'," Xena replied.

The goddess laughed and brushed her curly locks back. "You mortal types are so funny." She glanced back at Hope and teased, "Its a good thing you're half god."

Gabrielle looked over at her daughter, lifted her right hand, and did a circling motion at her temple then pointed at the Goddess of Love.

Hope grew perplexed by her mother's signal.

The bard sighed because she realized Hope wouldn't understand that at all.

"So, what's that nasty mark, Xena?" Aphrodite stepped closer, leaned forward, and squinted at the wound. "It looks like you got hit by a tree."

The warrior clicked her tongue.

Gabrielle snickered and because she couldn't imagine what her soul mate would do.

Aphrodite leaned in closer then lifted her right hand. She pointed at the wound and mentioned, "Totally! I see the ringlet design now." She rocked back on her feet and smirked. "Well at least it matches your armor design, warrior babe."

"That's it!" Xena jumped for the goddess.

And Gabrielle jumped off her partner in no time. She grabbed the warrior by the waist and held her. "Xena."

Aphrodite chuckled and mimicked Gabrielle by mouthing, "Xena."

The Warrior Princess growled at the goddess.

Gabrielle caught Aphrodite's joke so she released her partner. "Go for it."

"Okay!" The goddess held up her hands in defeat. "I won't make fun of the ringlet wound that matches Xena's armor."

Xena's eyes darkened another shade, and she bared her teeth.

"Wait!" Aphrodite stretched out her right hand and waved her palm past the warrior's face. She smiled when she saw the instant change.

Gabrielle peered up and smiled crookedly at Xena's healed forehead. Then it occurred to her so she asked, "I thought you couldn't heal without Athena's blessing?"

The Goddess of Love laughed. "As if. I can heal now that bitchy goddess is dead." She then smiled at the warrior. "Truce now?"

Xena eyed the goddess then nodded. "Truce."

Gabrielle sighed then mentioned, "Now, we'd like to get moving, Aphrodite. We have a long trip to the Amazons."

The goddess briefly sulked but nodded. "Well tell Eve I said what's up."

Gabrielle stepped forward and pulled her friend into a hug. "Thanks, Aphrodite."

Aphrodite tightly squeezed back and promised, "Anytime, bardie." She let go then grinned at the warrior. "I'll see you on the flip side, warrior tree."

The warrior snarled and stepped towards the goddess.

Aphrodite squealed and corrected, "My bad, warrior babe!" She turned then went to Hope, who stayed back and intently watched the entire exchange. "I'll sprinkle by for another visit, Hope." She winked and teased, "We totally need to girl talk soon."

Hope glanced at her mother for support then sorta smiled at the goddess. "Um, okay."

"Awe, she's so cute, Gabs." The goddess smiled at the mother then quickly gave the small demi-god a hug.

Hope was taken by surprise, yet she returned the hug then watched the goddess fade into sparkles.

"Take it easy, gal pals," called Aphrodite's fading voice.

Xena released a deep breath then asked in an irritated tone, "Can we leave now?"

Gabrielle grabbed the mare's reins that Xena had let go of earlier. "Yes." She shoved the reins into her partner's hands. "Come on, warrior tree."

"Gabrielle!"

The bard squealed and took off at a run for the road.

The Warrior Princess stood there seething and clenched hands.

Hope approached the warrior and cleared her throat. "I can offer some help on getting her back."

The warrior suddenly smirked and placed her freehand on the demi-god's shoulders. "I can already think of some things you can do, Hope." She gave Hope a gentle shove towards the road. "I think we may just find a common purpose together."

Hope softly laughed and couldn't hide her smile. Just ahead, she spotted her smirking mother waiting for them on the road. And for the first time, Hope experienced a smile that actually touched into her heart and her soul.

The End.