





# **Sins of the Past Unchained**

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# Story Info

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**Genre:** Xena fanfic, Romance, Erotica

**Pairing:** Xena/Gabrielle

**Warnings:** Contains scenes of graphic sex and harsh language. Also contains spoilers and references for Sins of the Past (X:WP, S1:E1) and Unchained Heart (H:TLJ, S1:E13).

**Synopsis:** This is what *really* happened in Sins of the Past. (Spoiler alert: They have sex.)

**Author's Notes:** I only had two goals for this story: (1) Find a plausible way to get Xena and Gabrielle together at the end of the first episode (i.e., have sex) without actually changing anything that happens in the episode, and (2) Try to explain some of the odd things that were left out of the episode (like what happened to Gabrielle's bag between when she left home and showed up to save Xena, and why did Gabrielle disappear immediately after Xena's duel with Draco was over). Since I've never read any story that answers either of those questions, hopefully I've added a little something new to my favorite fandom.

By the way, this isn't a recap. I've left out a lot of scenes or only referenced them in retrospect, so I'm not sure this will make much sense if you haven't recently watched the episode (though if you've never seen Unchained Heart, that's probably okay). Instead, I show the before and after of certain scenes where I wanted to give a different meaning or perspective to what happened in the episode. My hope is to not only give you a good First Time story (my personal favorite), but maybe get you to go rewatch the episode so you can see what I saw and look at certain things a little differently.

A few notes regarding details in the story.

I call Argo 'she' even though Argo is called 'boy' in the episode because she's referred to as female for the rest of the series.

My descriptions of Xena's outfit are based on what's shown in the episode (I watched those scenes, pausing them frame by frame, over and over again). Xena's outfit wasn't changed to the way I normally describe it in my other stories until Episode 5 (The Path Not Taken), and then she didn't start wearing her sword on her back until Episode 6 (The Reckoning).

I don't specifically state how long it's been since Xena left Hercules and it isn't explicitly stated in the show, but Xena: Warrior Princess debuted 4 months after the Season One finale of Hercules (Unchained Heart). In my mind, it was at least several weeks, if not a month or two, but you can imagine it however you like.

One last little side note: This is my first new (posted) fanfic in about 18 years (the last one was for The Facts of Life in 2002). Hope you like it. :)

# CHAPTER ONE

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Gabrielle had never been more scared in her life.

One minute, she'd been trying to plead her case for the hundredth time with her mother Hecuba regarding all the reasons why she couldn't marry the man her father had chosen for her while the long-suffering older woman quietly swept the porch, and the next, two soldiers had appeared out of nowhere and grabbed them. A short ways outside their small homestead, one of the last on the outskirts of the village, they'd been met by several other groups, including one containing her younger sister Lila, who'd been off visiting one of their neighbors.

Gabrielle stole glances at the other villagers as they were herded towards some unknown destination. Most of them were still holding their farm tools as if they'd been snatched right out of their fields. Even her mother hadn't had a chance to drop her broom. Gabrielle realized that probably meant only the outlying farms had been attacked. It also explained why her father Herodotus was nowhere to be seen. He'd gone in to town that morning to pick up some supplies she'd bargained for yesterday.

"Hurry up!"

A soldier shoved Lila from behind, causing her to stumble into their mother, but Gabrielle caught them, just barely managing to keep both of them from falling.

"Gabrielle, I'm scared," Lila cried.

"It's going to be all right, Lila," Gabrielle tried to soothe.

A fearful look from her mother told her she was the only one who thought so.

"You two! Shut up!"

Gabrielle glared back at the man, but she didn't try to talk anymore as the soldiers forced them to practically run along the old trail through the woods. Gabrielle had walked the trail many times as she'd daydreamed about becoming a hero and going on countless adventures to save the day. But this wasn't the kind of adventure she'd had in mind. And the scrolls she'd read had never mentioned the heroes being half scared out of their minds.

Gabrielle shook her head. She needed to keep her wits about her. Somehow, she had to get her mother and sister to safety. She knew the trail they were on ended in a small clearing about a mile ahead. She'd just have to wait and see what the soldiers had in mind.

Then maybe she could come up with a plan.





## CHAPTER TWO

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*“I’ve killed so many men that I’ll never wash their blood from my hands.”*

Xena guided her horse through the misty morning. It wasn’t that Argo needed her help to navigate the gently sloping hillside. She just needed a distraction. Maybe if she could focus on something else, the memories would stop playing in her mind’s eye, but they continued.

*“You’ve already started. You saved that baby.”*

*“But when you help people, you honor the wife and children that Hera stole from you.”*

Xena shook her head, trying to dislodge the sympathetic look she’d received from Hercules. She didn’t deserve his sympathy. She deserved his hatred. She deserved everyone’s hatred, even though she desperately wanted the chance to make things right. She just didn’t know how to go about doing that.

*“There is nothing in my whole life that moves me that way.”*

Since she’d left Hercules, she’d been wandering the countryside, aimlessly trying to find something, anything, to give her a purpose, some way to make amends. But so far, all she had to show for her efforts was a dwindling supply of dinars, even less food, and a mounting dread that her quest for redemption was hopeless.

As soon as she entered a village, the townsfolk did their level best to make sure she knew she wasn’t welcome. Her leathers and armor branded her a warrior, a killer, and the villagers had a natural distrust for her kind. And that was without even knowing who she was. If she identified herself as Xena, or someone recognized her, the response was instant fear and hatred, and she couldn’t get out of those towns fast enough.

At the moment, she wasn’t entirely sure where she was. Her best guess was a few days’ ride south of her home village of Amphipolis if she kept Argo at a walk. Not that she’d planned it that way, but part of her longed to see her homeland and without a conscious destination in mind, her body had been slowly but surely leading her in that direction.

Xena looked around at the countryside. She hadn’t been in the area in years. Not since she’d first started working on securing a buffer zone around her village to protect it from future attacks after beating back Cortese. Even then, she’d never ventured quite this far southwest.

Xena was contemplating turning Argo north, though she wasn’t sure whether she should head back west the way she’d come or begin making her way east towards Amphipolis. She was still trying to decide when she caught sight of the smoking ruins of a homestead set back among some trees. She wanted to head in the other direction, but she couldn’t seem to make herself pull on the reins.

Argo continued forward as if drawn to the destruction as strongly as her rider, though she did slow her pace as they entered the smoky area, her training as a warhorse making her alert for any danger. At an unconscious signal from Xena, Argo stopped, allowing her mistress to take in the carnage.

Xena couldn't stop the flood of memories of her own conquests as she looked around at the charred remains of what she imagined had probably been a happy home before raiders had come and torched the place. The scent of burned wood and cloth hung heavy in the air and she felt her eyes beginning to sting. She was so lost in the past, it wasn't until she heard a sound off to her right that she realized she wasn't alone.

A boy walked out of what was left of the cottage. He immediately begged for food, but Xena was having none of it. She hardly had enough for herself and the kid looked like he'd been eating well enough for most of his life. Still, she couldn't help asking about his parents.

"They were killed by Xena, the Warrior Princess. She came down out of the sky in a chariot, throwing thunderbolts and breathing fire."

Xena knew the boy was lying. Though his face was dirty, his clothes were far too clean for someone who supposedly didn't have anyone taking care of him. He didn't even have any burn marks or scratches. He was probably just a neighbor's kid who'd been scavenging through the ruins. She'd also never been in this area and she certainly hadn't attacked the settlement as recently as it must've been for the timbers to still be smoldering.

But none of that mattered. She'd raided plenty of other towns and had orphaned countless children. As she looked at the burned out ruins, she heard their screams in her mind. She tossed the last of her food at the boy in a vain attempt to assuage her guilt and spurred Argo to put as much distance between her and the destroyed homestead as she could.

It didn't help. No matter how fast she urged Argo to go, Xena couldn't outrun her own guilt. Nameless faces twisted in agony as she ran their bodies through with her sword. She couldn't get the smell of the burning villages out of her nostrils. The cries of the women she'd widowed and the children she'd orphaned as they sobbed over the bodies of their slain husbands and fathers echoed in her mind and she wanted to scream, if only to drown them out for a few moments.

No one wanted to give her a chance to redeem herself and she couldn't blame them. She didn't deserve a chance. She'd done nothing but bring pain and suffering to everyone around her, including herself. Even when her motives had been good, even when she'd been trying to save her people, she'd ended up leading her brother to his death. He'd only been a boy...

Xena felt like she was suffocating. Her armor was suddenly far too heavy. She stopped Argo near some fallen branches and left the horse to graze while she headed purposefully into the forest.

She came to a small clearing and went down on her hands and knees as she clawed at the ground. She was digging a grave, her own grave, and she knew it. She just couldn't be this person anymore.

The first thing she tossed into the shallow pit was her sword. She unbuckled her breastplate next, letting it fall on top of the sword with a clang. Then she slipped off her upper and lower arm bracers. Removing her greaves took care of the last of her armor, but it wasn't enough.

Xena hastily removed her leather battle skirt, not caring when her chakram fell off its hook and hit the ground at her feet. Even her leather bodice felt too tight, so she added it to the growing pile. She was about to sweep the dirt on top of everything when she noticed her chakram off to the side. She picked it up and saw the remnants of blood she'd failed to completely wipe off of the weapon, leftover from a skirmish she'd gotten into the day before with a group of brigands on the road.

It was just one more reminder of the person she wanted to bury and she tossed it on top of her leathers. She pushed at the soil, trying to cover the symbols of her old life. She just wanted to forget, but as she trickled more dirt and leaves on top of the burial mound, she couldn't blot out the screams sounding in her mind. She could still see the hilt of her sword sticking out as if she'd intentionally left it exposed.

Maybe she had. Maybe that would be the best thing for everyone. Just get it over with...

She looked around as she realized the screams in her mind had been joined by real screams coming from close by. Instinct had her backing up until she was hidden in some nearby bushes.

A parade of screaming villagers and laughing soldiers ran past her. The soldiers surrounded the villagers, herding them into the middle of the small clearing. The nearest soldiers were only a few feet in front of her, but none of them saw her and she intended to keep it that way. Even as Xena listened to the head idiot's speech, a plan was forming in her mind for how to free the villagers. She just needed to be patient and then she could—

Suddenly, one of the peasants, a young girl who looked like she couldn't be much more than seventeen or eighteen, darted forward.

"Gabrielle!" An older woman cried out, but the girl ignored her.

"Take me. Let the others go," the girl said, sounding more like she was giving an order than making a request.

Xena knew the slaver wouldn't accept the offer, though she was still impressed with the girl's spunk for trying. Then the slaver shoved the girl and Xena was moving without conscious thought, weaving her way around and between the oblivious soldiers who were all focused on their leader and the imminent whipping of the insolent peasant girl. But there was no way Xena was going to let him hurt the girl, not as long as she could do anything about it. She saw the head slaver hold out his hand expectantly and one of his men immediately placed a bullwhip in his palm...

Gabrielle backed away when she saw the whip, but there was nowhere for her to run and she knew none of her kinsmen would be brave enough or foolish enough to try to intervene. Then Gabrielle looked up and her eyes widened as she saw a woman dressed only in a shift come up behind the slaver and grab the whip, preventing him from using it.

Gabrielle couldn't take her eyes off the woman as she suddenly remembered a dream she'd had months ago.

She'd watched a dark-haired warrior woman sweep through an army, cutting them down as if they were all standing still. Then the woman had taken her into her arms and whisked her away and they had suddenly been in a soft bed. She hadn't been able to see the woman's face and she wasn't entirely clear on what they'd been doing, but when she'd woken, she'd immediately needed to go wash up.

She hadn't told anyone about the dream, having learned a long time ago that most people thought she was crazy. She usually only confided in her sister, though she'd kept that particular dream to herself. Whenever one of Gabrielle's dreams seemed to come true, Lila always teased her that maybe she was an oracle. Gabrielle felt her hair stand on end as goose bumps raced over her skin and she wondered what Lila would think about her dream coming true this time.

Gabrielle was pulled from her reverie as the situation quickly devolved into a free-for-all.

Gabrielle wanted to watch the woman fight, but she was too busy dealing with the soldier who was trying to drag her away. Her mother and sister did their best to hold on to her as she desperately tried to yank her arm out of the soldier's grasp, but he was too much for them. Gabrielle kicked and struggled as he heaved her up onto his shoulder, but his grip was too strong. Then she felt him buckle and her feet touched the ground. As she stumbled back, she somehow managed to kick him in the face.

Gabrielle looked around, trying to spot the newcomer, and found her on the ground a couple dozen feet away surrounded by sword-wielding soldiers. Gabrielle wanted to help her, but she wasn't a warrior. Her kick had been more accident than skill and she didn't even have a weapon. Maybe if they survived this, she could get the woman to teach her...

Xena glanced up at the men surrounding her, looking for an opening she could attack, but without a weapon, she knew her chances were slim. She dug her hands into the ground anyway, hoping to blind a few of them with a couple handfuls of dirt. Her fingers brushed against metal and she realized where she was.

Her hands closed over her buried sword and chakram and she blocked the lead slaver's strike just in time. She tossed her chakram to take care of the other soldiers' weapons and jumped to her feet. As she caught her chakram on its return journey, she felt a sense of joy flood through her, something she hadn't experienced since she'd fought alongside Hercules. She laughed out loud as she whirled to face the soldiers.

The rest of the fight went quickly as the villagers rallied at her war cry, fighting off the majority of the soldiers and sending them fleeing into the woods.

Xena squared off against the lead slaver again. She laughed in his face and easily disarmed him. She used the tip of her sword to pluck the blue sash from his shoulder, recognizing its significance with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“You’re with Draco,” Xena couldn’t help sneering the name as unpleasant memories of the warlord surfaced in her mind. The slaver’s lip trembled and Xena felt only disgust at his cowardice. Draco was obviously still employing the dregs of society in his pathetic army. “Tell him Xena says hello.”

Xena hit the man with the butt of her sword, sending him to the ground in a tumble. As she towered over him, the few remaining soldiers picked themselves up off the ground and dragged their fallen leader away, disappearing into the woods right behind their comrades.

Xena watched them go, making sure they were really gone before turning to face the villagers. They were huddled together in several small groups a short distance away. She walked over to the nearest of them to see if she could help with the injured, but they pulled away from her in fear.

Xena hardened her gaze. Why should she have expected any different? She turned away and almost ran into the short peasant girl blocking her path.

Gabrielle smiled up at the taller woman. She couldn’t believe her luck.

“You’re really Xena? The Warrior Princess?” Gabrielle asked excitedly.

“Yeah.”

Gabrielle waited for more, but the warrior remained silent. Then Gabrielle realized she hadn’t introduced herself.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Gabrielle.”

Xena just nodded. She wanted to look away, but her eyes were locked on the girl’s face. She looked like innocence personified and Xena suddenly had the urge to pull the girl into her arms and never let her go. Xena gritted her teeth and pushed the feeling to the back of her mind.

Gabrielle didn’t wait this time and continued.

“Thank you for saving us. I don’t know what would’ve happened if you hadn’t been here. What are you doing here anyway? Did you come because of that warlord? You said his name was Draco. Do you know him? Are you here alone? Or is there—”

“My horse is just on the other side of those trees,” Xena cut the girl off. She looked around and noticed the villagers eyeing her warily. She turned back to the girl. “I’ll just be on my way...”

“No!” Gabrielle blurted out, suddenly panicked at the thought of the woman leaving. She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. “I mean you’re hurt. At least let me tend to your wounds. Our farm isn’t that far from here. You can stable your horse in our barn.” The warrior appeared undecided, so Gabrielle pressed on. “And... And we might need your help... You know, if those soldiers come back. You wouldn’t want to leave us without an escort, would you?”

Xena frowned for a long moment and Gabrielle worried she hadn’t been persuasive enough, but as she rallied to come up with more arguments, the woman nodded.

“All right.”

Gabrielle felt her whole body sigh in relief as Xena walked a few dozen feet away and knelt on the ground where some of the dirt and leaves had been churned up during the fight. Confident the warrior wasn’t going anywhere, Gabrielle turned to check on her family and found Lila standing a short distance away.

“Gabrielle, why did you invite her home with us,” Lila hissed accusingly.

“She was wounded while saving our lives. It was the least we could do, don’t you think?”

Lila huffed and rolled her eyes. She was about to say something else when Hecuba walked up and gathered her daughters to her in a weepy hug. Gabrielle returned the hug, but then her mother let her go, suddenly becoming all business as she brushed at the twigs and leaves covering her daughters’ clothes.

As Hecuba fussed, Gabrielle’s attention was drawn back to Xena where she was digging up what looked like armor and a leather bodice. Gabrielle wondered what that was all about. She’d read about

warriors doing all kinds of strange things to appease Ares before going into battle. Maybe it was some kind of ritual cleansing. She'd have to ask her about it. It was sure to be an interesting story.

Xena slung the items over her shoulder and disappeared through the trees. Gabrielle held her breath, praying the woman hadn't changed her mind. She was just about to head after her when Xena returned with her horse, a beautiful golden palomino. The rest of the villagers seemed to realize that was their cue and they all began the tedious trek home.

Gabrielle wanted to hang back so she could walk with Xena and talk to her, but her mother and sister were holding on to her arms as if they might collapse without her support. Gabrielle resigned herself to her fate, but she couldn't stop glancing back to make sure the woman was still following them.

Along the way, groups of villagers split off to cut across the fields to return to their homes. A short while later, they reached Gabrielle's family farm. As the rest of the villagers continued on towards the town, Gabrielle finally managed to extricate herself from her mother and sister's grasp.

"Lila? Can you get some water boiling and find some linens we can use as bandages?" Gabrielle requested.

She didn't wait for a response as she walked back to Xena, who'd been bringing up the rear and had stopped at the beginning of the fence that marked the edge of the property.

"Um... Welcome to Poteideia. This is our farm... where I live... with my family." The warrior was clearly unimpressed as she looked disinterestedly around at the ramshackle buildings and the work horse corralled behind the fence. "You, uh, you want me to show you to the barn?"

Xena shook her head.

"I should probably be moving on. I think you'll be safe now."

"Wait! Please? At least let us tend to your wounds. And you can get cleaned up and... and put your clothes back on," Gabrielle trailed off as she realized what she'd said, but she couldn't help glancing at the amount of bare skin the woman was showing. "I mean the sun's going down soon and it gets cold at night and... I mean of course you know it gets cold at night. I just..."

Xena held up a hand.

"Do you mind if my horse just grazes out here? I won't be staying long."

Gabrielle tried to hide her disappointment even as she felt a burst of elation that she'd managed to talk the warrior into sticking around for a little while longer. Gabrielle nodded in answer to the question.

"Of course. She's welcome to eat as much grass as she wants."

Gabrielle waited for the woman to lash her horse to the fence. Xena grabbed a saddlebag and followed Gabrielle into the farmhouse. Hecuba and Lila were already inside with clean water and scraps of cloth at the ready.

Xena didn't say anything as she walked in. She dropped her saddlebag on a table by the door and then dumped the rest of the stuff she'd been carrying onto one of the beds along the back wall. She dressed in her leathers and armor as quickly as she could, feeling the eyes of the other three women on her the whole time.

"Would you like something to eat?" Gabrielle finally offered as she retrieved a small block of cheese wrapped in a cloth. She looked around for the half loaf of bread that had been next to it before remembering she'd finished it off that morning as an addendum to her breakfast.

"No thanks," Xena said as she sat down on a chair at the foot of the bed to finish adjusting her knee armor.

"Well, here, take it anyway, just in case you get hungry later," Gabrielle insisted as she set the small package next to the warrior's belongings on her sister's bed. "It's the least we can do to say thank you for saving us, especially with you getting injured like that."

Gabrielle used her eyes to urge her mother forward and the woman cautiously approached Xena with a wet cloth. Xena looked up, a warning in her eyes and Hecuba stilled.

"Oh, you haven't been properly introduced. This is my mother, Hecuba, and that's my sister, Lila. My mother's really good at patching people up. You should've seen some of the scrapes I used to get when I was little."

Xena studied the older woman for another few moments and finally gave her permission with a brief nod. As the woman dabbed at the wound on the back of her head, Xena went back to arranging her knee armor, trying to make it fit more comfortably over her boot. She finally gave up and unlaced her boot, shifting it a little before retying it.

"I guess you're used to scrapes, though, huh," Gabrielle continued, trying to get the woman to talk. "I mean the way you took on those soldiers... It was incredible... The way you fight... The stories don't do you justice... That thing you did with the hoop? That was amazing. Where did you get that? Did you make it yourself? And that kick you do... You've got to teach me that—"

A voice suddenly spoke behind her and Gabrielle turned in surprise.

"Xena, we'd like you to move on."

Gabrielle frowned at the interruption, having somehow missed her father's entrance, along with what seemed like half the town.

"Move on? Father, she should rest here until her wound is healed," Gabrielle protested.

"Daughter, hush."

Xena glanced up at the older man's stern face and knew her welcome, what little of it there'd been, had worn out. She kept her expression closed as the girl's father addressed her again.

"We don't want any trouble with you, Xena. We know your reputation. We just want you to leave."

"But, Father, she saved all—"

"It's all right," Xena interrupted, not wanting to be the cause of a family argument. "I plan to move on anyway."

"Don't take too long," the man warned.

Xena focused on her boots again, willing herself not to feel the sting of his obvious hostility, despite the fact she'd just saved his family from slavers. At least she was spared any further pointless threats as the man's final words seemed to settle the matter for the rest of the group, but as Xena watched the villagers file out, one of them nudged Gabrielle to get her attention.

"Let's go, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle turned at Perdicus' voice and automatically shrugged off his touch.

"Hey, just because we're betrothed doesn't mean you can boss me around. I want to stay and talk to Xena."

Perdicus looked like he wanted to argue, but Gabrielle just stared at him and he turned away. As soon as he was gone, Gabrielle sat on the stool Xena was using to prop up her foot and pled her case.

"You've got to take me with you. Teach me everything you know. You can't leave me here."

Xena finished adjusting her knee armor and stood up to retrieve her saddlebag.

"Why?"

"Did you see the guy they want me to marry?"

"He looks like a gentle soul... That's rare in a man," Xena commented as she brought the bag over to the bed so she could stow her things away. She tried to ignore the warmth that spread through her when she picked up the cloth-wrapped gift of food, but it wasn't working. She quickly moved on to pick up her dagger.

"It's not the gentle part I have a problem with. It's the dull, stupid part. Xena, I'm not cut out for this village life. I was born to do so much more."

Xena refused to turn around. She couldn't let this innocent girl with her romantic ideas about life on the road get under her skin.

"I travel alone," Xena said with finality.

Gabrielle bit her lip. It was clear she was going to have to come at this from another angle.

"So, where are you headed now?"

"Amhipolis."

"That's in Thrace, isn't it? I love to study maps and place names. So, what route do you usually take?" Gabrielle asked as casually as she could.

"Don't even think about it," Xena warned as she finished tying the saddlebag closed.

"What?"

Xena picked up her saddlebag and clipped her chakram to her belt as she turned to look at the girl, not buying the innocent expression for a moment.

“Following me...” Xena turned back to retrieve her sword before facing the girl again. “You don’t wanna make me mad now, do you?”

Gabrielle slowly shook her head, unable to speak as she stared up at the gorgeous warrior. There was something so seductive in that voice and the way Xena was smirking down at her, like she knew exactly what Gabrielle was thinking.

Xena held Gabrielle’s gaze on her way to the door, doing her best to warn the girl off. As she pulled the door open, she risked one last glance back at Gabrielle, trying to memorize the girl’s face, though she didn’t think she’d ever be able to forget it. She couldn’t help shaking her head at the soft look of hero worship the girl was still giving her. She didn’t deserve that look. She didn’t deserve that kind of trust.

Xena walked out into the early evening and headed for Argo. She attached the saddlebag and double-checked that no one had messed with her horse. Everything looked in order, so she hung her sword on her belt and swiftly mounted up.

She needed to get away from this place and especially that girl. Gabrielle was an innocent. She had no idea who Xena was, regardless of whatever stories she might’ve heard.

Xena guided Argo back to the clearing so she could follow the tracks of the retreating soldiers to their camp. She needed to talk to Draco, see if she could get him to back off.

She refused to think about why it was so important that she protect this particular village above all others.





## CHAPTER THREE

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Gabrielle and Lila helped their mother set the table for supper. None of them spoke, not really needing to for the routine chore. They also didn't want to upset Herodotus any more than he already was.

They all sat at the table. They ate in silence for a while, but Gabrielle could tell her father was stewing, turning the day's events over and over in his mind. Eventually, the dam burst and Herodotus began to rant.

"I can't believe that woman had the audacity to come into my home! And you three... alone with her... Who knows what she had planned for you... She's probably in league with that warlord."

Gabrielle felt her anger flare and spoke before she could think better of it.

"That's not true! She saved us from those men. We'd all be slaves if she hadn't—"

"Quiet, daughter! Don't interrupt your elders. You're too young to know what you're talking about. Some of the tales I've heard about her would give you nightmares for weeks."

"But, Father, that trader who passed through here just last month said he'd heard she'd been fighting side by side with Hercules. He said she—"

"I don't care what some outsider said. And what were you doing talking to some strange man? You're betrothed to Perdicus. You need to show him the proper respect."

Gabrielle glowered down at her plate, biting her tongue to keep from speaking out of turn again.

Herodotus frowned at the stubborn expression on his daughter's face. It was obvious what she was thinking, having heard her protests regarding his choice of suitors for his daughter countless times before. It was almost as if she'd spoken aloud and he'd had enough of her disrespect. He threw his napkin down on the table in disgust.

"That's it! Go finish your chores. We'll have no more talk of that warrior woman in my home."

Gabrielle felt tears threatening the corners of her eyes as she angrily pushed back from the table and stood up.

"Well, it's not like I'm the one who brought her up," Gabrielle said as she ran out of the house before he could respond.

She dashed across the yard, startling the chickens looking for their evening meal, and hid in the barn. Gabrielle leaned against the back wall as she wiped at the tears on her cheeks.

Xena had been selfless and heroic and... And why couldn't her father see that? It was just like when she talked about wanting to be a bard and go on adventures. He never listened. He just told her that girls didn't do that sort of thing and to stop dreaming about something that could never come to pass. She was just supposed to shut up and accept that he'd chosen Perdicus as her future husband.

“Well, I don’t accept it,” Gabrielle whispered to herself. “I can’t. I know I’m meant for so much more. I have to be. If only Xena had taken me with her...”

Gabrielle’s tears dried up as she thought of the tall warrior. Xena had fought against overwhelming odds as if nothing could stop her. Gabrielle admired that kind of self-confidence. She wished she could be that sure of herself. She wished she could chart her own course the way Xena did. Xena certainly didn’t need a man to protect her or tell her what to do...

“And neither do I. Not my father and certainly not Perdicus.”

Gabrielle stood up straight from the wall and brushed the last vestiges of her tears away as she squared her shoulders. She looked around the barn and felt a sense of calm wash over her. She started going about her chores for what she decided would be the last time.

She would leave tonight, no matter what. She would find Xena and do whatever it took to convince the warrior to take her on as an apprentice. Gabrielle couldn’t help the small flutter in her stomach as she briefly considered the possibility of becoming more than the woman’s apprentice, but she pushed the thoughts aside. One step at a time.

Right now, Gabrielle needed to make a plan for the more immediate future.

*I’ll have to be careful. I can’t let them see me packing. What should I take? Let’s see... I’ll definitely need food, a change of clothes, my bag to carry everything in... Oh, and my jacket... And maybe a couple blank scrolls and the quill and ink...*

Gabrielle frowned. The writing supplies were technically her father’s even if she was the one who usually kept the records regarding their livestock and harvests. She couldn’t take them. It was going to be hard enough on her family to not have her there to help them. She couldn’t steal from them on top of that. Food and her clothing, yes, but that was it. She would need to travel light anyway.

Gabrielle paused as she suddenly realized she was really going to leave. She’d fantasized about running away before, but this was real. She was really going to do it.

A sense of excitement built in her chest and she smiled.

As much as she would miss Lila and her mother... and even her father... she had to do it. She had to follow her destiny and everything in her told her that Xena was a big part of that destiny. Xena was her future, Gabrielle was sure of it. She’d felt it as soon as she’d seen the woman.

Now, she would just have to find the courage to go after what she wanted.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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Xena left Draco's tent appearing much more calm than she felt. She'd known using Draco's attraction to her would be the quickest way to get what she wanted from him, but that didn't mean she'd enjoyed it. More than anything, she wanted a bath after being in such close proximity to the man, but that would have to wait.

She returned to where she'd left Argo and rode for several hours until she was ready to make camp. There was a stream nearby, which she let Argo drink from while she got a fire going. As she poked at the growing flames, she couldn't help thinking over her conversation with the warlord.

When he'd asked if she cared about those peasants, the only face that had flashed through her mind had been Gabrielle's. She knew she hadn't hidden her reaction very well, especially when Draco had immediately tried to negotiate with her. She couldn't deny that his offer had been tempting. Leading an army had become second nature to her. It was all she'd known for so long.

But it had only taken a moment's thought for her to know she couldn't do it. She couldn't go back to her old ways. She'd been surprised when Draco had agreed to leave the girl's village alone. She didn't exactly trust him, but Draco had given his word and she'd never known him to go back on it.

With that taken care of, all she had to worry about now was her mother. As much as she hated to admit it, Draco was probably right. She wasn't going to be welcomed with open arms, but she had to at least try. She wanted a fresh start and beginning with her mother seemed like the best way to do it.

At least she would have something to show her mother now. She'd done the right thing and not just because Hercules was there to guide her. She'd helped that village all on her own. Maybe if she could help more people like that...

Xena shook her head, snuffing out the spark of hope that wanted to kindle inside her. She would never be able to balance the scales, not after the things she'd done, but she would do what she could. And even if she never saved another soul again, at least she'd saved that peasant girl... And her family, of course... And the other villagers.

The rest of the world faded away as she remembered the girl's innocent face and sparkling eyes. Xena had to take a breath as her heart suddenly picked up its pace. She couldn't help feeling a twinge of regret as she thought about Gabrielle's request, but she immediately cut those thoughts off, refusing to let herself get caught up in the fantasy of what it would be like to have the girl as a traveling companion... or more.

*No. She's far better off where she is. She wouldn't last a day out here on the road. And someone like her shouldn't be with... with someone like me.*

Xena cleared her throat, trying to dislodge the sudden tightness there. Her stomach growled and she welcomed the distraction. It wasn't until she was rummaging around in her pack for her food that she remembered having tossed the last of it to the boy. Had it really been only that morning?

Xena's hand landed on something hard wrapped in a thin cloth. She pulled the bundle out and sat down on a nearby rock to unwrap it. She stared at the block of hard cheese without really seeing it. As she sliced off a small piece and absently nibbled on it, she thought again of the beautiful peasant girl.

Xena closed her eyes.

*Be safe, Gabrielle.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

---

Gabrielle took one last look at her sister and carefully pulled the door closed behind her as she stepped out into the crisp night air. She paused to wipe the tears from her eyes. She glanced back at the door, unsure for a moment whether she should really leave.

What if she couldn't make it on her own? What if she couldn't find her way to Amphipolis? What if she made it all the way there and Xena was already gone?

Gabrielle shook her head and took several deep breaths to calm herself. She could do this. She remembered enough from the maps she'd studied to at least head in the right direction and it was only a few days to Amphipolis. She could make it. She *would* make it.

Gabrielle took another deep breath and resolutely set off into the darkness with only the full moon to light her way. She wanted to put some distance between herself and the village before her father woke in the morning to find her gone, though she didn't think he would come after her. He had too many responsibilities with the farm and no one knew where she was headed. She'd only told Lila she was going to join up with Xena, and she'd been alone with the warrior when Xena had told her where she was going next.

However, Perdicus might try to look for her in the surrounding area, which meant she had to be far enough away that he couldn't accidentally run across her or someone who had seen her on one of the main roads.

She picked up her pace, fear and excitement making her hurry. It wasn't long before she stopped worrying about what she was leaving behind and started looking forward to the adventure ahead of her.

Xena was out there somewhere right now. She was probably asleep given the late hour, but there was something about that knowledge that made everything seem more real suddenly.

Gabrielle knew in her heart she would see the warrior again. Whether it was in Amphipolis or somewhere else. Whether it was in a few days or a few months or even a few years. Gabrielle wouldn't stop until she'd found the warrior and convinced her to let her tag along.

She had to at least try.



## CHAPTER SIX

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*“He plans to destroy your home valley.”*

Xena poked a stick at her campfire as the man’s gravelly voice sounded in her mind once again.

She’d thought running into the Cyclops she’d blinded a while back would be the most exciting thing that happened to her on her journey home, but no. All day, she’d felt the dread of those words hanging over her as she made her way to Amphipolis. She’d known the town would be reluctant to accept her help, but she hadn’t anticipated their outright refusal to heed her warning. And her mother...

*“You’re all in great danger!”*

*“Even if that were true, we would rather die before accepting help from you again... Go away, Xena. This is not your town anymore. We are not your people... I am not your mother!”*

Xena hadn’t parted with Cyrene on good terms, so she’d been expecting the anger, but to be disowned by her own mother... And in front of everyone...

Xena scrubbed angrily at her eyes, refusing to let the tears fall. She stood up and began pacing in front of the fire. She needed to do something. She reached for her sword, but her hand grasped only air. Then she remembered.

She’d left her armor off when she’d entered her mother’s tavern to try to present a less threatening image, but she’d kept her sword on her hip just in case. As soon as Cyrene had seen her, she’d drawn Xena’s sword and Xena had let her. For several tense seconds, Xena had wondered if her mother actually planned to run her through and she’d decided in that moment to let her if that’s what she chose to do. But instead, she’d simply tossed the sword on a nearby table and told Xena just how unwelcome she was.

*“I am not your mother!”*

Xena turned to pace the other way as if she could somehow avoid the pain of hearing those words over and over in her mind. Her mother’s words had shaken her so badly, she’d practically run out the door in her haste to escape Cyrene’s venom.

Xena unclipped the useless scabbard and set it aside. She’d have to go back for her sword in the morning. Maybe while she was there she’d be able to talk some sense into the townspeople or at least her mother. Otherwise, she was going to have to figure out a way to defeat Draco and his men without an army of her own, and no matter which way she looked at it, that scenario always turned into a suicide mission.

Then again, maybe that’s how it was supposed to be. Maybe that’s how she was supposed to right some of the wrongs of her past. Maybe if she died trying to protect her home village, they wouldn’t hate her so

much. If she'd died with her brother all those years ago, her mother would've mourned her just like she had Lyceus. She would've died a hero.

Xena slumped against a nearby tree.

Tomorrow, after she retrieved her sword, she would visit Lyceus. Talking to him had always helped her see things more clearly. Maybe he could help her find a way out of this mess that didn't involve her death.

Or maybe he would just be there to greet her on the other side for a few moments before she was sent to Tartarus.

Xena closed her eyes and drifted into a troubled sleep.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Gabrielle groaned as the old man nudged her hip with his foot. She tried to roll away from it, wanting nothing more than to go back to the lovely dream she'd been having involving a certain warrior woman and her breasts.

"Come on, get up. I hain't got all day."

Gabrielle groaned again in resignation and then squeaked as she forced herself to sit up. The sun wasn't even above the horizon.

"Here," the old man said as he shoved a ration of jerky and stale bread in her face. "You can eat on the way."

Gabrielle took the food. It was the same as what he'd given her the night before when they'd finally stopped on the side of the road to make camp. She'd barely been able to stay awake long enough to eat before she'd wrapped herself up in the thin blanket the old man had let her borrow and then promptly passed out on the hard ground.

As she pushed herself to her feet, Gabrielle suppressed a painful moan. Her whole body ached and after walking and staying awake for two days in a row, she was sure the few hours she'd gotten last night hadn't been enough to let her catch up.

"You gonna get a move on or are ya staying here?" the old man questioned, the threat clear in his tone.

"I'm sorry. Let me just take a quick trip to the bushes..." Gabrielle requested and hurried off.

She was back a few minutes later. The old man had already packed up his meager supplies, though her bag was still on the ground along with the food resting on top of it. Gabrielle scooped the items up and quickly climbed onto the cart, settling herself on top of the heavy bags of dry goods the old man was transporting.

"We should arrive in Amphipolis in just a few hours," the old man tossed over his shoulder as he got the cart moving.

Gabrielle made a noise of acknowledgment, still not really awake yet, and focused her attention on her food. The hard bread and jerky took a lot of effort to chew and swallow, and she took frequent sips from the water skin the old man offered her to wash it all down.

Gabrielle was just finishing the last bite of her bread as the sun crested the horizon. Her body felt a little less abused, now that her stomach had something in it, and she could feel a renewed sense of hope filling her.

Her first day as an adventuress had turned out pretty good. Granted, she'd had a few setbacks, but she'd handled them. She'd met and survived an encounter with a Cyclops. She'd managed to con the crabby old

man into giving her a ride and he'd even fed her. She'd gotten some sleep, even if it hadn't been enough. And now, despite getting lost a couple times, she was on the last leg of her journey to find Xena. All in all, things were looking pretty good.

Gabrielle started up a conversation with the old man and they traded stories all the way until they reached the center of town.

The old man pulled the cart to a stop.

"Well, this is it. Amphipolis," he announced.

Gabrielle slung her bag over her shoulder and scrambled down the side of the cart, landing with a soft thud on the ground.

"Thank you so much for all your help. And I really enjoyed your stories. Well, goodbye," Gabrielle offered and started to turn away.

"Hey now, just a minute, girlie. That wasn't a free ride. I'm a business man, not a charity."

Gabrielle blanched.

"I-I don't have any dinars. I..."

"Whatcha got in that bag?" the old man gestured to the item in question.

Gabrielle slipped it off her shoulder and opened it up. She started looking through the contents.

"I just have some clothes... a-and my hairbrush and a few extra hair ties..."

Gabrielle looked up as the old man leaned over from his elevated position on the cart and took the bag right out of her hands. He rummaged through it with a scowl. Then he harrumphed.

"I guess it'll have to do," he muttered and then stashed the bag next to him on the far side of his seat away from Gabrielle.

Gabrielle stared at the old man in shock.

"But..." Gabrielle started, but he interrupted her.

"Your extra weight caused wear and tear on my horse and cart, not to mention there's all that food and water I gave you last night and this morning. That stuff don't grow on trees, you know." The old man leaned forward again. "And don't think I've forgotten how you intended to cheat me with that story about your father being a horse dealer." He harrumphed again and sat back up as he grabbed his reins. "Just let that be a lesson to you. Now, go on. I've got people to see and trades to make."

He snapped the reins and the cart trundled off down the road on its way to the other side of the village.

Gabrielle stood there in a daze, watching the cart until it disappeared. Finally, she blinked and looked away.

"I can't believe he just..."

She shook her head and looked around at the main square. Now she really needed to find Xena.

Gabrielle wondered where she should start when she saw a large group of villagers enter the inn. Several horses were tied to the hitching post outside and Gabrielle recognized Xena's pale yellow horse at the far end.

Gabrielle grinned as she hurried across the square. She ducked into the darkened entrance and threaded her way through the chain curtain used to keep out the flies. She couldn't see past the large crowd and it was eerily quiet compared to her own village's noisy tavern.

"Let me even the odds... One unarmed woman might be more to your tastes."

Gabrielle sighed in relief when she heard Xena's sultry voice coming from the other side of the crowd. Then she heard a thump, and then another, and she suddenly realized what was happening.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Gabrielle said as she quickly pushed her way through the crowd.

Xena stared in shock as she recognized who was standing between her and a particularly painful death. She was still trying to wrap her mind around the incongruity of seeing the peasant girl in her mother's tavern when the girl turned to face the crowd.

Gabrielle pushed her fear down as she tried to figure out how to reason with the angry mob.

"N-Now, you don't know me. I'm new in town. But I can assure you, Xena is a changed woman. I saw her do some heroic things in the name of good."

The spokesman for the mob was clearly unmoved.

"Unless you're suicidal, you'll get out of the way."

Gabrielle turned to look at Xena, hoping for some backup, but the woman didn't offer any encouragement as the man continued.

"She's brought Draco down on the valley."

Gabrielle turned back to face the leader as her eyebrows hit her hairline and a chill went up her spine.

"Draco? Now, he's a scary guy. And I understand why you're upset. But let me throw some logic at you," Gabrielle said as she began to mentally marshal her arguments, but the man cut her off.

"Look, you're wasting your breath. We'll never put our faith in Xena again. I buried two sons because of her! Now get out of the way!"

Gabrielle knew time was running out as the man turned to rally the mob behind him. She had to make him listen.

"Now, hold on."

Gabrielle rushed forward, intentionally moving to physically join their side against Xena, something she'd learned during countless bargaining sessions on behalf of her father. One of the fastest ways to get someone on your side was to tell them you agreed with them.

"Let's say that you're right, and she's Draco's buddy."

A new thought occurred to her as she turned back to see Xena's scowl, and she suddenly had her whole argument mapped out in her mind.

"Let's say she's even his girlfriend. Well, what have you accomplished? You think that Draco's bad news now? What do you think he'll be like when he hears that you knocked off his woman? Oh boy, it gives me the creeps even to think about it."

Gabrielle could see she was getting through to the man as well as the angry mob. They were obviously contemplating the kind of painful retribution they'd be in for if Gabrielle was right. Since they already believed Xena was in league with Draco, it wasn't a big leap to think she might also be romantically involved with him. And now that Gabrielle had stopped trying to get them to change their minds about Xena, they could focus on the consequences of their actions. Gabrielle just hoped they would decide to make a different choice, one that didn't involve stoning Xena to death. Or herself.

Gabrielle glanced back at Xena to see how she was doing, but the warrior just continued to scowl as she watched the villagers warily. Gabrielle turned back to the leader as he spoke.

"All right," the man conceded gruffly. "But get Xena out of here right now."

"No problem," Gabrielle said, already moving to help Xena gather her things.

Xena stared at the villagers, still not quite believing they weren't going to follow through with their plans for revenge. Then she heard Gabrielle pick up her sword from where she'd placed it on the table and quickly grabbed it out of the girl's clumsy hands. She glared to drive the point home, but Gabrielle didn't seem to notice. Xena shoved her sword in her scabbard and stalked off, feeling the girl trailing after her in her wake.

Gabrielle breathed a sigh of relief as she followed Xena outside. She wasn't entirely sure what had just happened, but it was over now and they were alive and together. That was all that mattered.

Gabrielle had to almost jog to keep up with Xena's long strides. They stopped at Xena's horse and Gabrielle hung back, waiting for Xena to say something.

Xena felt the girl's presence behind her, but she refused to acknowledge it as she removed her scabbard from her waist and attached it to her saddle. Her mind was whirling with the impossibility that Gabrielle was there. How in Tartarus had the girl managed to follow her all the way to Amphipolis? She never should've told her where she was going. That had been a mistake. It was almost as if she'd wanted the girl to follow her...

"Hey, Xena," Gabrielle finally spoke up, unable to wait any longer.

"What?"

"I could probably get up there behind you," Gabrielle suggested helpfully.

Xena felt her heart constrict, but she shook it off.

"What are you talking about?" Xena said dismissively.

Gabrielle paused at the even tone.

“Wait... You’re not gonna just leave me here... Are you?” Gabrielle started to panic as Xena prepared to mount up. “I came all this way to see you.”

Xena pushed off the ground and seated herself on top of Argo. She looked down at the girl and willed herself not to care.

“That is your problem.”

Gabrielle felt anger override her fear and called in the one marker she was sure the warrior’s honor wouldn’t allow her to ignore.

“Hey, I just saved your *life*.”

Xena stilled as she realized it was true. Technically, that made them even, since Xena had already saved Gabrielle’s life, but...

Xena reached down and easily pulled the girl up behind her. She waited for Gabrielle to settle herself and then got Argo moving.

“Where are we going?” Gabrielle asked.

“To see my brother.”

Gabrielle waited for more, but Xena remained silent. Gabrielle considered trying to wheedle some specifics out of the warrior, but decided against it. She didn’t want to push her luck. Besides, she might get more answers out of the brother in question.

Less than half an hour later, Xena brought them to a halt outside of a small stone building and Gabrielle finally understood Xena’s reticence. The markings on the outside showed it to be the family crypt.

Xena helped Gabrielle slide off of Argo and then dismounted herself. She lashed the horse nearby to let her graze. There were wildflowers growing in with some weeds and Xena bent over, picking a handful on impulse. She turned back to Gabrielle.

“I won’t be long.”

Gabrielle nodded and Xena disappeared down the long dark passage into the mausoleum.

After several minutes, Gabrielle shifted uncomfortably, trying not to feel the hot sun on her back. When they’d been riding, it hadn’t been that bad because of the breeze, but now she was starting to sweat. She moved inside the shaded entryway and instantly felt better. She leaned back against the side of the entrance, only to stand up straight again when she heard Xena’s low voice echoing off the stone walls.

Gabrielle’s curiosity got the better of her and she crept down the wide passageway, which wasn’t as dark as she’d thought. The walls were lined with lit torches, indicating the place was probably visited daily. She noticed an offering bowl set on a small altar along the wall to her right. The freshly plucked petals of the flowers she’d seen gripped in Xena’s fist a few minutes ago were floating on top of the water in a lazy swirl.

As Gabrielle took a few steps closer, she was finally able to make out what Xena was saying.

“...I thought I could start over... But no... They don’t trust me... Not even Mother...”

Gabrielle moved towards the large opening off to her left. The pain she heard in Xena’s voice made her heart clench and she just wanted to wrap her arms around the woman and hug her, but judging by the warrior’s normally stoic demeanor, Gabrielle doubted it would be appreciated. She took another silent step closer as Xena continued.

“I can’t blame her. She can’t see into my heart... But I’ve got to believe that you can... And I wish you were here.”

Xena sounded like she was on the verge of tears and Gabrielle couldn’t take it anymore as she stepped forward to reveal her presence to Xena. For a moment, she considered simply backing up again and walking away, not wanting to intrude, but then Xena spoke her heart and Gabrielle couldn’t help but answer.

“It’s hard to be alone,” Xena admitted as she stared down at the carved surface of her brother’s sarcophagus.

“You’re not alone.”

For a split second, Xena thought Lyceus had somehow answered her from beyond the veil, but then she realized the soft tones belonged to the girl. As she turned to see Gabrielle standing in the doorway, she

wanted to be angry at the invasion of her privacy. Then the girl smiled and Xena found herself unable to deny the small smile that curved her own lips in response.

Xena nodded a silent thank you and then turned back to the stone coffin.

Gabrielle stayed where she was, glad that Xena hadn't been upset with her eavesdropping, but unsure what to do next.

"I'm sorry. I heard your voice and... Sh-Should I go?"

"No, it's all right. This is my brother... Lyceus."

Gabrielle stepped forward until she was standing beside Xena next to the sarcophagus.

"How..." Gabrielle faltered.

"He died in battle defending our village the last time a warlord attempted to invade this valley." Xena swallowed and stared down at the skull carved into the head of the coffin. "I was the one who organized our defenses. I led him and the others to their deaths."

Gabrielle felt tears burning her eyes as she realized what the man and his angry mob had been so upset about.

"But... You obviously saved the town..."

"But at what cost!" Xena rounded on the girl, but then just as suddenly turned away and braced herself against the coffin in defeat. "We were all just kids back then, but we weren't willing to give up our homes without a fight. Sometimes, I wish we had. Lyceus would still be alive and I wouldn't have..."

Gabrielle watched as the woman seemed to turn inward, revisiting some past horror only she could see. Gabrielle reached out and gently laid her hand on Xena's arm in comfort.

Xena felt tingles where the girl's fingers grazed her skin. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation for a moment before she realized what she was doing. Her eyes snapped open and she quickly shrugged off the touch, taking a step back as she shook her head to clear it. She straightened up and squared her shoulders as she headed for the exit.

"Come on. I'm not letting another warlord take this valley. My brother died to protect it and I refuse to let his death be in vain."

Gabrielle was startled by the abrupt departure, but after a moment, she hurried to catch up.

"What are you going to do?"

"Try one last time to get them to mount a defense and if that doesn't work..." Xena smiled grimly as she remembered her initial interaction with Draco after she'd greeted him.

*"If you wanted to kill me..."*

*"You'd be dead."*

"If that doesn't work... Then what?" Gabrielle prompted.

Xena glanced at the girl's innocent expression and let her own face firm into a mask.

"Never mind. We'll cross that bridge if we come to it."

Xena vaulted onto Argo's back and reached down for the girl. As soon as Gabrielle was situated, Xena urged Argo into a gallop, the horse's sharp hooves quickly eating up the distance back to town. The girl tightened her grip around her waist to keep from falling off and Xena couldn't help smiling at the feeling. Her pleasure was short-lived, however, when she saw Draco enter the town hall with a small contingent of troops.

"Damn," Xena muttered under her breath.

She pulled Argo to a halt in front of her mother's inn and was glad when Gabrielle didn't waste any time getting down. Xena tossed the reins over the hitching post and turned to the girl.

"Stay here this time," Xena ordered.

Gabrielle nodded in agreement as Xena walked away, the warrior's stride purposeful, but it was only a few seconds before Gabrielle was jogging after her. She hung back as Xena announced herself at the entrance to the town hall, but then slipped in behind her. She quickly looked around and moved to stand behind one of Draco's soldiers. None of the men seemed to notice her. Everyone was far too interested in watching the verbal sparring taking place between Xena and Draco.

Gabrielle couldn't quite catch everything that was said, but it was clear when the negotiations were over. When Draco got a boost from his men and flipped onto the scaffolding at the back of the room,

Gabrielle realized he wasn't just another foot soldier like the men Xena had fought the other day. She started to feel a twinge of worry. Then Xena simply used two of Draco's men as stepping stones to perform her own unassisted flip onto the raised platform and Gabrielle knew everything would be fine.

She still had a few scares, but that was mostly because Draco was such a dishonorable fighter. His men weren't any better, particularly the soldier Gabrielle was standing next to. The duel should've been over, but the cheater rushed forward and caught Draco before he could touch the ground and helped him back into the fight. Even the villagers, who'd wanted Xena's blood only a few short hours ago were rooting for Xena over Draco's underhanded tactics.

As the soldier retook his position in front of her, Gabrielle glared at him, wanting nothing more than to kick him in the shins. Her chance for retribution came less than a minute later when Draco got into trouble again and the soldier started to move forward to save his leader once more. Gabrielle stuck her foot out, tripping the man, and watched in satisfaction as Draco landed flat on his back on the ground. Xena followed him a moment later, landing on top of him.

"I haven't touched the ground yet, Draco... but you have."

Gabrielle watched, enthralled with Xena's complete confidence. Or maybe it was the sexy voice. She was still trying to figure it out when she heard several of the villagers egging Xena on to kill Draco. Gabrielle held her breath, but Xena seemed to be ignoring them as she gave Draco her terms.

"If I let you live, you and your army clear out of the valley by sundown." When Draco didn't answer right away, Xena gritted her teeth, forcing herself not to dig the tip of her staff any harder into his throat, since he still needed to be able to speak. "Swear it! On the head of Ares."

Xena saw the recognition in his eyes. To renege on a deal made in Ares' name would be to court the wrath of the god himself.

Draco's voice was quiet, but clear.

"I swear, on the head of Ares, god of war, to be out of your valley by sundown."

With the pact made, Xena stepped back to let him up and tossed her staff aside. She faced him as he got to his feet.

"Then go," Xena ordered dismissively, wanting to be done with it.

Gabrielle was just about to turn and sneak back out the way she'd come when the soldier she'd tripped pulled a dagger from his boot and ran at Xena.

"Xena!" Gabrielle yelled a warning, but it was too late and she averted her eyes as she expected to hear Xena's cry of pain in the next heartbeat.

Instead, Gabrielle heard a whistling sound and then a loud grunt as something heavy hit the ground with a thud. She opened her eyes to see the soldier lying in the dirt, the hilt of a dagger sticking out of his chest. Xena was still standing, unharmed, and Gabrielle realized it had been Draco who had dealt the death blow to his own man.

Gabrielle suddenly felt her guts roll and she ran out the door ahead of the soldiers, barely making it to some nearby bushes before what little was left in her stomach from that morning's breakfast came back up.

Xena stared at the dead man on the ground as Draco walked around her on his way out the door. He paused behind her and she waited.

"A deal's a deal," Draco quipped.

Xena couldn't quite suppress her smirk at the flippant remark, her morbid sense of humor still carrying over from her warlord days, but it only lasted a second and then she remembered the girl. As Draco and his remaining soldiers filed out, Xena turned around, expecting to see Gabrielle smiling at her, but she was gone. Xena couldn't explain the sense of loss she felt at the girl's absence. She was spared having to think about it too deeply when she heard the town elder come up behind her.

"You can take the loot wagons, of course," he offered in his most placating voice as if he thought she might turn on her home village at any moment.

She suddenly felt very tired.

"I don't want anything," Xena said in disgust.

She walked outside, leaving the milling villagers behind. They could deal with the dead soldier's body on their own. She didn't care anymore.

In fact, now that the battle was over, Xena just wanted to leave, though that might've had something to do with the missing girl. She tried to tell herself it was for the best. Gabrielle had obviously been overwhelmed by what she'd seen and realized chasing after an ex-warlord wasn't all it was cracked up to be. That had probably been the first time she'd ever even seen anyone get killed.

*She'll be better off... Safer... She's probably halfway out of town by now on her way home. That's what you wanted, remember? Just let her go... Fine, maybe you can check up on her, make sure she gets home okay, but that's it. And she doesn't have to see you either. It'll probably be better if she doesn't. You'll just bring up bad memories for her.*

Xena kept her gaze on the ground as she listlessly kicked a small stone ahead of her in the dirt. It wasn't until she was a few dozen feet away from Argo that she looked up. Gabrielle was standing next to the horse, hugging her arms around her body. Xena felt her heartbeat start to double-time at the sight and couldn't help smiling even as she silently berated herself for her loss of control.

*Hades! What is it about this girl that affects me so much?*

Gabrielle met the warrior's steady gaze as she did her best to hide the guilty expression on her face.

"Hi," Gabrielle said nervously. "I take it everything went well?"

Xena smirked.

"You should know, Gabrielle. You were there. I heard you try to warn me." Xena saw the wide-eyed look of fear mixed with hero worship and averted her own eyes. "Thanks for that."

"Anytime," Gabrielle said softly.

Xena looked up at the bare whisper and felt herself getting lost. She forced herself to look away again and firmed her resolve. She couldn't let this innocent girl get hurt. Not because of her. She knew what she had to do.

"Come on. This is my mother's tavern. There's an inn with rooms in the back. We can both get cleaned up and then get something to eat. I'm sure she won't mind." Xena wasn't really sure, but after saving the town, she hoped her mother wouldn't make a scene over a hot bath and a meal.

Xena led Gabrielle to the guest room with the largest bathtub. She showed the girl how to fill it from the central water cistern that collected rainwater on the roof. The water was then conducted through two separate systems, one of which went past the main cooking hearth in the kitchen so it was always hot. Two spouts allowed the hot and cold water to be mixed to the desired temperature in the tub, though the hot water valve required the use of a thick cloth to keep from getting burned.

"You know, I've heard stories about this kind of thing being common in Athens," Gabrielle mentioned as she watched the water rapidly fill the tub.

"My mother has always loved to figure things out. She heard about this style of plumbing from a trading caravan from Athens and came up with the design herself. I grew up taking a bath almost every single day. That was one of the things I had to get used to doing without when I left."

"Then you should take advantage of it while you can," Gabrielle declared with a grin.

Xena nodded.

"I intend to, but first..."

Xena finished showing Gabrielle where the soaps and oils were, along with the towels, and then left to go to her old room to take her own bath. She was surprised to find it relatively unchanged. With the way her mother had been acting, she'd half expected the place to have been burned in effigy.

Xena filled her bath and quickly washed up. She would've preferred to sit and soak for an hour or two, but she couldn't take the time. She needed to leave. Gabrielle would be safe here with her mother until Cyrene could find an escort to take the girl back home. Xena just needed to write her mother a note explaining the situation.

Xena got dressed again and took the kitchen exit to avoid going past Gabrielle's room. She headed around the side of the building to get to Argo so she could retrieve her saddlebag. She had a couple bits of parchment and an old quill and ink set in one of the compartments.

Xena stopped. The bag wasn't on the horse and Xena realized in all the commotion with the villagers trying to stone her, she'd left it on the table in the inn. Xena rolled her eyes at herself and went back inside, using the front entrance this time. She found the bag right where she'd left it, though as she pulled the bag to her, she noticed the bottom lace had come undone. She started to tie it closed when she heard movement behind her.

Xena turned and watched as her mother slowly approached her. The smile on Cyrene's face was warm and gentle, just the way Xena remembered it from when she'd been a child. When Cyrene opened her arms in silent offering, Xena almost couldn't believe it, but then she was in her mother's arms, accepting the hug and giving one of her own.

Xena closed her eyes, reveling in the feeling of being held by her mother after being estranged for so long. Then she remembered the reason for their falling out and opened her eyes again.

"Mother, forgive me, please," Xena pleaded from the bottom of her heart.

Cyrene sighed.

"I forgive you... my little one... I forgive you." Cyrene drew back to look at the woman her daughter had become and smiled. "I'm so happy to have you back again."

Xena heard the hope in her mother's voice and tried not to wince.

"You know I can't stay for long."

Cyrene nodded.

"I understand. It's going to take time... on both our parts. The village, too."

Xena nodded and looked away.

"I'll try to come back soon... Maybe I can visit more often now that..." *Now that I'm not a bloodthirsty warlord?*

Xena shook her head at herself and sighed as her mother tightened her grip on her arms.

"It's all right, Xena. I do understand. You have a hard road ahead of you."

"Which is why I have to leave. But before I go... I have a favor to ask," Xena said tentatively.

"Oh?"

Xena gently disengaged from her mother's hold and picked up her saddlebag, slinging it over her shoulder.

"There's a girl in the last room with the big bath. Her name's Gabrielle. If you could feed her and send her home, I'd appreciate it."

"Is that the girl some of the villagers were talking about?"

"Yes. She's been following me the past few days, looking for adventure, but..." Xena shook her head. "It's not safe for her with me. She'll only end up getting hurt."

"I'll do what I can for her," Cyrene promised.

Xena accepted that, along with a few supplies and several more hugs. She could tell her mother was trying to delay her leaving, probably hoping she'd at least stay the night, but as the villagers began trickling into the tavern, Xena could feel them watching her and it was making her edgy. The somewhat celebratory mood they'd been in after she'd won the duel against Draco had been replaced by the old wariness. They still saw her as the warlord she was trying to leave behind and the feeling was oppressive. Despite wanting to spend more time reconciling with her mother, Xena knew she couldn't stay there.

Xena was also pretty sure she'd heard the tub draining from the back guest room, which meant she didn't have very long before the girl would be coming out to look for her.

Xena bid her mother goodbye and left without looking back.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Gabrielle stopped at the end of the back hallway that opened up onto the main tavern. The place was packed and a lot noisier than it had been earlier in the day when she'd first found Xena surrounded by angry villagers.

Gabrielle scanned the room, looking for the warrior, but couldn't find her. She wondered if Xena was still enjoying her bath and contemplated heading into the back rooms to look for her.

"Gabrielle?"

She turned at hearing her name and saw an older woman looking at her expectantly.

"Yes? That's me."

"Good evening, dear. I'm Cyrene... Xena's mother." The woman paused and then smiled as if the words held some secret happiness for her. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No. Xena and I wanted to get cleaned up first. Where is she?" Gabrielle saw the woman's face pinch and felt her stomach drop. "She left, didn't she?"

Cyrene put a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder.

"She cares about you. She just wants you to be safe."

Gabrielle nodded, but her mind was already forming plans.

"Do you know where she went?"

Cyrene frowned.

"She wants you to go home."

"But *I* don't want to go home," Gabrielle started to protest, but then stopped herself. She took a steadying breath and tried to calm down as she looked into the kindly eyes of the older woman. "Whether you tell me where she is or not, I'm still going to walk out that door and go after her. *I have to.*"

Cyrene saw the girl's determination and... something more. There was a need there and it was completely out of proportion to a girl just 'looking for adventure' as Xena had put it. Cyrene's eyes widened as she finally understood her daughter's behavior earlier. The longing looks towards the guest room, the softness in her voice when she'd said the girl's name. Cyrene smiled. Xena was going to have her hands full with this one.

"She didn't actually tell me where she was headed, but there's an old campsite a few miles from here that was a favorite of hers when she was younger. She used to go there when she needed a little time to herself. No one goes there much anymore, so it's a little overgrown, but I think it's your best bet."

Cyrene described which trails to take and waited for Gabrielle to repeat them back to her.

"Thank you, Cyrene," Gabrielle said as she hugged her.

“Now, if you can’t find her tonight, I want you to come back here. I don’t care how late it is. I don’t want you out there by yourself.” Gabrielle nodded as Cyrene cupped her cheek in a motherly gesture. “Are you sure you don’t want something to eat before you go?”

“I’m not really hungry. I just want to find her.”

“Well, here,” Cyrene said as she reached under the counter to retrieve one of the many flint striker sets she kept around for lighting the hearths in the guest rooms. People were always stealing them. “At least take this so you won’t be cold.”

Gabrielle took the small bundle and shoved it in her jacket pocket. She decided not to tell the woman she’d never quite gotten the knack of using the things.

Cyrene walked her all the way outside and they hugged one last time.

“I know you’ll find her, Gabrielle,” Cyrene said as they separated. “And I’ll sleep better knowing my daughter isn’t alone anymore.”

“Neither am I,” Gabrielle said.

Cyrene stilled for a moment, then nodded in understanding.

“Safe journey, Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle smiled her thanks and headed in the direction Cyrene had indicated. She turned to give a final wave goodbye, then set off resolutely down the road.

Several hours later, the sun having long since set, Gabrielle saw a campfire in the distance. She couldn’t be sure, but she thought it was near where Cyrene had said it would be.

Gabrielle backed up, realizing if she could see Xena’s fire, then Xena would be able to see hers. When she could no longer see the flickering glow, she gathered some twigs and dried leaves and pulled out the flint and striker. Unfortunately, no matter how many sparks she sent at the pile, she couldn’t get it to light. She finally gave up and put the items away, resigning herself to a cold night.

She briefly considered walking into Xena’s camp so she could at least sit by her fire, but decided against it. Xena would probably just try to pack her off home again. The only reason Xena had let her stick around was because she’d saved her life.

Gabrielle nodded to herself. She’d just have to wait until Xena got into trouble again and be there to help her out. Eventually, Xena would have to give in and let her stay.

Gabrielle wrapped her arms around herself and leaned back against the trunk of a nearby tree. She closed her eyes, hoping to fall asleep early so she could wake before Xena left in the morning. She wasn’t normally an early riser, but if she didn’t at least see which direction Xena headed in, it would be that much harder for Gabrielle to figure out where she was going this time.

A loud buzzing flew past her ear and she flung her hand up to brush it away. It happened again a moment later. Gabrielle turned her head to protect her ear, but then heard dual fly-bys in her other ear. She waved at the sounds again and then waited. She didn’t hear the buzzing again and relaxed.

As she lay against the tree, the sounds around her suddenly seemed magnified. Crickets chirped non-stop and there was an owl that kept hooting from somewhere overhead. Gabrielle restlessly repositioned herself against the tree, trying to get comfortable against its rough surface.

Then something large and buzzy collided with her ear and Gabrielle smacked at herself to get it off of her as she shot to her feet, her heart pounding.

She looked towards where she knew Xena was and sighed.

Gabrielle started walking, formulating her arguments with every step she took.

## CHAPTER NINE

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Xena poked at the fire with the stick she'd found while clearing the small space of debris. Her mother had been kind enough to give her a small cooking pot, which was currently hanging over the flames heating up a basic rabbit stew Xena had cobbled together. She'd been sitting on the flat rock she'd dragged closer to the fire since the sun had gone down, alternately tending to the fire and drawing random shapes in the dirt with her stick.

She couldn't stop going over the events of the past few days. So much had happened. She'd gone from complete despair to... Well, not happiness, but at least she had a purpose now. She was fairly certain Hercules would've been proud of her for choosing not to kill Draco when there was another way, though she couldn't help thinking she'd probably have to face off against the warlord again someday.

She'd even reconciled with her mother, something she'd hoped for, but had never thought in her wildest dreams would ever happen.

And then there was the girl.

Xena started to smile as she pictured Gabrielle's face in her mind's eye, but it quickly faded as she realized she'd probably never see the girl again. Xena jabbed at the fire.

*How is it possible to miss someone I only spent a few hours with?*

Xena gritted her teeth against the ache in her chest, refusing to give in to it. As much as she wanted to simply pack up her camp and go back to her mother's inn to see the girl again, she couldn't do it. At this point, she wasn't even sure Gabrielle would want to see her.

Xena knew Gabrielle would be upset when she found out Xena had left without her. She just hoped it would be enough to make the girl give up on following her. Maybe her mother would be able to talk some sense into her. The road was no place for an innocent girl like Gabrielle. And Gabrielle had no business hanging around with an ex-warlord like her. She should be home with her family. She'd be safe there.

Xena stared dejectedly into the fire.

*I hope you're okay, Gabrielle.*

Xena absently noted a rustling in the bushes only a few feet away and suddenly realized someone was not only sneaking up on her, they were already within striking distance. She instantly dropped the stick and grabbed her sword from where she'd left it resting next to her. She twirled it a couple times in preparation for battle. Then she saw the blue and rust red clothing of Gabrielle's peasant dress.

Xena's heart leapt for joy at the sight, but she quickly pushed the feeling down. She realized in an instant her mother must've had a hand in helping Gabrielle to find her, since the campsite was quite a ways off the main trail. *Mother...* Xena thought irritably as she relaxed her guard and lowered her

sword. Though she did her best to maintain an outward appearance of disinterest, she was unable to take her eyes off the girl as Gabrielle entered her camp.

“I was gonna follow you, until you were in some jam,” Gabrielle said without preamble as Xena finally retook her seat on the rock, trading her sword for a stick. Gabrielle took the warrior’s silence as an invitation and found her own seat near the fire. “It’s so cold out there,” Gabrielle continued, unable to stop her nervous rambling as all the excuses she’d prepared came tumbling out. “And I couldn’t get a fire started... A-And the mosquitoes are as big as eagles.”

Xena steeled herself against what she realized was probably going to be a long list of arguments for why she should let Gabrielle stay with her. She decided to cut the girl off before she could get too wound up. Feigning boredom, she looked directly at Gabrielle as she reminded the girl, and herself, that the decision had already been made.

“You know I’m sending you home in the morning.”

“I won’t stay home,” Gabrielle immediately protested, praying she could be convincing enough. “I don’t belong there, Xena. I’m not the little girl that my parents wanted me to be.” Gabrielle suddenly remembered who her audience was and pretended to give up as she shrugged her shoulders and looked away. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Xena thought of how her own mother had initially refused to see the changes Xena had made in herself and felt her resolve crack a little.

“It’s not easy proving you’re a different person,” Xena said quietly after a moment.

Gabrielle looked up at the subdued tone, surprised she’d managed to break through the warrior’s hard veneer with such a simple trick. The heavy sadness she heard tugged at her heart and she wondered again, just like she had in the crypt, if there was anything she could do to lighten the warrior’s burden.

Xena glanced over at Gabrielle and saw gentle understanding reflected in the girl’s gaze and suddenly realized how much she’d revealed of herself with those few words. It wasn’t the first time she’d let the girl in either and in a moment of clarity, Xena knew it wouldn’t be the last.

Xena had been through enough battles to recognize when she’d met her match. She didn’t really want to win this particular fight anyway. Xena rolled her eyes as she silently conceded defeat. She reached for the blankets she’d planned to use for herself to ward off the chill and threw the bundle at the girl.

Gabrielle looked down in surprise at the fur blanket wrapped around a thinner woolen blanket, not quite believing she was being allowed to stay.

“You can sleep over there,” Xena said nonchalantly as she nodded towards the other side of the fire, then picked up her stick again and went back to playing with the dirt.

Gabrielle automatically glanced at the spot Xena had indicated, but then her gaze was immediately drawn back to the warrior. She smiled and almost couldn’t believe it when she received an answering grin in return. Her own grin widened and she knew she probably looked smug, but she couldn’t help it. She’d just talked the Warrior Princess into letting her tag along.

Gabrielle got up, wanting to claim her place by the fire before Xena could change her mind. She spread out the larger fur blanket with the fur side up, then draped the wool blanket on top, though she pushed it to the side for the time being. When she was done, she sat down on the fur, instantly feeling warmer. She looked back over at Xena, pleased to see a hint of the warrior’s earlier smile still curving her lips.

“Food should be about ready. I apologize in advance for my cooking,” Xena mumbled as she rummaged through a nearby saddlebag and pulled out a cup and a shallow bowl. She held them out towards Gabrielle. “Take your pick.”

Gabrielle took the cup and Xena ladled out two scoops of the stew. She did the same for herself, then handed Gabrielle a spoon from her pack, keeping the fork. They ate in silence. Xena passed a waterskin to Gabrielle halfway through the meal, which Gabrielle drank from gratefully. It wasn’t that the food tasted bad. It was just spicier than she was used to.

Eventually, they both finished and Xena left to clean their dishes in the nearby stream, refusing Gabrielle’s offer to do the chore for her. When Xena returned, she stuffed the clean items back in her saddlebag and then resumed her place on the rock. She picked up her stick and poked at the fire.

Gabrielle wondered what she could say to get a conversation going. She looked around, not finding much inspiration in the nearby trees. Then she frowned as she finally took a good look at the rest of the space around the campfire.

“Where’s your bedroll?”

Xena snorted.

“You’re sitting on it.”

Gabrielle looked down at the blanket and brushed her hands through the soft fur.

“I can’t take your bedroll,” Gabrielle said half-heartedly as she considered how hard and cold the ground would be without it.

“Don’t worry about it. We can get another blanket at the next town we come to.” Xena stood, pre-empting any further conversation as she clipped her sword to her waist. “I’m going to make one last check around the camp. I want you ready for bed by the time I come back,” Xena said gruffly and then disappeared into the foliage.

Gabrielle’s eyes widened. She’d heard that exact phrase before. She knew what it meant.

A year ago, a traveling bard had passed through her small town. She’d listened with rapt attention as the man had told his stories at the local inn. She’d even managed to talk to him for a few minutes during one of his breaks before her father had found her and ordered her to return home.

As soon as everyone had fallen asleep, Gabrielle had snuck back out and hunkered down outside an open window near where the bard was still telling his tales. It wasn’t long before Gabrielle understood why her father had been so adamant that she go home.

The stories the bard had told in the afternoon had been about the heroic feats of gods and kings along with a smattering of news regarding recent events taking place in the surrounding villages. But after the sun had gone down and the children had been sent to bed, the stories had taken on a decidedly more adult tone.

One of the stories had involved a warlord who had kidnapped a princess for ransom. But then the warlord had changed his mind and decided to keep the princess for his own personal pleasure. After showing the princess to his tent, the warlord had told her he needed to see to his troops for a few minutes. Before leaving, he’d turned back to the princess and said, “I want you ready for bed by the time I come back.”

In the story, the princess had removed all but her undergarments, which were made of the finest silk. She’d draped herself across the warlord’s bed and when he’d returned, the warlord had taken her virginity in a passionate frenzy.

Gabrielle stared out into the dark forest.

She thought maybe she should be scared that Xena expected sexual favors in return for her generosity, but all Gabrielle felt was a sense of excitement. She’d been drawn to Xena from the first moment she’d laid eyes on her. As soon as Xena had told her where she was going, her only thoughts had been of following the warrior, and even Xena’s warning about not making her mad hadn’t been enough to dissuade her. The pull had been so strong, she hadn’t even really given much thought to an actual plan beyond how she was going to sneak out of her parents’ house and track the woman down.

Gabrielle supposed she should’ve anticipated the warrior’s demands. Xena was an ex-warlord after all. But even if she had, there wasn’t much she could’ve done to prepare for it.

She didn’t have any silk undergarments. All she had were her panties. She didn’t even have the loose shift she’d brought with her from home. She’d lost that when the old man had taken her bag.

Of course, that meant she had nothing to use as payment for Xena agreeing to take on the burden of looking after an innocent peasant girl... Nothing but her body.

But why hadn’t Xena just said that? Unless it was a test to see if Gabrielle was worldly enough to have heard the story and know what Xena meant.

Gabrielle nodded to herself. All right. She’d just have to improvise. Maybe she could—

“I thought I told you to get ready for bed. What are you still doing up?” Xena asked as she walked into camp. She unclipped her sword and set it next to her as she took her place by the fire.

Gabrielle jumped and then blew out a breath as she held her hand over her racing heart.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you’d be back so soon. I...” Gabrielle ducked her head. “I guess I’m kind of new at this.”

Xena raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“New at what? Going to sleep?”

Gabrielle frowned in confusion.

“No, I...” Gabrielle huffed a breath. “Fine, I’ll admit it. I’m a virgin, but I promise you, I learn quickly and I know I can please you if you give me a chance to—”

“Whoa, hold on. What are you talking about?”

“When you said you wanted me to get ready for bed... I thought... And this is your bedroll... I thought you meant...” Gabrielle trailed off as Xena’s eyebrows headed for her hairline. Gabrielle felt a blush burn her cheeks and she stared down at the ground. “You really just meant go to sleep, didn’t you.”

“Uh, yeah,” Xena said.

Part of Xena was in shock that Gabrielle was willing to trade her body so freely while the more debauched part of her was kicking herself for not catching on faster and immediately taking the girl up on her offer.

“...So stupid, Gabrielle,” the girl was muttering to herself and Xena rolled her eyes.

“You’re not stupid. It was an easy mistake to make. Especially considering who I am... Who I was.”

“No, it was entirely stupid,” Gabrielle argued. “To think you’d even be interested in someone like me...” Gabrielle shook her head and fought to push back the tears. “I hear one sexy story about a warlord and a princess and I jump to conclusions that are obviously ridiculous. I... Can we just forget this ever happened and go to sleep?”

Xena frowned as she watched the girl work her throat. She didn’t think twice as she slid off the rock and moved to sit in front of Gabrielle on the blanket. She just needed to comfort the girl. Gabrielle looked up at her and Xena held her gaze.

“Gabrielle... You’re a beautiful young woman. I’m... flattered... and to be honest—”

“You don’t have to say any more, Xena. I get it. You don’t want me. I just don’t know how I’m going to pay you back for—”

“Hey, who said anything about payment? And you didn’t let me finish. What I was going to say is that I’m flattered and to be honest, I find you extremely attractive, but I wouldn’t want to be with you if you just thought I was using you. I’m not that kind of person anymore... At least I’m trying not to be.”

“So you do want me?” Gabrielle clarified.

Xena rolled her eyes again. It was becoming a habit where this girl was concerned.

“Yes. I want you. But not as some payment.” Xena slowly reached a hand out and clasped the girl’s shoulder. “You’re safe with me, I promise.”

Gabrielle got lost in the warrior’s eyes and could only nod in response. Xena’s hand on her shoulder seemed exceedingly warm and the spot where Xena’s thumb touched the bare skin over her collar bone felt like it was practically burning.

Xena saw the girl’s eyes glazing over in obvious hero worship again. It was the same look Gabrielle had given her before she’d left Gabrielle at her farm and part of Xena just wanted to shake the girl. She wasn’t a hero. She didn’t deserve the girl’s admiration or gratitude. But the way Gabrielle kept looking at her was making the other part of Xena want to disregard all her recent baby steps towards goodness and take advantage of what was being offered.

Xena let go of the girl’s soft shoulder and moved away, needing to put some distance between them. She leaned back against the rock, trying to find a decent position even though she knew it was a lost cause.

“It’s late. We should get some sleep,” Xena said when Gabrielle continued to stare at her.

Xena closed her eyes, but after several minutes and hearing no movement on Gabrielle’s part, she opened them again to find the girl still watching her.

“What?”

“That doesn’t look very comfortable.”

“It isn’t, but I’ve slept in much worse conditions.” Xena smirked. “At least it’s not raining, I had a bath at my mother’s inn, so I’m clean, and I’ve actually had a decent meal, so all in all, I’d say I’m doing pretty good.”

Gabrielle glanced down at the fur she was sitting on, then back up at Xena.

“You, uh... You wanna share?”

“I’m fine, Gabrielle,” Xena said, refusing to give in to temptation.

“But if you don’t get good sleep, then you might be tired tomorrow and what if you have to fight another evil warlord and you make a mistake because you weren’t well-rested and it was my fault for taking your bedroll? Do you know what that kind of guilt can do to a person? I’d never get over it.”

Xena just stared at Gabrielle.

“Come on, Xena. I won’t get a wink of sleep with worrying about you all night, so for both our sakes, just come over here.”

Xena moved as if in a daze. It certainly wasn’t of her own volition. Xena fleetingly wondered if the girl had been blessed by the gods. Maybe one of the muses... Or Aphrodite.

“Thank you, Xena,” Gabrielle said as she waited for the warrior to get settled. Xena moved her arm to the side to push herself over a few inches to presumably give Gabrielle more room, but Gabrielle saw her chance and quickly moved into the opening, nestling against Xena’s side. She wrapped an arm around the woman’s waist and then tried to lay her head on Xena’s chest, but the warrior’s breastplate was in the way. “Hey, um, you think you could take this off? I bet it would be way more comfortable, too. For you, I mean.”

“I need to keep my armor on. If we got attacked in the middle of the night—”

“Xena, I saw you take on a dozen men in nothing but your shift. And you just defeated the only warlord within a day’s ride of here. I think we’ll be safe for one night.”

Xena had to concede every point the girl had made. That was becoming a habit, too. Xena frowned in consternation, but she really couldn’t think of a valid reason to keep all her armor on, other than to prevent the girl from getting any closer to her. The fact that she wanted the girl closer wasn’t helping. Xena reluctantly sat up and reached for her shoulder guard, but her hands were immediately joined by Gabrielle’s.

“Show me?” Gabrielle requested. “I should know how to help you with this kind of stuff, right?”

Xena nodded in resignation and indicated where the hooks and buckles were on her armor. Gabrielle lifted it off and gently laid it aside. Then she began working on Xena’s upper and lower bracers. Xena was about to protest, but the girl was already sliding them off and moving around to her other arm. Xena clamped her mouth shut as Gabrielle moved down to her legs, first removing her greaves, then unlacing her boots.

Gabrielle refused to look up, though she could feel Xena watching her. She was just afraid Xena would realize her true intentions if she looked into her eyes. But Gabrielle knew what she wanted. She just had to convince Xena she wasn’t the child she appeared to be.

Gabrielle set Xena’s boots next to the armor she’d carefully laid out nearby. She considered reaching for the laces at the front of the warrior’s battle skirt, but changed her mind. That would probably be going a little too far. And now that she’d taken care of all but Xena’s leathers, she realized she’d forgotten about herself, so she quickly removed her boots and jacket. She wondered if she could get away with removing her own skirt, but decided against it.

Xena was still sitting up, so Gabrielle gently used a hand to push against Xena’s breastbone. Xena gave in to the not-so-subtle hint and lay back. She wasn’t surprised this time when Gabrielle snuggled into her side again.

“That’s much better, don’t you think?” Gabrielle asked, her voice coming out a little higher than she’d intended in her nervousness.

“I guess,” Xena said noncommittally.

Gabrielle slowly rubbed her thumb over the seam running along Xena’s side. She could feel the fine stitching and absently hoped she’d be up to the task of repairing the warrior’s leathers if need be. She

hadn't worked with leather very much in her village. Just the odd repair of a split seam on a bag or a torn bridle for their work horse.

Gabrielle began cataloguing her various skills, trying to find something of value she could offer to the warrior in exchange for her protection and training. There wasn't much.

She was good at bargaining. She could cook and sew, though she didn't really enjoy either. And she could talk, though most of her fellow villagers hadn't considered that a skill. More like a nuisance. But that bard who'd come to their town had told her she had good storytelling instincts. He'd even given her a few lessons while he stayed at the inn for several days. And he'd made quite a few dinars during that short time with his stories. Poteidaia wasn't even that prosperous, so if she could do even a fraction as well with her own stories...

"Go to sleep, Gabrielle."

Xena's voice rumbled in her chest beneath Gabrielle's ear and Gabrielle felt her whole body start to tingle in response. She managed to suppress her gasp, but she couldn't quite catch herself before she involuntarily pushed her mound against Xena's hip. She quickly covered for the obviously sexual act by continuing to shift in place for several seconds like she was trying to find a more comfortable position. She eventually settled again, recognizing a little too late how the additional motion only seemed to make her that much more aware of every point of contact between their bodies.

"Sorry. I was just thinking," Gabrielle mumbled as she closed her eyes and tried to block out the sensation of Xena's warm body pressed against her own.

"I know. Go to sleep."

Gabrielle mentally cringed. She needed to get herself under control. The warrior obviously wasn't interested in her that way, despite what she'd said to the contrary, and if Gabrielle wasn't careful, she was going to end up making a fool of herself again. Or worse... Annoying Xena so much that the warrior sent her away permanently.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and slowly blew it out as she tried to focus on what a long day it had been. She really should be exhausted...

Xena's hand tightened on her hip and Gabrielle shook her head as she pushed herself out of Xena's grasp and sat up.

"You know, I'm... I'm not really that tired. I think I'll just stay up for a little while longer and—"

"Gabrielle?" Xena sat up and moved so she could see Gabrielle's face. The girl looked like she was in pain. "What's wrong? Did you get hurt? You should've told me..." Xena started as she reached for Gabrielle's shoulder.

Gabrielle shrugged her off and moved to put more space between them.

"I'm not hurt. I just... I'm fine. You go to sleep."

Xena's hand was still hovering in midair from where Gabrielle had jerked away from her.

"I'm sorry," Xena said in a low voice as she looked away and dropped her arm. "You could've just said you changed your mind."

Gabrielle looked up at the sad tone and frowned.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"This," Xena said as she gestured vaguely between them. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just assumed when you... The way you cuddled into me... I thought you wanted to be held... I figure you're probably missing your family pretty bad right now..." Xena shook her head and blinked several times as she squared her shoulders. "It's fine. I'll take you back home in the morning."

Gabrielle's eyes widened as panic flooded through her.

"What? No! You can't... You said I could stay. You can't go back on your word. I mean I know you can, but..." Gabrielle swallowed down her tears. "Please don't take me back there. I know you think I'll just be a burden to you, but I was thinking about it and there are a few things I can do that might be useful to you. I can cook and I'm not too bad at sewing and I'm really good at making a dinar stretch. And I bet I could make some money for you telling stories. Even if it was just a few dinars, that would be something, right? That would be worth taking me on, wouldn't it? And I know you said you don't want my body as



payment, which I can understand. I'm just a peasant girl, but maybe if you closed your eyes and thought of someone else..."

Xena frowned and grabbed the babbling girl's shoulders.

"Stop, Gabrielle. Your body isn't a bargaining chip, so stop talking as if it is. And if I was with you, I certainly wouldn't need to think of anyone else, but that's not going to happen. So no more talk of payment. I told you, you're safe with me."

"What if I don't want to be?" Gabrielle blurted out before she could stop herself.

Xena froze.

"What?"

Gabrielle continued to stare into Xena's eyes.

"I said... What if I don't want to be safe? What if I..." Gabrielle licked her lips. "What if I just want you?"

Xena released her hold on Gabrielle's arms as if she'd been burned and just stared at the girl in disbelief.

Gabrielle ducked her head.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. You were just being nice earlier. I..."

Xena reached forward and drew Gabrielle's chin up just in time to capture the girl's lips with her own. She didn't try to deepen it, but she didn't need to. Just the feel of Gabrielle's soft lips pressed against her own was enough to make her stomach clench with need. It was several long moments before she pulled away. She was surprised to find herself gasping for air in time with Gabrielle as her heart raced out of control.

Gabrielle felt like all the air had been sucked out of her lungs. As she looked at Xena, she realized that was where all the air had gone and she scrambled across the short distance to reclaim it. She fumbled with her skirt for a moment as she straddled the warrior's lap, but then her lips were on Xena's and suddenly she could breathe again and she moaned.

Xena's hands automatically came up and wrapped around Gabrielle's lower back to pull her in tighter as the girl attacked her mouth. As she felt Gabrielle's tongue slide between her lips, she realized the girl wasn't a complete novice and smiled into their kiss as she started giving back as good as she was getting.

Gabrielle combed her fingers through Xena's hair, dislodging the woman's braided hairband. She tossed it aside without looking and went back to threading her fingers through the silken strands as she sent her tongue inside the warrior's mouth for another taste.

All the times she'd let Perdicus kiss her, she'd never felt anything like this. It had been something she'd allowed because it was expected of her, but this...

Gabrielle dove in again and pressed herself against Xena as hard as she could. She needed to be closer. She needed more. A memory from her dream of being naked in the warrior's arms made her realize what she wanted to do next.

Gabrielle gathered her courage and slowly pulled her lips away as she withdrew her hands from Xena's hair. They were both breathing heavily. Gabrielle held Xena's gaze as she reached for the ties on the front of her peasant blouse.

"Wait," Xena whispered.

Gabrielle paused, but didn't move her hands away.

"Why? You... Don't you want me? It feels like you want me," Gabrielle said only a little uncertainly.

Xena swallowed and tried to calm her breathing.

"I do. I just think..."

Xena lost her train of thought for several moments as she stared into Gabrielle's eyes. There was that look again and Xena finally realized she'd been mistaken before. It wasn't hero worship, or at least it wasn't *just* hero worship she was seeing in the girl's gaze. There was also quite a bit of lust. Xena suddenly laughed. At Gabrielle's look of confusion, which was quickly turning to hurt, Xena reached up to cup both sides of the girl's face.

"Sorry. It's just... I've never been seduced by a virgin peasant girl before. And you're doing an amazingly good job of it."

Gabrielle's expression cleared and she smiled.

"I am?"

Xena nodded.

"Yeah." Xena took a breath and swallowed. Her thumbs absently grazed the girl's cheeks. "Are you... Are you sure this is what you want, Gabrielle? We hardly know each other. Not that that's ever stopped me before, but I..."

It was Gabrielle's turn to nod as she moved her hands up to cover Xena's and slowly drew them down to the front of her blouse.

"I'm sure," Gabrielle whispered. "I want you, Xena. If you want me, too... then please..."

Gabrielle pressed her fingers over Xena's in encouragement and Xena took the hint, undoing the bow holding Gabrielle's blouse closed. Gabrielle shrugged slightly and the light blue cloth slipped off her shoulders, revealing her pert breasts.

As Xena drank in the sight, Gabrielle easily slid her arms free of the loose blouse until it was pooled around her waist. Xena was about to bring her hands up when Gabrielle's hands reached for the straps of her leather bodice.

"You, too," Gabrielle insisted as she pulled at the leather.

Xena smiled.

"It doesn't come off as easy as yours does."

Xena lifted Gabrielle by her hips until the girl was standing. Xena joined her and made short work of the laces holding her battle skirt in place. She dropped it next to her armor, then turned around as she reached behind herself to show Gabrielle where to undo the knotted bow at the base of her spine that had been hidden by the belt-like skirt.

Gabrielle brushed Xena's fingers aside and took over. She loosened the laces threaded through the eyelets running up the back of Xena's leathers until the warrior was able to get enough slack to remove the bodice completely, tossing it next to the rest of her armor.

Gabrielle felt herself becoming lightheaded as she looked over the vast expanse of skin covering the warrior's muscled back. Her gaze slipped down to see only a thin strip of cloth covering the crack of Xena's ass.

"Where's your shift?" Gabrielle asked in a strangled whisper.

"It was too dirty to put back on after my bath and I didn't have time to wash it," Xena said as she turned around, a smirk curving her lips, which only widened when Gabrielle gasped at seeing Xena's breasts.

"By the gods..." Gabrielle breathed out, her gaze glued to the perfect globes resting almost at eye level. She finally looked up at the warrior in a daze. "Xena? When... When did we die? Did Draco win? I don't remember..."

Xena cupped Gabrielle's cheek, frowning in concern.

"What are you talking about, Gabrielle? We haven't died."

Gabrielle swallowed as she reached for Xena's hips and slowly slid her hands up the warrior's sides.

"We must have... Only the Elysian Fields could feel this good," Gabrielle murmured.

Xena almost laughed, but as Gabrielle's soft hands roamed over her skin, leaving trails of pleasurable goose bumps in their wake, she couldn't help agreeing. She couldn't ever remember feeling this good and they hadn't even done anything yet.

Gabrielle's hands finally reached their destination and she carefully cupped Xena's heavy globes. The weight of them in her palms was so different from the way her own breasts felt when she bathed. She squeezed gently, a thrill running through her at the softness. She heard Xena give a quiet moan and watched, entranced with the way Xena's nipples seemed to be swelling right before her eyes.

Gabrielle didn't fight the sudden urge to taste as she leaned forward and brushed her lips against the crinkling skin surrounding one of Xena's hardening nipples. Xena inhaled sharply, causing her ribcage to expand, which pushed the flesh more firmly against Gabrielle's lips. Gabrielle closed her eyes and nuzzled the pebbly skin, suddenly feeling a sense of déjà vu, and she continued her previous train of thought.

“Maybe I’m just dreaming... I had almost this exact same dream last night... My sister always said I have the gift of prophecy...” Gabrielle’s tongue licked out, teasing the stiff flesh. She moaned at the same time Xena did. “Gods, it didn’t feel nearly this good,” Gabrielle mumbled and then she stopped talking as Xena’s hand pulled urgently at the back of her head and Gabrielle began to suckle in earnest.

“Oh gods, Gabrielle,” Xena hissed out.

Even as her body responded to Gabrielle’s touch, part of her mind was trying to figure out why just the feel of this girl’s mouth on her nipple was causing such a strong reaction within her. It hadn’t been that long since her last time. She’d taken a whore to her bed in one of the last towns she’d passed through and the woman had been quite skilled, worth every dinar. But this mere slip of a girl had her knees ready to buckle after only a few seconds of sucking on her tit.

“Ga-Gabrielle, I need to lie down,” Xena managed to get out.

Gabrielle heard Xena’s breathing hitch and sucked harder as she tightened her hold around Xena’s back, not wanting to relinquish her place at the warrior’s breast. She heard Xena cry out and she groaned in response around the hard nipple in her mouth.

“Oh sweet Aphrodite, who *are* you?” Xena whispered as she wrapped her arm around the girl’s shoulders in an attempt to steady herself even as she cradled Gabrielle’s head with her other hand to hold the girl in place.

Gabrielle released the nipple from her mouth and looked up into Xena’s bewildered gaze.

“Yours... I’m yours, Xena.”

Xena felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her and she leaned down to capture Gabrielle’s lips in a bruising kiss. As her tongue slipped around Gabrielle’s, Xena’s hands fumbled with the sash belted around the girl’s waist until she pulled it away through sheer brute strength. Gabrielle’s hands helped hers as they both frantically pushed at the blouse and wraparound skirt still clinging to Gabrielle’s body.

As the clothing fell away, Xena’s fingers pulled at Gabrielle’s bare hips, pausing for only a second when they ran into the girl’s breeches. As Xena pushed them down and out of the way, she felt Gabrielle do the same for her. They both kicked the offending scraps of cloth away and then Xena was pulling Gabrielle down to the furs beneath them.

They rolled over, Xena claiming her place on top of Gabrielle as she slid her thigh between the girl’s legs.

“Ohh, Gabrielle...” Xena groaned as she felt the girl’s desire coat her thigh.

“Xena...” Gabrielle whimpered as she instinctually thrust her hips up against the hard muscle pressing against her sex.

Xena slid a hand up to palm one of Gabrielle’s small breasts as she lowered her mouth to suck on the opposite nipple. She heard Gabrielle gasp and couldn’t suppress her own moan as she felt the girl’s tit harden almost instantly against her tongue. She used her thumb to rub over its twin, making it just as hard in only a few moments.

Gabrielle was on overload. She’d never felt anything like what Xena was doing to her breasts. She’d never even imagined what it would feel like to have someone sucking on her nipples. Then Xena switched sides and Gabrielle cried out as Xena seemed to increase the pressure, sucking and pinching her nipples even harder than before.

Xena was in her own little world and it consisted of only Gabrielle’s soft flesh and taut nipples. She alternated between the small mounds, doing her best to suck each of them completely into her mouth. She scraped her teeth over a swollen nipple and felt a charge rush through her at the sound of Gabrielle’s breathy cry of pleasure. She wanted to hear that sound again.

Gabrielle felt tingles racing all over her body even as she seemed to be acclimating to the sensations Xena was causing in her breasts. As her mind slowly returned to something resembling rational thought, she realized she wasn’t really giving anything back to Xena. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to. She just didn’t know where to touch first.

Her hands skimmed across Xena’s back, enjoying the feel of the warrior’s muscles moving beneath her fingers as Xena gently rocked against her. Gabrielle threaded her fingers through Xena’s hair and Xena

pulled her mouth away from its feast. Xena hovered over her, staring down into her eyes as they both slowly moved against each other, and Gabrielle felt her heart skip a beat.

Gabrielle slid her hands down until she could grasp Xena's hips. She simply held on for several moments before finally getting up the nerve to slide a little further down to caress Xena's round buttocks. She felt the warrior's muscles flex beneath her hands and instantly lost her inhibitions as she strengthened her grip, grabbing Xena's firm ass and pulling hard as she thrust up again. Xena seemed to get the message and started grinding harder against her, so Gabrielle brought her hands back up, grasping at Xena's neck to pull her down for another kiss.

Gabrielle accepted Xena's tongue into her mouth and immediately began sucking and licking at it, trying to draw Xena even deeper. Every time she pulled with her lips, Xena groaned and thrust harder against Gabrielle. Gabrielle could feel Xena's sex slipping over her hip and tried to angle herself up a little higher for the warrior.

Xena broke the kiss with a cry of pleasure as she felt Gabrielle push up against her, the girl's hipbone rubbing right over her engorged clit. She'd been bracing herself on both arms over the girl, but as her stomach clenched in mindless need, she shifted to the side so she could reach down with one hand. She needed to be inside Gabrielle. Right now.

Gabrielle was soaked, her outer lips swollen and her folds open, exposing her clit to Xena's exploration. Xena's fingers slid through wet silk and she didn't think twice as she pressed her thumb over the girl's clit at the same moment she slipped two fingers into the girl's tight channel. She was deep inside Gabrielle before she realized what she'd done, the thin barrier she'd met no match for her sudden hard thrust as Gabrielle cried out.

Xena stilled. She'd completely forgotten. Xena looked down at the girl's face, seeing tears forming at the corners of her eyes before they rolled down across her temples.

"Gabrielle... I'm sorry... I didn't mean to—"

Gabrielle clawed at Xena's back.

"Don't stop! Oh gods, please, don't stop... Please, Xena... Please..."

Xena started moving again and Gabrielle groaned, the brief pain she'd felt a distant memory as the warrior pushed inside once more and Gabrielle thrust her pelvis up to meet her more than halfway.

"By the gods, Xena... Xena..."

Gabrielle slid her outside leg up, pressing it against Xena's hip as her heel dug into the back of Xena's thigh to try to gain more leverage. She thrust up repeatedly against Xena's deep penetration, but it still wasn't enough. Gabrielle instinctually drew her leg back even further, this time digging her heel into Xena's backside as she used her other leg trapped between Xena's thighs to push her pelvis up even higher.

Xena thrust harder inside Gabrielle as she felt the girl trying to do everything she could to get Xena to go deeper. Xena angled her fingers for a particular spot at the top of the girl's vagina. She heard Gabrielle gasp when she found it and then the girl was whimpering with every hard stroke over the firm flesh.

The feeling of being inside Gabrielle was overwhelming. Xena groaned right along with the girl as she slid deep inside, not stopping until the webbing between her middle and ring fingers forced her to. She kept her thumb rubbing over Gabrielle's clit as she pumped her fingers in and out a little faster.

Gabrielle couldn't catch her breath. She'd gasp for air one moment, then moan her exhale as Xena pushed deep inside her slick opening. Then Gabrielle felt her lower belly tightening and she curled in on herself, burying her face in Xena's chest as she held on for dear life.

"Xena!"

The clenching deep inside Gabrielle took on a life of its own and she screamed incoherently as she bucked up against Xena's fingers. She couldn't control her body as wave after wave of pleasure blotted out everything but the feeling of Xena pumping inside her, prolonging the sensations of rapture. She didn't know how long it lasted, but she was gasping for breath by the time the spasms finally tapered off. She felt Xena gently slip out of her relaxed opening as she tried to calm her breathing.

Xena felt her own orgasm trying to crest as Gabrielle came so forcefully against her, but it wasn't quite enough to send her over the edge. Gabrielle had moved out of position with the first tremors of her climax, so Xena had been left without the kind of direct stimulation her clit needed.

Gabrielle straightened out as her muscles slowly relaxed. Xena was still minutely rocking against her and Gabrielle drew her hands up Xena's body until she could push the warrior's long hair out of her face.

"Xena?" Gabrielle whispered.

Xena pulled back from where she'd instinctually cradled Gabrielle against her chest and looked down into the girl's bright eyes. She felt like she was about to explode and it was only her constant movement against Gabrielle that was keeping the ache from getting out of control.

"Xena..." Gabrielle lifted her head to place a soft kiss on Xena's chin and trailed her lips along the warrior's jaw. "Tell me... What do you need... Just tell me... I'll do anything you want... I want to make you feel as good as you just made me feel."

Xena groaned. What she wanted...

"Your mouth... Gods, I want your mouth on me... But it's okay... I know you've never—"

Gabrielle cut Xena off as she covered the warrior's mouth with her own. She knew that wasn't what Xena had meant, having heard more than a few illicit tales that night outside the inn, but it was a start. She felt Xena sink into her as she speared her tongue between Xena's lips and pushed to roll them both over so she was on top this time. Her thigh naturally settled between Xena's legs and she felt the warrior continue to rock against her.

Xena grabbed two handfuls of ass and held Gabrielle in place as she rubbed herself against the girl's accommodating thigh. It normally took her a little longer to reach her pinnacle like this, but if Gabrielle kept doing what she was doing with her tongue inside Xena's mouth...

Gabrielle reluctantly pulled away, eliciting a groan of protest as Xena tried to follow her.

"Gabrielle..."

"No, Xena... Let me... Let me please you... If I don't do it right..." Gabrielle pressed her thigh harder against Xena's thrusting mound for a moment to complete the thought, then withdrew again.

Gabrielle kissed her way down Xena's chest, taking a few minutes to suck and tease both of Xena's breasts. The hands gripping her head and the hard nipple pressing against her tongue were all the encouragement she needed to keep licking and tasting Xena's flesh. Then Xena grabbed one of her hands and dragged it to her center and Gabrielle knew it was time to move on.

Gabrielle slid her way down Xena's body, her legs ending up half off the furs and in the dirt, but Gabrielle barely noticed as Xena's scent filled her nostrils. She inhaled the heady aroma and felt her heart rate pick up as she contemplated where she was about to put her mouth. Xena's hands were still holding her head and they were insistently pushing her down as Xena raised her hips in obvious need.

"Gabrielle... Please... *Oh gods!*" Xena cried out as she felt the girl's hot mouth cover her swollen sex.

"Mmmh..." Gabrielle moaned as she licked at Xena's essence, her tongue slipping between slick folds until it ran across a hard nodule at the top of Xena's slit.

"Gabrielle! Oh gods... Yes... Suck me... Ah *fuck!*"

As the girl's lips wrapped around her clit and sucked, Xena held her head in place and ground her sex against Gabrielle's mouth. Xena swore she saw stars behind her tightly clenched eyelids and then pleasure exploded inside her and she thrust repeatedly, screaming Gabrielle's name with each gasping breath. Then she felt fingers pushing inside her and she thought she might pass out as her orgasm redoubled, her whole body constricting with spasms of ecstasy as the girl continued to suck on her clit in time with the clenching of her vaginal muscles around Gabrielle's fingers.

It seemed to go on forever and Xena heard herself making sounds she didn't think she'd ever made before, but she couldn't silence the high-pitched cries and whimpers as Gabrielle worked her opening in short hard strokes.

Finally, the last of the tremors faded and she was able to breathe normally again.

"By all the gods..." Xena whispered hoarsely as her muscles suddenly released and she collapsed back against the furs.

Xena grunted as Gabrielle gently withdrew her fingers and then gave her clit one last lick. She waited for Gabrielle to climb back up beside her, but after a few moments with no movement, Xena opened her eyes and propped herself up on her elbows to look down her body.

Gabrielle was slowly licking her fingers clean. The girl looked up, their eyes meeting half in firelight, half in moonlight. As Gabrielle's fingers slowly moved in and out of her mouth, Xena felt her breath catch at the erotic sight.

Gabrielle finished cleaning her fingers and glanced back down at the wetness coating Xena's sex. She never thought she'd find anything she liked better than the taste of nutbread, but as she took a deep breath to inhale Xena's scent, she knew nothing would ever top this. Her whole body was humming and she just wanted to go back to her private feast. She was about to lower her head to do just that when Xena reached for her and started pulling her up.

As soon as Gabrielle's mouth was in reach, Xena claimed the girl's lips, pushing her tongue inside with a groan as she tasted herself. Her scent was all over Gabrielle's face, the girl's cheeks and chin still glistening with Xena's essence. Xena rolled them over, half hovering over Gabrielle's body as she tossed her hair over her shoulder to get it out of the way so she could drag her lips all over the girl's face.

"Gods, Gabrielle... Did Aphrodite open a temple to compete with Hestia? How in Tartarus are you a virgin?" Xena moaned the question, though her tone of amazement still came through.

Gabrielle smiled lazily as Xena nuzzled and kissed her wet cheeks in between soft licks.

"Well, I'm not... Not anymore," Gabrielle said as she turned her head to give Xena all the access she wanted. "And I've heard a few stories... The rest... I just let my mouth do what came naturally."

Xena laughed under her breath as she finished cleaning the girl's face. She pulled back to look at Gabrielle and casually rested on her side next to the girl as she propped her head up on her hand.

"If that's what comes naturally, you must be a daughter of Aphrodite... Or at least her Chosen," Xena teased with a smile.

Gabrielle rolled onto her side, mirroring Xena's position. She stared at the woman lying naked next to her, trying to gauge Xena's potential reaction as she considered her words carefully.

"Some of the stories I've heard about you say you're the Chosen of Ares... Love and war... Sounds like a match made by the Fates," Gabrielle said, testing the waters.

Xena looked away.

"I'm not his Chosen anymore," Xena said firmly.

Gabrielle realized a little belatedly that she'd hit a sore spot, but now that she'd started down this path, she couldn't back down. She reached with her free hand, using a single finger on the warrior's strong jaw to bring Xena's eyes back to her own.

"You're a warrior, Xena. Whether you fight for good or evil, you still fight," Gabrielle said softly.

Xena looked away again and rolled onto her back. She stared unseeing up at the stars.

Gabrielle frowned and moved over to fill the empty space Xena had left between them. When Xena didn't wrap her arm around her, Gabrielle climbed on top of Xena and straddled her hips. She leaned over Xena, forcing the warrior to look at her.

"If I'm the Chosen of Aphrodite and you're the Chosen of Ares, I think that means we have a lot to learn from each other. So while you teach me how to be a warrior, I'm going to teach you about love. And your first lesson is that love is unconditional."

Xena was looking at her a little wide-eyed, but Gabrielle just smiled.

"I want to tell you a story. Maybe you've heard it before. It's quite old," Gabrielle said as she sat up.

She rested her palms gently over Xena's ribcage as she held the warrior's cautious gaze.

"Once, a long, long time ago, all people had four legs and two heads... And then the gods threw down thunderbolts and split everyone into two. Each half then had two legs and one head, but the separation left both sides with a desperate yearning to be reunited because they each shared the same soul. And ever since then... all people spend their lives searching for the other half of their soul."

Gabrielle leaned over again and brushed her lips over Xena's cheek before moving to whisper in her ear.

“Xena, I’ve been waiting my whole life for you to find me.” She felt Xena go still beneath her. “It’s okay. You don’t have to believe me... But I think you know it’s true. As soon as I saw you, I knew I had to follow you... I had to be with you. I didn’t think you’d let me in this quickly. I thought it would take weeks, maybe even months... But you felt it, too, didn’t you? When you saw me...”

Xena closed her eyes as their first meeting played out in her mind’s eye.

As soon as she’d seen Draco’s men, she’d had no doubt about her course of action. She couldn’t let a bunch of helpless villagers get dragged into becoming slaves by the same kind of warlord she used to be. Of course, she’d also known the smart thing to do would be to wait until they left the area to retrieve her weapons and then go after them on Argo. It would be utterly foolish to attempt to go up against a dozen armed soldiers while she was half-naked and unarmed.

Then Gabrielle had stepped forward, selflessly offering herself in place of the other villagers, and Xena hadn’t been able to take her eyes off the girl. Sure, the offer itself had been ridiculously naïve and she’d known it would be rejected out of hand, but she’d also known it had taken a great deal of courage for a simple peasant girl to stand up to armed slavers like that.

The fire and confidence Xena had seen in those first few moments had drawn her in and she’d already been moving out of her hiding place when Draco’s lieutenant had threatened Gabrielle with a whipping. Xena wanted to think she would’ve intervened at that point no matter who it had been, but the truth was, Xena’s only thought had been to save the girl.

During the ensuing fight, she’d kept one eye on Gabrielle, feeling an irrational need to protect her and make sure she was safe above all others, though she’d tried to help out some of the other villagers as well. At one point, her split attention had nearly cost her life.

The screams of Gabrielle’s family had alerted her to their imminent recapture and she’d thrown her broken spear at a soldier to save Gabrielle, leaving her weaponless. Then she’d stupidly gawked at the girl, feeling a strange sense of pride as Gabrielle had kicked at her attacker. Xena’s momentary distraction had left her vulnerable and she’d been hit from behind. It had been pure luck that she’d landed on top of her own weapons, allowing her to rally against the men intent on skewering her on their swords.

Then again, what if it hadn’t been luck? Why had she stopped at that particular clearing? Why had she decided to bury her weapons in that particular spot? And at that particular time? She’d never been there before. It held no special significance for her. She just hadn’t been able to go on another moment, dressed for a battle she no longer wanted to fight.

What she did remember was the sense of defeat she’d felt as the screams of her past victims had reverberated in her mind. She’d been contemplating digging up her sword for one last use when the ghostly screams in her mind had been drowned out by the very real screams of terrified villagers nearby.

After she’d saved the villagers and Gabrielle in particular, she’d found a new sense of purpose. This was how she would make amends. She would save as many people as she could from the people she used to be like.

Was that the point? Was this what the Fates had in mind all along?

Xena felt Gabrielle sit back up and opened her eyes to look up at the girl.

“You really think we were brought together by the Fates?” Xena asked, her tone a strange mix of disdain and hope.

Gabrielle smiled.

“Yes. As soon as I saw you, I knew you were the one I’d been waiting for. I thought you felt it too when you agreed to come home with me, but then when you left without me... I decided right then that even if I couldn’t make you want me like this... the way I wanted you... Even if all we ever were was friends... I knew... I have to be with you, Xena. Wherever you go, that’s where I want to be.”

“You know, where I’m headed, there’ll be trouble.”

Gabrielle smiled.

“I know.”

Xena frowned in confusion.

“Then why would you want to go into that with me?”

Gabrielle leaned down, the smile still on her face.

“That’s what friends do... They stand by each other when there’s trouble.”

Xena saw the seductive grin and answered it with a smirk of her own as she chuckled under her breath.

“All right... Friend.”

Gabrielle laughed and offered what was supposed to be a quick peck to Xena’s lips, but it quickly escalated into a passionate kiss. Gabrielle smiled against Xena’s lips as she realized tonight’s adventure had only just begun.

The End



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