Return of the Queen

by Killerwit68

Summary

There is a strength that lies in loss, and loss comes to all with enough time. Gabrielle struggles with Xena's death in the years following the events in Jappa. When she reaches the breaking point of her grief, a very good friend suggests reconnecting with the Amazons. What she learns about herself will shape the future, and become a tale to be told for generations to follow. (Post Fin)

www dot katen-author dot com
Chapter 1

Return of the Queen
by
Kelly Aten

Introduction

Nearly three years after Xena’s death Gabrielle was still wandering. She and Argo made the trip to Amphipolis to place her friend’s ashes with Cyrene and Lyceus. She made a small hollow amulet and sealed some of Xena’s ash inside before placing the rest into the mausoleum. As promised, Xena’s ghost remained with her, she could see, hear and feel the other woman but no one else could. Gabrielle suspected that Argo had a slight affinity toward the shade, always seeming to know where Xena was, but nothing else. Gabrielle had spent all her emotion trying to let go and hold on at the same time, and Xena could see it was tearing her apart. Finally she could bear the younger woman’s torment no longer and knew she had to say something. It was evening and Gabrielle was sitting in front of the campfire sharpening the sword she got in Jappa. Xena settled beside her soul mate. The gentle pressure against her shoulder alerted Gabrielle seconds before she saw her friend materialize. She smiled at the person she loved more than any other. “Hey. Did you see anything out there while you were floating around?”

Xena smiled back sadly. “Nothing at all.”
Gabrielle was confused by the other woman’s look. “What’s wrong then?”

Taking a deep breath figuratively, since the real thing was unnecessary in her current state she went on. “Gabrielle, I think you should go home.”
Pain and anger instantly etched Gabrielle’s features. They had argued many times since Xena’s death, mostly about trying to get Gabrielle to move on. In a harsh whisper, tired of the same argument again and again, she answered “Xena, my home was lost to me three years ago.”

“No, I mean a physical home Gabrielle. You need a place to settle for a while and heal.” Xena’s ghost stood and paced in front of the other woman. “Gabrielle, it has been three years and you still cry yourself to sleep most nights.” She looked at her best friend tenderly. “You need friends, people to help you through this.”

Gabrielle angrily thrust the sword back into its sheath and shouted at the Warrior Princess. “Who Xena! Just who do I have to turn to, huh? After we were frozen for twenty-five years, everyone we know is gone to me…” Quietly she added in a whisper, “Everyone who knows me.” She took a shuddering breath and sank to her knees covering her face with her hands. Xena could only watch as the instantaneous anger rolled through the smaller woman, pain building it into a tidal wave. She stood by her friend, waiting for it to crash ashore. Gabrielle sobbed, “You left me!” She looked up at Xena and screamed “It’s just not fair! It wasn’t supposed to be this way; we were supposed to be together always!”

In guilt and agony at her decision to go to Jappa, Xena dropped to the ground and held her friend tightly. “You didn’t lose me Gabrielle, I’m right here. I’ll always be here.”
Calming down, Gabrielle turned tear-filled green eyes towards the woman who held and broke her heart. She whispered, “It’s just not the same.”

Xena could only watch as the blond took care of her weapons and settled into her bedroll for the night. Thinking of something at last she called, “Gabrielle…”

Gabrielle looked at her expectantly. “…I think you should go see Varia and the rest of the nation. Maybe your Amazon sisters can help you find the peace that I took away from you.”

The bard thought about it for a minute. “Does it mean that much to you?”

“You mean that much to me!”

Gabrielle nodded slowly. “Fine, we’ll head that way tomorrow.” She lay back down on her bedroll, staring into the fire and said quietly. “Goodnight Xena.”

Chapter 1

Gabrielle rode Argo into a small town on the outskirts of Amazon land. Since it was getting late, she decided to stay the night at the inn and ride out to greet her sisters in the morning. After settling into her room she found a quiet corner in the common room downstairs. A candlemark later she had the remnants of her dinner pushed to the side and she was diligently writing in one of her scrolls. Xena was not around at the minute, probably out visiting with Argo as she sometimes liked to do. Gabrielle was aware that she was being watched but continued to ignore it until the cloaked woman walked up and stood next to her table. Gabrielle looked up at her expectantly while the other woman took in the scroll on the table and the sword propped against the wall. Not wanting to socialize, the bard’s famous smile was in absence. “Can I help you?”

With eyes returning to the scroll the stranger asked, “Are you a bard?”

Gabrielle answered with certainty. “I was once called a bard, but no longer.”

Settling into the chair across the table uninvited the woman said, “I have heard of you I think. Are you not the Battling Bard of Potidaea? Companion to Xena the Warrior Princess?”

In a husky voice filled with pain Gabrielle answered. “There is no more Warrior Princess, and there is no more Bard. There are no songs left to sing.”

Leaning forward the stranger reverently touched the scroll on the table. “You would waste your talent, a gift from the gods?”

Gabrielle felt the familiar anger fill her. Fighting for control she said in a flat tone, “The gods are dead.”

The woman nodded sagely with a hint of a smile on her face. “Yes true, most of them, but you are not.” With another glance at the scroll on the table she added, “And I think you have a story to tell, no?”

Gabrielle looked down with tears in her eyes and traced her fingers across the parchment lying on the table. “Yes, maybe one last tale.” She looked up again as the stranger stood and opened her cloak. Revealed was the garb and bearing of an Amazon sister.
She woman smiled and held out her hand to clasp in the way of the sisterhood. “My name is Mashti.” She then stepped back and bowed. “And when you are finished here, we will be waiting for you Queen Gabrielle.” With no other words, Mashti took her exit of the inn.

At that moment, the proprietress of the inn came around. After clearing the dishes she asked “Is there anything else you need dear?”

With a final glance at her scroll she nodded. “Yes there is. Would you be interested in the services of a bard tonight?”

The innkeeper looked thoughtful. “How much would you charge?”

Gabrielle smiled for the first time in what felt like weeks. “Nothing at all. I just ask for some food for tomorrow when I leave. Just a day’s rations and my needs will be met.”

The innkeeper grinned and held out her hand, already planning on the increase in sales for the night. “Done!”

That evening Xena looked on while Gabrielle made her way to the front of the common room. The crowd quieted as she introduced herself. While some young ones had never heard of her, most knew her as a legend. “My name is Gabrielle. Though I hale from Potidaea, I’ve traveled to many foreign lands and spun many a yarn. I have only one tale to tell now; it is about love, loss, and the greater good.” Finding the tall, dark woman in the back of the room, she took a calming breath and began for the last time. “I sing of the Warrior Princess…”

Candlemarks later, with a hoarse voice and emotionally drained she finished her tale. “… And so, I am a Queen without a nation, a bard without a song, and a heart who has lost my love.” Looking across the crowd, there were many sad eyes and a few who shone with pride at hearing of another great deed done by the Warrior Princess. There was only one pair of eyes that held Gabrielle’s attention. They were beautiful blue, and shed the tears of a lifetime lost. Xena had no words that could possibly describe the pride and heartbreak she felt for her beautiful bard.

One of the warriors, which had been seated toward the back, came up to talk to her after. Gabrielle looked at the handsome woman, smiling at the thought that she would have been just a child when Gabrielle went into her sleep decades ago. She was maybe 40 seasons, strong, with long blonde hair pulled back into a braided leather thong. She wore her sword at her hip, and her armor looked well cared for. The woman smiled, and her face was transformed from handsome to a study of beautiful androgyny. “Good evening Queen Gabrielle, my name is Laodoke. Would you care to have a tankard of ale with me?”

Gabrielle looked at the other woman, curiosity pulling her up from sadness. “Do I know you?”

The warrior, slightly chagrined admitted “No, you don’t know me. But I know you… well, I mean, I’ve seen you before.” She blew out a frustrated breath, that the small blonde had made her so flustered. “Let me try again…”

Gabrielle interrupted her, placing a hand on her arm. “Wait, this sounds like a tale. Perhaps we should find that ale and you can tell me about it?”

Laodoke gave her another brilliant smile. “Yes, thank you!”

Once they were seated at a scarred wooden table, Gabrielle prompted “So, you were saying?”

The warrior across from her looked confused. “What?”

Gabrielle smirked at the woman’s distraction. “You were about to tell me your story, about how
you know me.”

“Oh! Yes, sorry.” She gave a slightly embarrassed smile and an explanation. “I first saw you and the Warrior Princess when I was just a child. You see, I grew up in the town of Melitia.” She paused, to see if Gabrielle remembered the name.

The little queen cocked her head to the side. “Melitia… Melitia… was that… That was the little town that banned dancing!”

Laodoke smiled at the other woman’s memory. “Yes, it was. You and Xena came in and turned everything upside down. That was also where I had my first training from you and Xena. Of course, the training was also teaching me to dance. You were very sneaky with your plans, but none of us kids were going to complain.” She laughed at the thought. She continued her story. “Well, your visit changed more than just my ability to dance. It made me realize that I wasn’t stuck in that small town; that I could go out and make a living for myself and not have to marry the shepherd’s son. As soon as I was old enough, I left Militia and joined with the nearest city’s guards. Once I was finished with my training, and putting my compensation time in, I was free to travel and see the world.” She placed her hand on top of Gabrielle’s, and gave her another toe curling smile. “And I owe it all to you.”

Gabrielle raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Wow! That is quite a story, and I’m really glad we were able to help.”

Recognizing the warrior’s subtle signals of interest, Gabrielle welcomed the distraction. She smirked at the attractive woman across from her. “I see you’re all grown up now, and you seem to have done quite well for yourself.”

Laodoke blushed, hoping the beautiful woman sharing a table with her was interested in more than her story. “Well, I have a comfortable life now. I’m actually one of the guards that are escorting a group of traders from the city of Kalpakia. We are headed to the Amazon city. Have you seen it since the unification?” When Gabrielle shook her head no, she continued. “Me either, but I heard it’s amazing. Not that any of us will be allowed to really see much.” She laughed.

Gabrielle smiled at Laodoke’s open and friendly attitude. “Yes, we Amazons do take our privacy very seriously. I’m actually heading there tomorrow; perhaps I’ll see you there.”

“Well, we do have to stop at a few more villages on the way, but hopefully.” She looked at Gabrielle curiously. “So it’s true then, you really are an Amazon? I’ve heard so many stories over the years. Stuff like you and Xena were Crucified by the Romans, you were an Amazon Queen, you single handedly fought and killed fifty roman soldiers, you defeated a Cyclops, you fought the legendary samurai, your defense of Eli, travels to the land of Pharaohs… there are so many stories! It’s hard to know what is real and what is exaggerated… “

Gabrielle laughed and put a finger to the other woman’s lips, momentarily startling her into silence. When she removed her finger, Laodoke was blushing furiously, and biting her bottom lip. “Oh gods, stop already! Geez, if half the stuff that is going around about Xena and I were true, you’d think I was a demi-god like Hercules!” She shook her head and chuckled. “Wow, well some of the stuff is true, some is exaggerated, and some I’m sure never happened at all.” She smiled. “For starters though, I am an Amazon Queen, and have been for a few different tribes. I’ve killed plenty of Roman soldiers and Samurai. I’ve visited the land of Pharaohs, Chin, and India. And yes, Xena and I were both crucified by the Romans. We died.”

Laodoke looked shocked at her last admission. “I had heard, but thought surely… but how? Is that when you both disappeared for so long?”

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. “As for the how, well we don’t really know. It was the work of
our friend Eli, and perhaps some divine interference. And we disappeared for twenty-five years when we poisoned ourselves to hide from the Gods. We were put in an ice cave for safe keeping, by no other than Ares, the God of War.”

The warrior looked at Gabrielle in shock. “That is amazing! You have lived so many lives, and yet…” She trailed off, unsure if she would be welcome to finish the sentence.

Gabrielle prompted. “And yet?”

The warrior took a chance. “And yet, still so beautiful. Gabrielle, are you here with anyone?”

Gabrielle mentally snorted. ‘Warriors, always thinking with their swords, one way or another.’ She debated her options. On one hand, she was alone, no matter how much she wished otherwise. It also wasn’t that rare for her to occasionally spend the night with a companion. She gazed into the hazel eyes of the warrior across from her. ‘No, she’s definitely not looking for more than a night. And is there really any harm?’ After seconds of long analysis of her own emotional state, and the possible repercussions, she gave a friendly smile and answered. “No, I’m here alone. Why do you ask?”

Laodoke grinned broadly. “Well, would you care to come up to my room and exchange more stories with me?”

The smaller blonde flirted back. “Well, I’m a little out of practice with storytelling… I hope my tongue doesn’t get tired.”

Laodoke rose from the table and reached out her hand. “My shield mates have often said my mouth never stops moving, so I’m sure that together we will have no problems filing the time. Shall we?”

Gabrielle smirked. “Oh, I’m not worried. I once spent a few moons with a tribe that only spoke with their hands. I got very good at the language…”

The warrior stumbled. “W.. what?”

Gabrielle merely winked at her as she made her way up the stairs.

The next afternoon was clear and sunny as Gabrielle and Argo made their way into Amazon lands. Xena appeared nearby and said needlessly. “They're coming.”

Gabrielle looked at the ghost that was her love and traveling companion and laughed out loud in wonder of her own skills. “I already knew, but thank you.” She halted Argo with her knees and clasped her hands in the air over her head just as a dozen women dropped down from the trees. “Good day Amazons, I give greeting to my sisters.”

The leader of the patrol stepped forward and knelt on one knee toward Gabrielle. “Greetings to you Queen Gabrielle, I am Shalla. We’ve been expecting you.”

The leader of the patrol stepped forward and knelt on one knee toward Gabrielle. “Greetings to you Queen Gabrielle, I am Shalla. We’ve been expecting you.”

Gabrielle dismounted and walked along side her sisters toward the camp. She looked on curiously as the women around her took up guard positions. She glanced toward Xena and the warrior shrugged. “Beats me, they appear to be your honor guard.” She walked off to the side to avoid having the other women pass through her while she was talking to Gabrielle. Both women found it sort of disconcerting. Gabrielle gave a small smile and addressed Shalla. “How are Queen Varia and the rest of the council? It has been quite a while since I last saw them, and not since the city was built.”
Shalla smiled. “She and the council are doing well.” She frowned and placed a hand on Gabrielle’s arm, slowing the shorter woman. “I just wanted to say that we are sorry for the loss of Xena. She was a great friend to the nation and will be missed.” As one, the patrol did a closed fist salute over their hearts.

Touched, Gabrielle returned the salute and shot a quick glance at Xena. “Thank you, I’m sure she can hear your thoughts and is aware of your feelings.” Xena smiled sadly and nodded at her bard.

Less than half a candlemark later the group made their way into something completely different than the last Amazon village she had visited. Gabrielle looked around in amazement at the size of the community she once knew.

“Queen Gabrielle!”

Up ahead she could see Varia striding toward her, followed close behind by Cyane. The bard’s smile was genuine at seeing the familiar faces. A small part of the ache in her heart eased in the presence of these women that she had fought beside. Perhaps Xena was right, I did need to be around people I know and love.

Varia stopped in front of her and clasped her forearm before pulling her into a heartfelt hug. No words were spoken at first. There had been much healing between the two women after the battle of Helicon. With Gabrielle’s petition and the agreement of the council, Varia had been reinstated as the head queen. The one condition was that Cyane would be her chief advisor and second in command. Varia pulled back and gave her a gentle smile. “Gabrielle, it’s so good to see you.” She was released and the gesture was repeated by Cyane. The sad look in their eyes said much and Gabrielle’s returning gaze promised more words to come.

Varia gave a trilling whistle. Two women came forward, one took Gabrielle’s saddlebags and the other led Argo toward the stables. Varia addressed the first one. “You can put her things in the guest hut next to mine.” After that was taken care of, they started walking again toward Varia’s hut while the royal guard walked all around them. Varia Glanced at the traveling queen. “Much has changed with you Gabrielle and I don’t just mean the loss of Xena.”

Pain-filled green eyes looked at the high-Queen of the Amazon nation. “Yes, much has changed, and I fear there is not much of me left to be changed.”

They neared Varia’s door and she turned to the rest of the group. I need to speak with Gabrielle alone for a while. She looked at Cyane and understanding passed between them. “Will you take care of arranging a feast in honor of our traveling Queen’s return?”

Cyane nodded and gave Gabrielle a quick smile. “Yes Varia, I’ll see to everything.”

“Good, thank you.”

They entered the hut and Varia motioned toward two comfortable chairs near the window. “Please, sit.”

Gabrielle walked to the chair then paused and carefully removed the sword from her back and leaned it against the wall. After pouring them both a cup of cool, sweet wine Varia sighed. “I’m so sorry Gabrielle. Xena was… well she was more than just an ally to the Amazons and my teacher, she was my friend. Even after our history, I knew she wanted what was best for the Amazons, and I respected her.”

The bard swallowed then rubbed her fingers across the smooth wood of the cup. Not sure how to
begin, she started at the end. “She’s still with me Varia.”

The high Queen gave her an understanding look. “She will always be in your heart Gabrielle.” Gabrielle shook her head. “No, you don’t understand. She walks with me as a ghost. I can see, hear and feel her but no one else can.”

Varia was curious. “But how?”

Clasping the wood amulet between thumb and forefinger she said, “She came with me from Jappa, an island nation east of Chin. I carried her ashes with me the entire way, and before I laid them to rest in Amphipolis I place a pinch in this amulet.”

Varia looked at this strong queen in a completely new light and was both sad and a dismayed. “Oh Gabrielle, why haven’t you let her go?”

A lone tear fell from the bard’s eye and she whispered. “Because we were promised forever.”

In an instant, Varia was at her side embracing her as only a friend could. “Shh… it’s alright Gabrielle. You’re with your family now, lean on us for strength.”

At those words, Gabrielle finally let herself break down. Sobbing she said, “It’s so hard, why does it have to be so hard?” When she calmed down a bit Varia returned to her chair. “The gods and fates have thrown so much at us and we made it through. Now I’ve finally lost her and I don’t know where to go. I don’t know who I am anymore.” A brief memory flashed through Gabrielle’s mind. Am I who I am, or what you made me? Wiping tears away she smiled at Varia. “She’s the one who suggested we come here. She knew I was barely holding together and thought the comfort of my Amazon sisters would help me.”

Holding tightly to Gabrielle’s hands Varia said. “We will.”

Sitting back Varia glanced at the sword against the wall. “I see you carry a sword now, that’s new.” Trying to lighten the mood a bit she joked, “You look more like a warrior than a bard now.”

Giving the Amazon leader a piercing look she stated, “I am no longer a bard.” Sorrow threaded through Varia’s heart when she realized that Gabrielle had lost so much more than her soul-mate, she really had lost herself. She gave Gabrielle’s hands one last squeeze then let go, changing the subject. “We have much to discuss. Are you planning to stay awhile?”

Gabrielle glanced at Xena, who was standing across the room looking at the weapons hanging on the wall. “Yes, I think I am.”

“Excellent! Tonight we feast, and then tomorrow you can meet with me and the rest of the council. Does that sound alright with you?”

Gabrielle stood and slung her sword across her back once more. “Sure, that sounds fine. I’m going to go rest for a while; can you send someone for me when the dinner starts?”

“I’ll send your honor guard to escort you.”

Gabrielle stopped at the other woman’s comments. “Varia, I don’t need a guard, please don’t assign people to protect some useless queen they don’t even know.”

“Gabrielle, you are far from being a useless queen.”

“But I am a queen without a people, and it is unfair to pull from someone else’s tribe just to satisfy
some outdated custom.”

Varia strode towards her and grabbed her arm firmly to make the shorter woman understand. “As long as the Amazon nation still exists, you will always have a people. As far as the rest of them, they were all volunteers from various tribes. Whether you like it or not, you’re a legend Gabrielle.” Varia gave her an intense look. “I don’t think you realize that between your rights of caste and won challenges, you were the queen of multiple tribes long before any talk of unification. You paved the way for all we have accomplished here, and for me to be the queen that I am. Whether you acknowledge that or not, women of the nation respect your title and they respect you. Don’t begrudge them their honor.”

Gabrielle stood stunned for a minute before nodding tersely. “Fine, they can stay.” Heading out the door she added, “I’ll be in my hut.”

Minutes after Gabrielle left, Cyane knocked and entered. “How did it go?”

Varia looked into the other queen’s deep brown eyes. Her pain was evident in the timbre of her voice. “She is hurting. But we knew she would be.”

Cyane nodded. “I know she is; I could see it when she came into the village. What can we do?”

Varia drained the last of the wine from her cup. “I don’t know. We’ll have to take things one day at a time. I do know that she’s agreed to a meeting with the council tomorrow. She says she plans on staying, but I’m not sure for how long.” She looked intently at Cyane. “While she is here, I want her to serve on the council with the other queens.”

The other woman nodded. “I don’t think you’ll find a single objection after what she did for us at Helicon.”

Remembering her own betrayal on that fateful beach, and subsequent forgiveness by the bard, Varia added quietly, “No, I don’t think I will.”

That evening the feast went well. Many women who had only heard of the quiet queen got their first chance to meet the beautiful woman. Gabrielle was polite and friendly but Xena could see that she was holding herself back from everyone, keeping her distance. Maybe it was because everyone was still treating her like spun glass, fragile and untouchable. All she could do was hope that time would heal the bard’s wounds of the soul.
Within a span of two weeks, Gabrielle had finally found a routine of sorts. She would ride Argo every morning then after lunch she would have weapons practice and finish the day volunteering at the healer’s hut. She would spend her evenings talking to Xena or sometimes just meditating. She wasn’t happy yet, but her pain was easing day by day. Mostly she just felt lonely, but to everyone in the village, minus a select few, she was Queen Gabrielle. Set apart from the rest, by caste or by legend. Either way, there weren’t many people she could talk to, person to person. One evening Gabrielle was sharpening her sword while Xena looked on. The dark woman remarked, “I don’t think I’ve said anything lately, but you’ve become one the best fighters I’ve seen.”

Gabrielle looked up surprised. Praise was rare from her friend but when she gave it, it was always heartfelt. She smiled proudly. “You know I have you to thank for it. You were a great teacher.”

Xena reached out and tenderly caressed her bard’s cheek. Gabrielle melted into the touch and shut her eyes, pretending like her friend was really there. She was the only thing or person that could feel Xena’s touch and she relished every time it happened. Xena leaned close and whispered in her ear, “You were a great student…”

The bard gasped as she felt the delicate touch of lips against the curve of her ear. A touch that slid along her jaw line. Gabrielle sighed hotly. “Xena…”

Xena realized what she was doing and abruptly pulled away, leaving the other woman shivering. “I’m so sorry Gabrielle. I wasn’t thinking… and I’m sorry.” She gave the blond a helpless look full of dismay at her own actions.

Gabrielle stood and put her sword away then walked toward the ghost. Putting her hand on the taller woman’s arm, she rubbed gently. “It’s ok Xena.” Looking into the tender blue eyes of the woman she loved, Gabrielle whispered, “I love it when you to touch me.” She hesitated for just a second then admitted quietly, “I crave it.”

The warrior pulled her bard into her arms, embracing her fully. “Gabrielle… I miss you so much… I miss life. And for the rest of your life, I am sorry.”

“I know you do. And I know you’re sorry, but you had to make the choice for the greater good. While I understand it on an intellectual level, my soul still hurts.” Gabrielle murmured from against the taller woman’s shoulder.

Xena pulled back, gently cupped Gabrielle’s chin and looked her in the eye. “But know this; I would rather be here with you in this limited form than not see you at all. I wouldn’t trade you for all the gold in the world or all Eli’s promise of heaven.”

Gabrielle smiled. “I feel the same way. At least we can still touch. I don’t think I could bear it if I never felt the comfort of your embrace again.”

Xena caressed her cheek and gently ran a thumb over the shorter woman’s lower lip. Softly saying, “No fear of that…” and kissed, just a light press of lips. The brief connection helped reaffirm their friendship and devotion but for Gabriel, it triggered something more. There had been a part of her kept buried deep throughout the years, and in just a few short seconds it had been set free.
After the kiss ended Gabrielle looked up at the keeper of her soul. “Xena, can you feel pleasure in that form?”

The ghost was perplexed. “What do you mean? I can feel happiness, even sadness. Most of my emotions are muted somewhat but the love I feel for you is still all-encompassing. Why do you ask?”

“No Xena…” Her voice was low and husky. Taking a chance, Gabrielle reached out her hand and lightly caressed Xena’s breast, running a thumb across her nipple. The ghost gasped and involuntarily arched into the touch. Question answered, the queen removed her hand.

Confusion warred with arousal. “Gabrielle?”

Gabrielle walked over to the bed and began undressing. She carefully folded every article of clothing and placed each one on a nearby table. When she was completely nude she stared back at the keeper of her heart. “Xena, I want you to touch me. Just for one night make me forget…”

Xena shook her head again in sorrow at all the opportunities missed. “Why now, after all these years? You haven’t been interested in me that way in a very long time.”

The beautiful queen shook her head and closed her eyes, briefly remembering their history. In the beginning, it didn’t take the young bard very long to realize she felt more than just hero worship for the Warrior Princess. And though it took a while to bring her companion around, their romance burned very hot for many years. It was only after the crucifixion and resurrection that things changed between them. Over the years, Gabrielle has convinced herself that the changes she went through, her change into a warrior, had made her soulmate not want her physically any more. In reality, it was Xena’s guilt at her own part in those changes and the thought that Gabrielle may resent her, that made her withdraw from her lover. Since that time they had remained best friends and soulmates, but no longer lovers. Gabrielle said sadly, “Xena, I’ve wanted you for years but I thought you no longer wanted me. But I can’t stand being without you any more and I’ll beg if I have, even if we can have only a few fleeting touches. Please!”

In an instant Xena was by her side, cradling her soulmate gently in her arms. “Gabrielle, you don’t need to ask, I’ve missed you so much! I’m here for you; I’ve always been here for you. I’m just sorry you didn’t know that.”

The night was spent learning things about each other that neither had known before. It was a little unnerving to Gabrielle that Xena was nothing more than a ghost but she could still touch her and bring her such intense feelings. The sweet taste of release brought reality crashing back ashore, bringing as much pleasure as pain. When it was all done, Queen Gabrielle sobbed into her returned lover’s embrace for all the things that could no longer be. She fell asleep wrapped in her own arms, and drowning in her loneliness.

In the world of man and immortal, few gods still remained. Of the Major deities, only two were left on Mount Olympus. Brother and sister, Ares and Aphrodite sat together watching a scrying dish filled with water. However, it was not the water that held their attention. It was the image of a heartbroken warrior-bard that floated in all its liquid clarity. In one of her rare moments of seriousness, Aphrodite spoke.

“Poor sweet-pea, she is so sad.” She looked at Ares; who was intently watching the blonde with a curious look on his face. “What I can’t understand is who she was she talking to.”

He stroked is goatee thoughtfully. “Well sis, if I had to hazard a guess, I’d say it was Xena.”
studied the Amazon queen through the scrying bowl again. “What I can’t figure out is whether she’s really seeing something I’m not, or if she’s just cracking up.”

Aphrodite looked sharply at her brother and stamped her foot to emphasize her words. “How can you be so… insensitive? They were soulmates, and now they’re lost to each other.”

The God of War looked up in fury and anguish. “I’m anything but insensitive! I may be a god, but I still lost something when Xena died.” His look changed to one of remorse as he glanced back toward the bowl, his attention riveted. “I can only imagine what she is going through right now, but there is nothing I can do about it.” Offhandedly, he added “Besides, why do you care so much anyway? She’s just another mortal, not even one of your chosen and of no consequence to you.”

Angry and hurt, Aphrodite splashed her hand through the water disrupting the image. Only then did she get her brother’s full attention. “Her love and loss call to me, not to mention she is one of the few mortals who have dared call me a friend!” She gave her brother a shrewd look. “My question for you is… why do you care so much?”

Ares looked shocked at the question. He sputtered for a moment before denying his actions. “Bu… wha… That’s ridiculous! I don’t care for her at all; she’s just the annoying little blonde that used to hang around Xena.”

The Goddess of Love smirked, highlighting her perfect dimples. “Well then why have you spent more time spying on her in the last few years than you ever spent spying on Xena?”

Area paled. “How do you know that?”

“Well duh, I am a goddess. I have my ways.” She looked at him knowingly. “Come on big bro’, fess up already. What’s the deal with our little Queen?”

The God of War stood and walked away from the scrying dish. “Get real ‘Dite! I’m only interested because she’s Xena’s protégé. I just want to see how good a fighter she really is.”

Aphrodite giggled and sat down in front of the dish. Smoothing the water with her hand, she gazed at the sleeping woman once again. “Methinks you protest too much.” She looked at her pacing brother who had suddenly become still with her words. She listed items to prove her point, ticking them off on her perfectly manicured fingers. “First you saved the little bard from the lava pit during that whole Hope ordeal…” She forestalled any interruptions by adding, “…Oh I know you said you were just saving Hope but you didn’t have to grab Gabrielle too, nor did you have to claim fatherhood for Hope’s child when I know it wasn’t yours.” She smirked at her own little bit of insight and flicked out another finger. “Second, you lovingly place both Xena and Gabrielle side by side in an ice tomb when you thought they were dead… even though it was supposed to be Xena that you lusted after.” She glanced at her brother and was surprised by the unreadable look on his face. She continued with another flick of her finger. “You also saved her again when you were saving Eve. There was no reason for it, especially when you are always saying the Gabrielle was the reason Xena would never be with you. You could have let her die and solved all your problems.” She added the final item just as Ares was sinking back into his chair. “Finally, you started courting her to be your next chosen the last year that Xena was alive.” She gave him a triumphant look, one that said ‘don’t mess with the blonde’, and waited for his answer.

With elbows on his knees, he put his face into his hands. Sighing, he sat back again and looked at his sister. Sensing he was going to talk, Aphrodite prompted quietly from across the dish. “Tell me.”

With eyes that were, once again, focused on the image of the sleeping queen, he asked, “Tell me sis, do you think it was mere coincidence that the day Xena was ready to give everything up,
including her life, she met a certain blonde bard?”

Aphrodite raised her eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

Ares glanced back at her for a second then resumed his watch on the bowl. “I mean… who do you think sent Draco to Potidaea on that exact day? Who do you think knew Xena would be in the area, with guilt dogging her heals?” He looked into the Goddess of Love’s eyes. “I did… because I arranged it all!”

Softly she said, “Why?”

He groaned trying to think of the best response. “You know how half the gods speculated that Xena was really my daughter?” He made a face and waved his hand in the air. “Oh Ares, you both have dark hair… Oh Ares, you’re both great fighters…” When Aphrodite nodded he continued. “Well she wasn’t.”

Aphrodite smiled. “I never thought she was.”

He gave her a brief look of thanks. “I’m going to tell you a story and I don’t want you to ask any questions until the end, ok?” When she nodded yes he began. “I once had a young warrior, who was full of youth and vigor in battle. He had such promise, I was thinking of giving him an army of his own.” He paused to take a sip from his wine goblet. “The day I was going to make him the offer of a lifetime… he quit! He renounced his God, me, and gave up war.” Aphrodite raised an eyebrow so he explained. “Apparently, he was getting married and in order to make his wife and new father-in-law happy, he settled down and became a farmer.” Ares seemed to stare off into nothing, clearly lost in the past. “I was furious! I thought that if he were going to refuse the God of War, then I would bring war to him. On their wedding night I put him to sleep and came to his wife wearing his image.”

On hearing this, Aphrodite couldn’t help interrupting. “You do have a child! Who is it?”

Ares sadly looked into his sister’s eyes. “The farmer’s name was Herodotus and he lived in a town called Potidaea.”

“…Gabrielle…” Aphrodite whispered.

He continued. “I was… disappointed.” When his sister gave him a thunderous look he quickly added, “I’m the God of War, and she was nothing but a little helpless storyteller. I wasn’t even sure she was mine at first; she looked, nor acted nothing like me. But over time, I saw things in her that were a little different from the other mortals.”

Aphrodite couldn’t help interrupting. “But Bro’, she was like so…”

Ares cut her off. “Innocent? Untouched and un-blooded? I know, and I wanted that to change!” He slammed his fist down on the arm of the chair. “She was physically weak but strong willed and full of noble ideas. I knew she would never look to me or take any instruction from me. That was when I had a brilliant idea.”

The Goddess of Love tenderly grasped his clenched fist to calm him down. “What did you do?”

“Well, after following her progress, stunted though it was… I did notice one redeeming quality about her. She had a way of talking everyone around to her way of thinking. She still isn’t even aware of the effect she has on everyone she meets.” He looked up at his sister. “Tell me ‘Dite, have you never thought it strange that everyone she meets, barring the insane, is willing to fight and die for her? Her belief in people makes them greater than they could ever be by themselves. She
has…” He paused, searching for the right words. “... a power of will that is... extraordinary.”

A look of dawning awareness came over his sister’s face. “Like… You’re so right!”

“Well I saw this and thought I could use it to my advantage. Who better to train Gabrielle for me than my own Protégé? And who better to get Xena to fight again than the God of War’s own daughter?” He shook his head ruefully. “It worked better than I could ever have planned, except I never believed they could share such a bond.”

Aphrodite smirked at him. “It looks like the fates had a little hand in things after all huh bro’?”

“Oh yeah they did. I learned that the only thing stronger than the bond of blood and the bond of oath is a lifebond. The fact that they were soulmates completely took me by surprise and ruined my long term plans. Together they were strong enough to defy me.” He laughed without humor. “Hades, they were strong enough to defy all the gods!”

The Goddess of Love leaned back in her chair and twined ringlets around her finger in thought. “Maybe you were so drawn to Xena because she was your daughter’s soulmate. She was already bonded to war… so to speak, so you felt a small part of that connection.” She gave her head a little shake to clear the unusually deep thoughts. “So… what are you going to do? Are you going to tell her?”

He looked down at the image of his heartbroken daughter. “I don’t know. I’ve done so many unthinkable things to them, trying to steer their course. I don’t think she would ever forgive me.”

Aphrodite protested. “But Ares, not only have they saved you on more than one occasion… but they both returned our powers of Godhood. Gabrielle is a reasonable woman; she would come to understand in time.”

It was a grave man that returned her sincere look. “You don’t understand! I’m responsible for some of the worst things that have happened to her.” He paused then quietly dropped the bombshell on his sister. “I sent Callisto after Perdicus.”

Aphrodite gasped. “Ares, how could you! She was your daughter!”

“You don’t think I know that! Even as a God I know that’s unforgivable. As much as I hated the thought though, I needed her with Xena. She needed to continue learning all the arts of war. But I’m also afraid her time with Xena has turned her off any good nature she may have had toward the gods in general and learning that she was only half mortal may just set her off.”

Aphrodite looked at him kindly. “Is that really what you’re afraid of, or is it that she may reject you the same way your chosen did?”

He shook his hear wearily. “I don’t know… there are so few of us left. I just want to get to know her; my daughter.”

She looked at him a little closer. “Bro… I think you’re growing up!”

“Oh please! Let’s not get carried away.”

The Goddess of Love looked at her brother once again with a smirk and dimple fully in place. “So I ask again, what are you going to do?”

Ares looked into the scrying dish, observing his sleeping daughter. “I’m going to talk to her.” In the blink of an eye and a blue flash, he was gone. Aphrodite looked into the dish to watch the show.
Seconds before his appearance, Gabrielle was awake and aware. She didn’t realize it at the time but it was very similar to the sixth sense Xena often felt before the appearance of any of the Deities. It was much to the God of War’s surprise that upon his appearance next to the bed, the blonde warrior’s hand was already in motion. It happened almost instantaneously, him leaning toward the sleeping woman, and her hand lashing out toward his chest with a dagger. The feel of the blade piercing his leather shirt and skin gave the small woman enough time to get to her feet and on the opposite side of the bed. She was furious and it showed in every line of her nude body.

With dagger at the ready she asked acerbically, “Couldn’t find any willing women tonight Ares?”

He looked at his chest in disbelief as it rapidly healed, then at his daughter with newfound respect. “Nice!” Pasting a smile on his face he asked, “Can’t a guy just stop in for a chat?”

“No! Now get out.”

He fluffed the pillows a little then hopped into the bed, ignoring the brandished blade. He patted the bed next to him. “Come on, just for old time’s sake?”

Realizing he wasn’t going to be an immediate threat, she grabbed the shift she had discarded upon going to bed and put it on. Then with controlled nonchalance, she walked over to the small table and poured herself some water. She set the dagger down to drink but kept the sword leaning against the wall, near at hand. “Is there something in particular you need?” She tilted her head to the side in thought. Bluntly she said, “Xena’s dead, I don’t want to be your new chosen, and there are no wars brewing anywhere in Greece. What could you possibly want from me?”

Looking unusually serious, he answered. “I need to talk with you about something.”

Gabrielle’s body went still. “What… what is it? Does it have something to do with Xena or the Amazons?”

Ares was distracted at first by the reference to the deceased Warrior Princess. “No it doesn’t. It has to do with you.” He stood and approached the Amazon Queen slowly. When he was standing right in front of the rigid woman he reached out and gently ran the back of his hand across her cheek. He pulled it back as she flinched away. Quietly he said, “So different, but with the same core of fire.”

She jerked her head and stepped away from him. “What are you talking about?”

“You and I; us Gabrielle.”

She stepped even further away from the god and grabbed the knife from the table. “How many times do I have to tell you, there is no us and there never will be an us! You have no business with me, now leave.” She looked around for the first time since waking, noticing that Xena’s ghost was nowhere to be found.

Wary of the small women’s speed and fighting prowess, he stepped forward once again. “But I do have business with you, I always have.” He proceeded tentatively. “We are… connected.”

The blonde head was shaking negatively. “That’s a load of centaur dung and you know it! First of all, the only connection I’ve had to anyone besides family is my soulmate. And even if Xena
wasn’t dead, she wasn’t your chosen in the end, and despite rumors you were never her father.”

Ares took a deep breath and looked at her intently. “Not her father, no.”

Gabrielle gasped; her body catching on before her brain. Her voice was full of confusion, low and husky. “Wha… what?”

The talk dark haired god stepped even closer and slowly pushed the dagger to the side. “I am your father, not Herodotus.”

The dagger dropped to the floor forgotten. She sank into the chair behind her and put a hand over her mouth in dismay. After a few seconds the familiar anger washed over her and she stood again, pushing him away. “You’re crazy! Do you really think I’m going to believe you after all that you have done to Xena and I? You would say anything to further your plans, so what are they?”

Ares recovered and stood tall again. “I have no plans and I’m not lying to you now.”

The blonde looked unsure for a second; a million thoughts going through her head. “But how… I don’t understand… it can’t be possible…”

He began to speak, walking slowly towards her at the same time. “Do you remember falling into the river as a child? None of your little playmates were around.”

For the first time since the beginning of the conversation Gabrielle looked slightly frightened. “Yes, I must have been about seven winters old. How did you know about that?”

“Tell me what you remember.”

Gabrielle looked at him hesitantly then began to recount the incident. “I was playing down by the river, even after I had been told not to. That was why no one else was around because I didn’t want to be told on, knowing I would get in trouble from my father.” She looked at the God of War defiantly with the comment about her father, and then continued. “I remembered dropping the stick that I had been attacking the trees with, and leaning over the bank to grab it before it floated away.”

“And?” Ares prodded.

“I fell in. It was so cold and I was so small that it took me away instantly. The only thing I remember after that is a fla…” She stopped and looked at him with dawning amazement before continuing. “… a flash of blue light, then I was dry again and lying on the bank where I originally fell in. I even had my stick back.” She cocked her head and looked at him curiously. “It was you, wasn’t it? But why? I don’t understand.”

He walked over to a chair by the fireplace and took a seat. “If you want to know everything then grab a flask of that good Amazon wine and take a seat. It’s not a long story but I’m sure you’re not going to like it.”

After they each had a cup of wine and she was seated across from him, he began. He took nearly a candlemark but he told her everything. When he was done she took a healthy swig of her wine, then shook her head and drained it entirely. Nervously out of character, the god challenged. “Well… say something!”

The Amazon Queen stood and set her cup down then wandered over to the wall to look at the traditional weapons hanging on display. “I don’t know what to say.”

Ares chuckled trying to lighten the atmosphere. “And you call yourself a bard!”
Gabrielle spun around furious. “I don’t call myself a bard! And I’m sure I have you to thank for that, as well as for many other things in my life.” He started to respond and she cut him off. “No! It’s my turn to speak now and your turn to listen.” He nodded his head and sat back in the chair and she continued. “My entire life has been nothing but a lie. I feel like I’ve been running up hill for years, hoping to reach the summit and now I find out that there is no summit. Life is nothing but an up hill battle with no end in sight. My soulmate and reason for life is dead! Now you tell me that the cruel, manipulative and uncaring bastard who has tormented us from the beginning is my own father. What purpose does it gain you by telling me this, what do you want from me?”

He stood and walked over to her, then looked at the wall full of weapons. They were comforting to him in a time when he was very uncomfortable. “First of all, I agree that I can be cruel and manipulative but I was never uncaring. And second, just because you don’t know something, doesn’t mean what you do know is any less valid. Your life has not been a lie.” He turned to her and was touched by the sad pain in her sea green eyes. “Knowing I was your father instead of Herodotus would not have changed the love and laughter you experienced in life, or the adventures you lived. If anything it would have taken them away. If you think being the child of a god is easy, ask Hercules.” In a move that surprised both of them, the proud god got down on his knees. “Please Gabrielle; I don’t expect anything from you. With the Twilight of Gods upon us, there isn’t much left for me. Followers are dwindling and there isn’t much of anything in the world that I find interesting to me anymore. I’m trying to right past wrongs and find a little direction.”

With dawning understanding as to the God of War’s motives, Gabrielle touched his shoulder lightly. “Stand up Ares. It doesn’t befit the God of War to be kneeling…” She smirked. “…even at the feet of a Queen. You’ve given me a lot to think about.” She shook her head slightly. “I’m not sure I believe everything yet, but I believe enough.”

Ares stood in relief and forced a couple unfamiliar words from his mouth. “Thank you Gabrielle. If you want, Aphrodite knows everything now too and you can ask her for confirmation.”

“She’s a Goddess and your sister, what reason would I have to believe her?”

He gave her an ironic smile. “Because she told me that you were her friend and she’s never lied to either one of us before.”

She nodded once. “Okay, I may want to talk to her then. But for now, I want to be alone.”

The dark God waved his hand in acknowledgement. “Fine, I can do that. I just want you to know that I don’t want anything from you because of what I told you. Just…” He had to clear his throat to say the words again. “…um… thank you again for listening.

With an unreadable look on her face Gabrielle stepped close to him and fingered the slash in his leathers. Then in a move almost too fast to see she grabbed his shirt through the rip and pulled him down to eye level. “I said I believe you, I never said you were forgiven! Now get out!” She pushed him away so hard he stumbled slightly. With a blue flash and no words spoken, he was gone.

When she was sure he was gone she took a seat by the hearth and poured herself another glass of wine. She looked around curiously and whispered, “Xena, where are you?” After finishing her glass she gave up on pretense altogether and started drinking directly from the skin. After nearly half a candlemark more she finally felt familiar hands begin to massage her shoulders. “Where have you been?”

Xena stopped and came around to stand in front of the blonde woman, smiling. “I was out talking to Argo. Why, did you miss me?”

Softening her expression she gave her soulmate a small smile. “Of course I did but I had company.”
The dark ghost frowned. “It’s a little early for Amazon visitors, or would that be a little late?” She shook her head, unsure what the time would be called between midnight and sunrise.

Gabrielle, slightly tipsy replied, “Early, late, it’s all relative…” She snorted. “Relative, hah!”

Xena raised an eyebrow in surprise and glanced at the emptied wine skin. “Gabriel, have you been drinking?”

The blonde growled, “You would drink too if Ares woke you up from a sound sleep.”

Xena paused for a second letting her brain catch up with the blonde’s comments then blurted, “Ares! What did he want, is he looking for you to his new golden child?”

The small Queen chuckled without humor, alerting the tall warrior to bad news forthcoming. “Actually… that’s an interesting choice of words Xe.”

“What, golden child? I don’t get i…” She trailed off when a thought popped into her head. “I’ll kill him, that bastard! Does he think that now I’m dead you’ll carry a child for him to continue his soulless line?”

Gabrielle felt her stomach turn at both, the thought of having a child with her own father and the fact that any of Ares progeny would be soulless. “Uh… no, I can safely say that is the last thing he would ever want. Actually, to that point, he already has a child.”

Xena stopped pacing and stared dumbfounded at her soulmate. “What? He doesn’t have any children, he would have told me!”

The shorter woman temporized. “Well, if he had told you, you would have told me, and I’m the last person he wanted to know.”

“You’ve lost me, can you please focus and explain.”

Gabrielle sat up from her slumped position in the chair. She grabbed the empty wineskin, shook it, and threw it down in disgust.

“Gabrielle…” Xena drew out the small queen’s name.

Gabrielle stood and walked over to the table. She poured herself a cup of water and remained facing away from Xena’s ghost. “Did you know Herodotus used to be a follower of Ares?”

“No, I didn’t.”

The blonde sighed. “Well it surprised me to hear about it. Apparently he was so prized that Ares was going to give him his own army.”

Xena began to move toward the smaller woman. “But he hates warriors, he’s told me so many times.”

“Yes, well, he quit and renounced the God of War when he got married to my mother. He became a farmer so he could settle down and start a family. That made Ares pretty angry.”

Xena reached the other woman and gently pulled her into a hug from behind; lending silent support without the intrusion of eye contact. “Gabrielle?”

The smaller woman revelled in the embrace. When she spoke, her voice was nearly a whisper. “Herodotus is not my father.” At this admission she was forcibly turned in the other woman’s
embrace.

“What?”

Disturbed green eyes looked up into shocked blue. “He’s not my father… Ares is.”

Xena backed away from her, reeling at the small woman’s admission. “That’s crazy! What makes you think he’s your father?”

Gabrielle gave her a crooked smile. “Well, he told me.”

“Oh come on, why would you believe anything that snake says?”

The blonde walked back over to the chair by the hearth. She slumped back into its padded depths and sighed once again. “Because I remember him.” She went on to tell her best friend the entire story and added the few memories she had of the dark god from her childhood.

Gabrielle watched the other woman grow angry and start pacing in front of her. “I can’t believe you kept this from me!”

She jumped up at the other woman’s words and strode forward quickly. Grabbing the taller woman’s shoulders she gave her a shake. “Listen to me, I swear I didn’t know! I only remembered those things from my childhood after we started talking about it.” She turned her friend loose and yelled in frustration. Green eyes burned angrily at the ghost in front of her. “Do you think I like the fact that he is my father?” She turned away and quietly said, “That bastard sent Callisto after my husband just so I would stay with you and keep learning the warrior ways. He was an innocent man and my friend who did nothing wrong except marry me.” An old guilt flared up when she said the last bit. “And even though I want to kill Ares for what he’s done, there is still that small part of me that thanks him for righting the mistake I made in marrying. I have hated that small part for so long.”

Xena started to reach for her. “Gabrielle, I’m so sorry…”

“No, don’t touch me!” Noticing the sun was starting to rise, she quickly dressed in her Amazon leathers. Grabbing the sword and saddlebags from by the table she turned back to the silent ghost. “Don’t follow me either; I need to be alone for a while to think.” She walked out the door leaving the other woman to stand in confusion and silence.
Chapter 4

A few candle marks later Cyane found Varia in the mess hut, taking her morning breakfast. “Varia, Gabrielle is missing.”

The High Queen quickly swallowed the gray, tasteless gruel being served that morning. “What do you mean missing?”

Cyane pulled a bench over to Varia’s table and straddled it. “Well, she left very early this morning. She told the two honor guards stationed outside the hut she was going to check Argo. She told them there was no need to follow her because she was coming right back.” The second-in-command smirked at the spunky Queen’s actions. “Only it seems she didn’t come right back. They came to find me when it became apparent.” She chuckled. “Well not immediately. They panicked for a while, realizing they’d lost their Queen, and then they came to find me.”

Varia gave her a stern look. “You think this is funny?”

“Well… yeah! Come on Varia, she’s not some babe in the woods. She, of all people, can take care of herself. Besides, you know she was chaffing at the idea of all those Amazons following her around.” She reached out and laid her hand on the High Queens to calm her. “She’s probably off working something out in her head.”

Varia protested weakly. “But what if she doesn’t come back?”

Cyane gave her a look. “You know she would tell us if she weren’t coming back. Besides, I already checked and her things are still in her hut. I’m not sure when, but she’ll be back.”

Varia pushed the remainder of her breakfast away. “Fine, I’ll tell the council at this morning’s meeting then we’ll just wait and see.”

Cyane watched her beautiful Queen walk away. She had been in love with Varia practically since they had met. They were so different; where she was very relaxed and easy going, Varia always seemed so intense, so serious. She didn’t think there was any way the beautiful woman could want her. Varia had taken many temporary lovers but none for more than a few days. The knowledge that she, herself, had never been chosen by the High Queen hurt. But rather than risk confessing her feelings, Cyane accepted what she could have, trust and friendship.

Two days later Cyane was walking near the outskirts of the Amazon village. She was drawn to the practice grounds where there was a large gathering of women. From the sounds of things, there was a sparring match in progress, the familiar crack of staves being the first clue. When she pushed her way toward the front she could see Coshana, the training master, and Gabrielle circling each other. Suddenly, in a move nearly too fast to see, Gabrielle dove toward Coshana and at the end of her roll swept the other woman off her feet. Before the training master could recover she was back on her feet and had the end of her staff pinning the woman to the ground at her throat. Coshana said the appropriate words to signal the end of the match, “I yield Queen Gabrielle.” But the golden haired Queen didn’t move an inch. Cyane could see the vacant look in her friend’s eyes and knew there was something wrong. She stepped forward slowly into the dirt practice area and called softly. “Gabrielle…” When the Queen didn’t move, she tried again a little more forcefully. “Queen
Gabrielle, she yields, let her up!” Recognizing that the traveling Queen was in a dangerous state the training master smartly didn’t move. Gabrielle flicked her eyes in Cyane’s direction but didn’t let up on her opponent. Seeing that she was making progress she pressed. “Come on Gabrielle, you won now let her up.”

Without warning a piercing scream came through the crowd. It only took a second for Gabrielle to spin the staff around. When the wood came to rest, one end was directly in front of her face. An arrow was neatly embedded a hands-breadth from the end. Two women from Gabrielle’s honor guard were dragging Coshana’s younger lover through the crowd. A third guard was carrying a bow, mostly likely the weapon used to fire the arrow. The struggling woman was yelling hysterically. “She was going to kill her, she had to be stopped!”

Coshana got up from the ground and slowly walked toward the young woman. “Sefri, what have you done? She’s a Queen; you’ll be sentenced for this!”

All the gathered Amazons watched, waiting to see what would happen, while Cyane shook her head sadly. “Take her to the holding cells.”

The guards started to turn away but stopped at the sound of Gabrielle’s clear voice. “Stop!” They turned with the prisoner between them and waited to see what the Queen wanted. Gabrielle glanced at the staff she still held in her hands and threw it down in disgust. She walked over to Sefri, and nodded to her. Part in acknowledgment of the young woman’s love for the training master, and part to show that Sefri was right. Loud enough for gathered crowd to hear she said, “I don’t know if I would have killed your training master…” She paused for a second and added, “But I could have killed her, and… I may have killed her. Even now, I don’t really know.” When a collective gasp went through the crowd she said, “She was right to try to stop me, protecting a fellow Amazon is paramount, especially against someone who is not in their right mind. I commend her actions.” Then to her guards she said, “Turn her loose, she is not at fault.” Gabrielle then turned to face Coshana and held her arm to clasp in the warrior way. “I am truly sorry for my actions; I’m not sure what came over me. I hope you can forgive me.”

Coshana nodded and gave her a small smile before clapping her arm. “It’s ok Queen Gabrielle, it was battle lust. I have faced it many times…” She chuckled. “…just not from a superior opponent. Usually I can control the younger ones but you were like a blur. It was an honor to spar with you.”

Cyane gave a sigh of relief before yelling to the crowd. “Ok everyone, break it up!” She nodded to the guards to turn Sefri loose and watched as the grateful girl threw her arms around her lover, sobbing. Gabrielle watched the exchange sadly and turned to walk away. “Gabrielle, wait.” She paused, waiting for Cyane to catch up. “Did you just get back today?”

Gabrielle nodded and continued walking toward the center of the city, where her hut was located. Cyane reminded her of herself years ago, when she first started traveling with Xena. Meddlesome and full of questions. “Yes, I had to… get away to think for awhile.” She smiled to herself and waited for the questions to pour forth. She wasn’t disappointed.

“What where did you go, what were you doing? Why didn’t you tell anyone you were leaving?” When Gabrielle didn’t answer immediately she said quietly so no prying ears could hear, “What’s going on Gabrielle?”

Gabrielle thought for a second to try to decide what to say and how to say it. Cyane patiently waited while the other Queen walked in silence. When they finally reached the traveling Queen’s hut, she invited Cyane inside. They took seat at the table against one wall and Gabrielle poured them cups of cool water. The pitcher had been recently filled, most likely by one of the many
runners the village had to serve the Queens. The liquid was gloriously sweet after the strenuous match. When she had collected her thoughts enough, she began. “I had a strange visitor in my hut the other night.”

Cyane was dismayed and started to stand. “What! Your guards never saw anyone, how could that happen? We must notify the captain of the guards immediately!”

Gabrielle quickly grabbed Cyane’s shoulder and pushed her friend back into the chair. “Sit down; no one can stop him from going where he pleases.”

“Him, a man in our village? But who was it?”

Gabrielle looked at her friend and still felt very alone. “It was Ares. He was here to give me a little information.”

Cyane settled once again. “Oh? Was it something to do with the Amazons?”

“No, just me.”

Tired of dancing around the conversation she verbally pushed the small Queen. “Gabrielle, just spit it out already. What ever it is, it will be alright.”

Gabrielle laughed at her comment and managed to sound more tortured than mirthful. “Don’t you see? Nothing is ever alright! I’m not who anyone thought I was, not myself at all!”

Cyane thought maybe Varia was right. Maybe Gabrielle’s grief had pushed the woman over the edge. “I don’t understand; what did Ares have to say to you?”

“Cyane, I’m his daughter. I’m only half mortal, half human.”

The other queen sat back surprised. Never in a million years would have guessed this. “Wow… that’s uh… wow! Are you sure?” Gabrielle nodded. “Wow!” She looked at her friend’s sad face. “But what’s the matter, why is it such a big deal?”

“You don’t understand! I’m the daughter of the God of War! He’s a soulless bastard, if there ever was one. All this time I thought the violence was Xena’s influence on my life. Now I find out that because of who my father is, it was me all along. I was born pre-disposed to violence.” She hit her own chest with a closed fist to emphasize her point. “All the anger and rage that has been building inside me since Xena’s death is just the real me coming out!” Gabrielle stood and started pacing. “You know, I asked her once…” She looked into Cyane’s warm brown eyes then continued. “… I said, Am I who I am, or what you made me?” She shook her head. “I know that single question caused her so much pain and it turns out I was completely off base. I am only myself. I am the person who was touched by Xena, manipulated and created by the God of War, and the full potential of what was inside me all along.”

Cyane tried to protest. “No… that’s not true at all…”

She was interrupted again by the weary Queen. “Cyane, I could have killed Coshana today, you saw me. I wasn’t even there; it was all instinct. And now I know I have my father to thank for this core of rage inside me.” She sighed and sat back down, rubbing a hand across her eyes. “Even now, I’m not sure what would have happened if that arrow hadn’t come when it did. I don’t know if I would have backed down.”

“Of course you would have, I’m sure of it!”
The blonde looked at her Amazon sister sadly. “How do you know when I’m not so sure myself? I WANTED to finish it; to go for the kill. I could taste it on my tongue like good wine.”

Cyane stared back into intense green eyes that were swimming in pain. “Listen to me. Everyone feels anger but you have a core of goodness, not rage. Even today, you purposely chose a defensive weapon to challenge instead of one designed to kill, such a sword. That says a lot.”

“You don’t understand. I wasn’t thinking that clearly when I came back into the village. I probably only chose the staff because it’s my best weapon, and I wanted to humiliate her.

Her friend gently took her hand. “No, you grabbed the staff because it’s your first weapon. In a time of hurt, anger, and turmoil, you chose the thing that comforted you the most.

Gabrielle pulled her hand away. “You just don’t get it. The fact is, I know what’s in my blood. I’m only good because I choose to be.”

Cyane chuckled lightly. “But isn’t that the point? Every one of us is born with the potential to be good or evil. It’s the choices we make throughout our lives that ultimately decide what side of the line we fall on. And you have made conscious choice to serve the greater good.

The blonde looked down sadly. “Yeah well, I’m a little sick of the greater good right now. And I’m just afraid that everyone will hate me…” Quietly she added, “Xena will hate me.”

Cyane contemplated what to say next, wanting to help the woman before her. “Gabrielle, you are a wonderful person and a magnificent Queen. You’ve spent your entire adult life helping others; no one is going to hate you.” She paused for a second and added, “And Xena is dead Gabrielle, its time you let her go.”

Gabrielle stood abruptly, knocking her chair over. “No! She’s always with me. She’s real to me!”

Cyane remained seated and spoke gently. “She’s only real to you because you want her to be. She’s inside you, heart and soul.”

“No, that can’t be true! I’m not making her up. She talks to me, touches me. She tells me things…”

When she faded off the other women added, “Things you already knew? Do you wake to the comfort of your own hands?”

Gabrielle sank to the floor on her knees and hung her head. She whispered in a small voice. “Yes.”

Cyane got up and came over to Gabrielle. She sunk down on the floor next to her and simply held her. “Gabrielle, people have already accepted you for everything you are. Whether it’s a bard, a Queen, a warrior, or a healer, they don’t care. It’s about what you bring into other people’s lives that makes a difference, not your parentage. It’s time for you to accept yourself, accept the person that you’ve become. You may be lonely without your soulmate, but as long as there are people around, you will never be alone.”

Gabrielle accepted the embrace, friendship and words of the other woman. After drying her tears she turned her face toward her friend and fellow queen. “Thank you, you don’t know how much your words and support mean to me and I will take it all into consideration.” Cyane nodded and stood, understanding that she was being dismissed. She knew Gabrielle had much to come to terms with so she was willing to let her be, for a while.

After Cyane left Gabrielle decided to take a nap. She was hungry and exhausted but still keyed up from the sparring match. After undressing she lie in her bed and let the events of the past few days
roll through her thoughts. She especially thought about Cyane’s words to her. She’s only real to you because you want her to be. It was right after that particular thought went through her head that Xena appeared. The ghost looked wary, unsure of her reception.

“Gabrielle… is this ok?” Gabrielle didn’t respond she just stared at the ghost of her best friend. “Please Gabrielle, speak to me. I’m sorry for everything and if you want me to leave just say the word and I’ll come back later.”

Finally the blonde Queen gave up trying to convince herself that the Warrior’s Shade wasn’t really there. “It’s ok, you can stay.” Xena seemed to slump with relief. “I’ve been trying really hard to convince myself that you’re nothing but a figment of my imagination. But even with my skills of persuasion I couldn’t make myself believe it.”

Xena looked alarmed at her words. “What? You can’t do that! Gabrielle, I’m only real because you want me to be, don’t you see?”

Gabrielle gave her a strange look. “Funny, that’s exactly what Cyane said. Maybe she was right, maybe I am making it all up so I don’t have to let you go.”

Xena quickly got into the bed and took Gabrielle into her arms. She ran a gentle finger across her soulmate’s lips then kissed them lightly. “She’s right in a way. It’s your strength of will that holds me here. It’s that strength that makes me real.” She ran a finger across the other woman’s jaw and down her neck. Gabrielle shivered under her caress. “You are the reason I’m here. It’s because you want me here so much, that I am.”

Gabrielle tensed in sudden realization, and a split second of understanding flitted through her conscious mind. “What!”

Aphrodite had been watching the Queen carry on, what looked like, a one-sided conversation. At first she thought maybe her brother was right, that maybe Gabrielle had finally went crazy. But in that instant of Gabrielle’s dawning awareness, Xena’s image briefly appeared to the Goddess of Love. It was only for a few fleeting seconds but Aphrodite saw, clear as day, Xena lying next to the smaller blonde. “Son of a Bacchae! Ares!” She had to tell her brother.

Back in Gabrielle’s hut, Xena had silenced the younger woman with a kiss. “Shh, it’s ok. I don’t mind really, considering the alternative. Let’s not think about anything for a while and accept the fact that I’m here in whatever form I can be, and enjoy it.”

Gabrielle relaxed into her best friend’s arms and sighed. Her exhaustion was finally catching up to her. “Xena, could you hold me please? I’m so tired…” Though it was late morning, she was asleep before she could even finish the sentence. As requested, Xena was content to hold her while she slept. They would have to finish the conversation later.
Ares appeared in the Chamber of Gods seconds after his sister called him. He had a sword in one hand and was busy trying to tie his trousers with the other. “I’m here now, where’s the fire sis?”

Aphrodite was so excited she didn’t even bother teasing him about his state of undress. “I saw her! Gabrielle’s not crazy, I saw her!”

Ares propped his sword against a chair, having forgotten the sheath in his haste. “Saw who? What exactly are you yelling about ‘Dite? I was kind of busy with that spicy little…”

The Goddess of Love cut him off with a wave of her perfectly manicured hand. “Oh please, I don’t care about your little trysts. I finally saw her.” She pointed at the scrying dish as if that would help him understand what she was trying to say.

Ares walked over to the dish which showed his sleeping daughter. “Yeah, so? It’s just Gabrielle.”

His sister stamped a delicate foot. “I know she’s the only one there now! I’m telling you I was watching a little while ago and I saw her talking to someone. Just when I thought maybe you were right about her being crazy, there was a flicker and Xena appeared.”

Ares paled noticeably. “What? That’s impossible!”

Aphrodite went to stand by her brother. “It’s true, it was only for a few seconds but I saw her very clearly. There is something odd going on with our little Queen.” She tilted her head and looked up at Ares in speculation. “Perhaps she has more power than we expected. I mean, we know she’s not immortal. Both her, and Xena have died. And she’s not overly strong like Hercules. But she must have gotten something from you besides that bardic tongue and her gift of persuasion.”

Ares sat in a nearby chair and stroked his goatee in thought. “Hmm… perhaps. But what could it be?”

Aphrodite stood in silence for a minute, thinking. “Ares, what if…” She faded off, afraid to voice her idea.

Her brother looked up at her expectantly. “What?”

“Bro’, what if you weren’t far off the mark when you said she had an amazing power of will? What if that’s the ability that was bestowed on her from your blood?”

Ares at first discounted the thought. “‘Dite, that’s outrageous! No one has that…” He stopped, thinking about it a little more. “But she’s only a demi-god; she shouldn’t have that much power!”

The Goddess of Love sat in a chair next to him. “What if what happened to her in Jappa increased her power?”

They looked at each other for a second; wracking godly brains for the answer. Suddenly Ares blurted it out. “It’s the green dragon on her back!” He jumped up and began to pace. “It carries much power, it seems to store and amplify power. At first I thought it was merely defensive but I
have seen it help her in battle on occasion. I’ve witnessed arrows bounce off her back as though they were stopped by the hardest of steel armor. She never even noticed; I don’t think she even realizes the power it carries.” He looked at his sister in amazement. “It must be amplifying her power of will. But to what extent…”

Aphrodite glanced back into the bowl, watching the sleeping woman. “Do you think you should warn her?”

Ares looked at his sister sharply. “Warn her about what?”

“Well duh! If she can make Xena real, if only partially, doesn’t that endanger those 40,000 souls the Warrior Princess was trying to save?”

Ares waved his hand negligently. “That’s not a problem. I did some checking after Xena died, you know, calling in a few favors. That little friend of hers, Akemi, lied.” He made a face. “Big surprise, I know. Xena was the only one who didn’t seem to know what a little conniver she was.”

His sister gave him the evil eye. “You’re like, just telling me this now!”

“Well yeah, it’s not like either one of us had the power to bring her back! There was no sense getting our hopes up, or Gabrielle’s either. And it would only hurt both of them, knowing Xena died for nothing.” He grinned, seeing a way he could get into his daughters good graces after all. “But now, what if I could convince Gabrielle that she could bring Xena back on her own? For that, she just may forgive me for all the things I have done to them in the past.”

Aphrodite tried to slow him down. “Bro’, you like, don’t even know if she can do it. What if she’s not strong enough to bring her all the way back?”

“'Dite, I think she is. After all, that’s the beauty of her power. As long as her will is strong enough, I think it will work. We just have to convince her that it’s possible.”

“Hmm… you could be right. So do you want to tell her now?”

Ares looked into the water at his sleeping daughter and shook his head. “No, I want you to tell her.” He smiled ruefully. “The last time I woke her up I had to replace my leather shirt. She won’t hurt you though; I have faith in her warrior instinct. You aren’t a threat, therefore she won’t respond like you are.”

The Goddess of Love gazed at her sleeping friend, a little unsure. “Okay… if you say so.” She looked up at her brother and gave him a little smirk, showing off her trademark dimple. “Wish me luck!” With a pink flash and fluttering rose petals, she disappeared. Ares sat down to watch his sister at work.

Aphrodite popped in quietly, without the usual fanfare that accompanied her presence. She took a step toward the sleeping woman, crossing the lazy rays of afternoon sunlight shining through the window. Gabrielle, tired of pretending to be asleep, addressed the Goddess. “Good afternoon Aphrodite.”

The curly haired blonde gasped in surprise. “Like, how did you know I was here?”

Gabrielle turned over and smiled at her friend, and what she now knew as her father’s sister. How strange. “I felt you. So what brings you here on this fine afternoon?” She sat up and ran a hand through short hair, to straighten it a bit after her nap.

Aphrodite took a second to appraise the attractive little queen. She shook a few lascivious thoughts
from her head and walked over to the bed. With a little hop and squeak, she got in next to her the green eyed blonde. Patting the fluffy down mattress, she said “Wow, this is actually kind of nice. They treat you Queens here pretty well, huh?”

Gabrielle gave her a look, wondering what the Goddess wanted. “Yeah, pretty good.” She watched the brightly smiling goddess for a second longer then prompted, “Aphrodite?”

“Hmm? Oh… yeah… right. I bet you want to know why I’m here huh?”

Gabrielle drawled, “Well, yeah, that would be top of the list.”

The Goddess of Love carefully studied her nails and attempted to answer. “Well… see… Ares and I have been talking.” She looked up at the little Amazon Queen and Gabrielle stared back expectantly. Still unsure of the full extent of her niece’s power, she decided not to beat around the bush. “Sweet Pea, you know you have power, right?”

Gabrielle cocked her head and gave Aphrodite a slightly confused look. “Huh? What kind of power?”

“Well duh, like your demi-god power!”

Gabrielle looked at the curly-haired Goddess in consternation. “That’s ridiculous! I don’t have any power” Aphrodite looked at her seriously. “Sweetie, you’ve always had power.” She reached out with her finger and lightly tapped the Queen on the crown of her head then the cloth covering her heart. “You have the power of will.” Gabrielle stared at her in disbelief so she added, “Oh, it’s a subtle power but very strong. Your willpower has won you the skills that have made you a great warrior, bard and hero. It’s that same willpower that turns your belief in others into a driving force.”

The Amazon Queen sat and stared, with her mouth wide open. The idea was slowly taking root but not really sinking in. “Uh… bu… what are you talking about?”

“Think about it, Miss Thing. What was one of your greatest beliefs? It was in the goodness that Xena possessed. At least half of her great turn around and redemption is due to your faith in her; because you believed in her.” Gabrielle was slowly shaking her head negatively so she thought of another example. “It’s your will power and drive that have made you one of the greatest fighters.”

Gabrielle tried to interrupt. “But Xena…”

Aphrodite waved a hand and cut her off. “Do you think Xena could have trained just anyone? Face it sister; when you set your mind to something, it usually happens. Period!”

Suddenly a haunted look flickered across Gabrielle’s face. She whispered quietly, “Except Xena is still dead.”


Grief and confusion bled into instant seriousness. Gabrielle grabbed Aphrodite’s hand in an iron grip. “Tell me!”

The Goddess of Love winced in discomfort. “Sweet Pea, I was watching you tonight.” Gabrielle looked dismayed so she hurried on. “I like to check in on you once in a while. You are my friend, and I worry about you.” She held up a hand. “And before you ask, no, I didn’t know you were Ares’ daughter until he told you.” Continuing on, she said “So anyway, I was watching earlier and you looked like you were talking to someone.” She fluttered her free hand to emphasize her speech.
“So, like I kind of thought maybe you were cracking up. But suddenly, she appeared.” She looked into bright green eyes that were pleading for hope. “I saw Xena lying in your arms.”

Gabrielle released Aphrodite’s hand and sat in disbelief and silence. She thought of the past year’s heartbreak; one suffered every day and night she spent without her best friend by her side. She felt broken. She felt empty. She lost her heart with her bardic craft; she lost her soul with Xena. Feeling battered by the events of the recent and far past, the Amazon Queen was unsure if she even knew how to hope anymore. The only hope she knew of was not good. Hope was her daughter, hope was evil, and hope was loss. And Gabrielle, the Battling Bard of Potidaea, and Amazon Queen, was tired of losing. Her voice broke with those tentative, verbal, first steps toward healing. “Hu… umm… how could you see her? No one can see her, but me.”

Aphrodite looked back at the sad woman and wanted to take away all her pain. Many times the Goddess of love wished she had the power to bring Xena back, if only for the sake of her mortal friend. It was her job to know of matters of the heart and these women were meant to be together. It is the harshest punishment in the world to separate two soulmates. “I’m not sure how I was able to see her, but in that instant I did. Ares and I think the fact that Xena is real to you, and that I was able to see her for a few short seconds, may be a manifestation of your power. He thinks the reason you have grown so strong is due to the tattoo you received in Jappa. It is very powerful.”

Gabrielle sat back in a rush. Stunned, she said, “You’re saying that the reason I’ve been able to see Xena since her death and the reason that you were able to see her for a few seconds is that my so called power has kept her partly alive?”

“Well… yeah!”

A look of dismay flickered across her face. “But that negates the whole reason she needed to stay dead! What about all those souls?”

Aphrodite hated to be the one to break the news to Gabrielle but there was no one else. “Gabrielle… Akemi lied. They are all safe; Xena never needed to remain dead for them to continue on to their destination.” The Goddess of Love saw the anguish in her friend’s eyes and reacted instantly, pulling the young queen into a strong hug. “I’m so sorry for all the pain you’ve both been through.” All she could do was hold onto her while Gabrielle sobbed onto her shoulder.

When Gabrielle calmed down Aphrodite materialized a pink hanky from thin air. The border of hearts around the edge of the soft cloth served to bring a very small smile to the bard’s face. Gabrielle dutifully blew her nose then handed the hanky back. The Goddess of Love just scrunched up her face in disgust and made it disappear again. Even though Gabrielle’s heart was hurting for the needless year of pain, she suddenly had new focus. She was not about to let this one chance at happiness escape her grasp and if two gods thought there was a possibility, then she was going to try. She looked up at the curly-haired goddess with a glint of determination in her eyes. “So how do I bring her back?”

Aphrodite sighed and gave her a slightly rueful smile. “Well, Ares and I talked about it and… we don’t really know.”

Gabrielle thought for a second then got out of bed and dressed in her Amazon leathers. Afterwards, she went to the door and spoke with the guards outside in a low voice. Aphrodite watched the young queen, marveling at the changes that have take place over the years. Where there was once a shy, slightly naïve young woman, there was now a strong, confident leader, and a very beautiful woman. She had a feeling that was the potential Xena saw so many years ago, besides the obvious connection of the heart. Gabrielle paced for a few minutes before there was a quiet knock on the door. She said a few more words and retrieved the three chilled wineskins from the woman outside.
then quickly shut the door again. After placing the skins on the table she turned back to her aunt.

“You, I, and Ares are going to have a little chat.” Suddenly, the queen’s attention was diverted to something off to the side. The look on her face was full of love, and for the first time in a long time, hope. When Aphrodite looked, she saw nothing there.

Xena looked back and forth between Gabrielle and Aphrodite with a confused look on her face. “Gabrielle, what’s she doing here?”

Aphrodite’s mystery was solved when Gabrielle started talking to the empty space. “Xena, I’m so glad you’re here!” She walked over to the tall warrior and threw her arms around her in a tight embrace.

Xena threw a curious, and slightly jealous, look at the Goddess of Love sitting in her soul mate’s bed. Her mind suddenly flashed back to their time with Caligula. Then with a shake of her head, she focused on the woman in her arms. She could feel a slight tremor coming from the smaller woman so she pulled back only to look into teary green eyes. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

The bard pulled away and wiped her eyes. She glanced at Aphrodite, then back at Xena before answering. “They think I have some sort of power and that I can bring you back with it. All the way back Xena!”

The Warrior Princess cocked her eyebrow in surprise then looked at the Goddess of Love. Aphrodite was showing a polite, if somewhat clueless, look of interest in the one-sided conversation. She didn’t want to cause her soulmate any more pain, but she didn’t want her to get her hopes up unnecessarily either. “Gabrielle…” She sighed and ran a hand through long dark hair. “… Are you sure about that? It seems… I don’t know, kind of far fetched.”

Gabrielle gave a slightly hysterical giggle then immediately cast a serious look at the woman who haunted her dreams every night. “I know, but it’s the only chance I’ve got to get you back!” She gave the tall woman a sad but determined look. Quietly she said, “Xena… I need this.”

Xena took one look at the keeper of her heart and relented. “Ok, so do they know what to do?”

The queen sighed again and walked over to the table containing the wine. She poured three glasses and corked the skin. With one look toward the goddess in her bed, then another toward Xena she said, “No, but the four of us are going to find out.” She took a calming breath then called, “Ares, we need to talk to you! Quit spying and get down here.”

Ares appeared in a blue flash, leaning casually against the wall. “You rang?”

Xena immediately bristled, not liking the thought of having to work with the God of War for anything. “Do we really need his help?”

Ares, like his sister, stood quietly while Gabrielle addressed the empty place next to her. “Yes Xena, they’re the ones who think I have the power. And, since they are gods themselves… they probably would have some idea how my power could be utilized to bring you back.”

Ares, feeling something he couldn’t really identify, addressed his daughter. “Is she really here?”

Gabrielle, seeing his face, gave him an understanding smile. “Yes she is.”

He pushed away from the wall and walked into the room further, facing the space Gabrielle had been addressing. “Xena, I know you may not believe me… but I have really missed you.”

Xena growled at the dark man. Gabrielle chuckled at the way some things never change. “She’s
growling at you right now.”

Ares backed away slightly, unsure of exactly what the not-quite-real Xena could do. “Xena, I swear to you, ‘Dite and I will do anything we can to help bring you back.”

His sister chimed in, “Yeah, like the Warrior Babe and the Warrior Bard need to be together. That’s just the way it’s supposed to be!”

Both Xena and Gabrielle had to smile at the Goddess of Love’s words. In their eyes, truer words were never spoken.

In their eyes, truer words were never spoken. Gabrielle took over the gathering with the ease born of many hours of negotiating as an Amazon queen. “Why don’t we all grab a cup of wine and sit down. I left orders for me not to be disturbed, so we can talk as long as we need to.” Within minutes, the three breathing bodies were seated by the crackling fire, started with a snap of Aphrodite’s fingers. They all had wine and were ready to begin their strategy session. Gabrielle looked over at Xena, who was leaning against the mantle. “Xena, any time you want to jump in with something, just say it. I’ll let the other two know what is said.”

“Fine.” The dark haired woman was willing to help out, but she couldn’t keep from worrying that the small blond seated next to her was getting her hopes up for nothing.

Gabrielle began. “Alright, so we think I have some special power. And we think that this power can bring Xena back to life.” She turned her gaze toward the sibling gods. “So why exactly do you think these things are possible?” Aphrodite and Ares started to speak at once but stopped again at the blond Queen’s raised hand. “One at a time, please.”

Xena snorted humorously at the display, mumbling under her breath, “…Gods!”

Finally Ares took over and explained their reasons for belief in Gabrielle’s power. Xena and Gabrielle listened silently while Aphrodite nodded at the appropriate parts of the explanation. Nervously Ares concluded, “…and so, that’s what we think.”

Xena spoke into the silence that followed. Though the two immortals in the room couldn’t hear what was said, they knew Xena was speaking by the way the small blond adopted a listening pose, aimed toward the fireplace. “Gabrielle… the problem I see is that for this to really work, you have to be completely convinced.”

Gabrielle nodded then turned her attention back to the Gods. “Xena says I have to be completely convinced for this to work and…” She paused, letting reality seep in a little bit. “…and I don’t think I am. I’m not sure how to make myself believe something when the consequence of failure is to feel the pain and grief from those first few days, all over again.” She looked down and quietly added, “I think it would kill me a second time.”

Ares jaw was clenched in helpless anger at his daughter’s pain. “I don’t know what to say that can help you, Gabrielle.” He got up to retrieve the wineskin from the table then sat back down and refilled everyone’s glasses. “There has to be something that can prove to all of us, that can give you hope of a positive outcome.”

Ares was taking a sip of his wine when suddenly his sister sat forward and exclaimed, “Hey, I’ve got it!”

The dark god scowled at his impetuous sister then futilely tried to wipe the spilled wine from the front of his leathers. Finally he gave up and waved the mess away with a negligent hand and a blue flash. Xena and Gabrielle had witnessed the spill and chuckled at the God of War’s actions. Then they waited for the, now silent, Goddess’ idea. She looked up at the expectant faces and gave her
head a little shake and flashed a dimpled grin. “Oh! Oops, sorry I’ll get on with it.” Not used to being the one with the ideas she cleared her throat nervously. “So, like, what if Gabrielle went to visit an Oracle? I mean, wouldn’t an Oracle give a prediction that would either confirm, or negate the events that we think would happen and possibly even tell her what she would need to do?”

Ares and Gabrielle looked thoughtful, while Xena remained skeptical. The Warrior Princess spoke up, with wisdom born of years of experience. “Yeah right!”

Gabrielle threw her soulmate a stern look. “Xena!” She looked back at the two gods apologetically. “She’s not being very helpful.”

Xena stepped away from the mantle and circled behind her bard. With the first gentle touch to the seated woman’s shoulders, she began to relax. Xena tried to explain her reaction to the idea in a more tactful way. “Gabrielle, you know that Oracles are notoriously hard to decipher. What if you can’t tell what the prophesy means?”

Gabrielle turned her head and looked up at the keeper of her heart. “Xena, at this point I’ll take anything that sounds positive. I’ll bring you back if it’s the last thing I do!” With a tender smile and subtle nod from her best friend, she turned back around. Her determination was clear to everyone in the room. “So, where can I find the nearest Oracle?”
Chapter 6

Aphrodite looked apologetic and shrugged her shoulders. “Beats me, it just sounded good at the time.”

Ares gave his sister an annoyed look. “Gee thanks sis, you are sooo helpful!” He gave Gabrielle a look that managed to be both smug and worried. “Well, I happened to know where the nearest Oracle is located. Unfortunately, it’s about a week’s march south of here, in the town of Preveza.”

The diminutive Queen cocked her head and looked back at him. “Can’t you just…” She twirled her finger in the air near her head. “… Pop us over?”

Ares scratched his temple absently. “Well… it’s like this… there is some rule about Gods helping mortals seek prophesy from the Oracles. If we help in any way, the Oracle will know. And if the Oracle knows, they won't give you a prophesy.”

Gabrielle cast a look in Xena’s direction when the dark haired woman snorted and mumbled, “Figures.” She looked back at the two Gods across from her. “Well, that’s no big deal then. I’ll just get some supplies together and Argo and I will take a little trip. It won’t take nearly as long on horseback.”

The God of War shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Well…” He trailed off, unsure how to add the rest of what he knew.

Aphrodite looked over at him. “Like, now what? Is there a something else she should know?”

In a low voice, Gabrielle prompted, “Ares…”

With a sigh Ares got to his feet and walked over to the mantle, coincidentally where Xena was standing. She quickly moved out of the way, not wanting to touch the God, even in spirit state. Facing away from the two solid women in the room, he dug a nail into the wood and spoke.

“Unfortunately, there is something between here and the temple of the Oracle that may prevent you from getting there.” He turned around to explain. “Bartos. He controls the town of Louros, about halfway between here and there. It’s the only road that heads into that southern region, so you would have to go through his troops to get to the oracle.”

“Bartos?” Two feminine voices said in unison.

Before Ares could answer, Xena spoke up. Though the other two were oblivious to her words, Gabrielle listened intently. “Bartos the Bastard. That’s what we used to call him years ago. I can’t imagine he’s gotten any nicer.”

The blond Queen repeated the name. “Bartos the Bastard?”

Ares looked at her. “Yeah, that’s the one. He’s one of mine, but I can’t tell him to leave you alone because…”

Two women and a ghost finished his words for him. “… That would be directly helping.”
Gabrielle’s mind ran through a few different scenarios before turning her attention back to Xena. “How tough is he?”

Xena knew what her soulmate was thinking. “Gabrielle, we’ll find another way. You don’t have to go up against him…”

The smaller woman’s voice was husky and tinged with anger as she cut her off. “No! He is between me and the possibility of getting you back. So either you’re going to tell me what I need to know, or I’m going to go in blind, because quitting is not an option.” The two Gods listened with slightly bemused looks on their faces. The understood the gist of what was being said, but the one-sided conversations were a little unnerving.

Gabrielle moved her gaze from Xena to Areas. “Start talking.”

Ares waved vaguely toward where he assumed Xena was standing. “Go ahead Xena; you fill her in while I pop out to check on something.” He looked at Gabrielle and his sister; I’ll be back in a few candle marks.” With that, he disappeared, taking the wine with him. While directly helping wasn’t allowed, there was more than one way to skin a cat. And he would do whatever he could to help his daughter, and perhaps win her back to his side. Oh, and that love stuff too.

Aphrodite, looking thoughtful for a second, added “Yeah, like, I’m going to check on a few things too.” She smiled. “I’ll be back when Ares returns.” Then with a poof of pink glitter, she disappeared.

Gabrielle watched the falling sparkles for a few seconds then turned her gaze back to Xena. “Okaaaay, you were saying?”

The taller woman was silent for nearly a minute, biting her bottom lip with thought. Then turning her cerulean gaze to the blond queen, she said “You need an army.”

Meanwhile, Ares was back at Olympus, sitting on the Throne of War. Ares had a plan. Well, it was more of inkling of a beginning of a plan, but it would have to do. Gabrielle would need an army, and he knew just where she could get one. He had seen her fight, all she needed to do is challenge Bartos and she would get free passage and win his army, all at once. And Bartos was definitely arrogant enough to go into the challenge overconfident, against what he will consider a ‘mere’ woman. The God of War couldn’t help his scheming ways; it was just part of his nature.

The question was, how would he get Gabrielle to go along with it? He took a sip of the wine he filched from Gabrielle’s hut, rolling it around his tongue like the ideas in his head. After a few more minutes, he had it. He would direct Bartos to attack the Amazon nation, which would cause Gabrielle to play right into his plans. He knew his daughter well, from the many years of watching her. He knew she wouldn’t want to risk her precious Amazonian sisters if she could narrow down the risk to just herself. Xena “The Overprotective Nurse-Maid” Warrior Princess might have a low opinion of the Queen’s fighting skills, but he was positive Gabrielle could beat Bartos in a challenge. Sure the man was mean as dog spit, with greater than average strength and intelligence, and decades of war experience. But Gabrielle was smart, wicked fast with her sword, partially invulnerable from her tattoo, and after all, she was the daughter of a war god. Finishing his wine, he laughed to an empty throne room; already enjoying his well thought plans. Next stop, Louros.

Strangely enough, Aphrodite was having the same idea as the two fierce warriors. She figured,
there was no way Gabrielle was going to do this alone, she would need her friends. And since two of the Queen’s closest remaining friends were also in need of assistance from the Goddess of Love, she was perfectly legitimate in her interference. After all, it was part of her job to help two hearts find each other. And, if in the process of doing her job, Gabrielle gets the assistance she needs, bonus! Floating and invisible, she followed a certain amazon queen through the village. It was time to put her plan into action.

Gabrielle looked at Xena in confusion. “What?”

The ghostly warrior started pacing. “Ok, hear me out. You need to get through to the oracle, and going by yourself is suicide.” She stopped long enough to glance into the green eyes of her soul mate. “But I know Bartos. He is mean, dirty, and incredibly conniving. However, he is not stupid. It would take more than half of the eligible Amazon fighters, but I believe with a large enough show of force, he will let you through with no real trouble. He would not risk his army, without the incentive of a lot of dinars. And since the Unified Tribes are not currently at war with anyone…” She stopped and looked at the blond queen. “What do you think?”

Gabrielle stared back at her incredulously. “No! Absolutely not!” She cut her hand through the air to emphasize to her words. “I will not ask that of them, I cannot take that risk with their lives, Xena.” Sadly she looked at her longtime friend. “They don’t owe me anything. And I cannot ask them to risk all their lives for one person, no matter how much that person means to me.”

Xena silently disagreed with how much the Amazon nation actually owed Gabrielle, and protested “But Gabrielle…” only to be interrupted by her fair companion.

“No Xena. We need to find another way.”

Xena sighed and walked over to her. Wrapping her arms around the other woman, she whispered “I love you, Gabrielle, and I don’t want to see you hurt.” Feeling the comforting embrace of her soul mate, the shorter woman would only sigh, and return the hug.

After long minutes of connection, she collapsed into her chair. Taking a sip from her cup, she asked “What if I sneak through the area at night?” She looked at Xena. “You know how stealthy I am now, even with Argo; I’ve made it through similar situations.”

Xena walked over to her and knelt at her feet, resting a hand on Gabrielle’s knee. “Bartos is different, Gabrielle. He is obsessive about security, and keeps a large contingent of warriors guarding the only good pass through the area.” With a serious look she added “You will have to go through the Louros Gate to get the western part of the Ambracian Gulf.”

Looking hurt, Gabrielle whispered “Are you questioning my abilities Xe?”

The warrior stood up in frustration. “No! But…” She thought for a second, trying to come up with a good way to explain what taking on Bartos and his army would be like. Suddenly, it came to her. “Do you remember the time you were poisoned, and I took on the entire Persian army?” When her companion nodded, she went on. “Well it will be like that, only you will be completely alone. You will have no help, no foreshadowing of events, and no cache of weapons to draw from.” Even in the bloodiest of my warlord days, I would not have taken him on in those circumstances.”

Gabrielle sighed and looked down at her hands. Strong and calloused, she knew what they were capable of, but she also knew when she was beat. Looking up into familiar blue eyes, she replied “Ok. We’ll find another way. But I need to speak with Ares, so I can find out just how many troops
Bartos actually has. I need to know exactly what I’m up against, to effectively form a plan.”
Suddenly feeling restless, and knowing the war god, her father, would not return for a while, she
decided to go see Argo. “I’m going to check your horse, want to come with?”
Xena smiled. “Sure.”

Ares materialized in the town of Louros, and glanced around with his hands on his hips. With a
sneer, he muttered “Some things never change.” Seeing the God of War appear in the center of the
warrior town, one of the guards on duty took off at a jog to get Bartos. The rest went over to Ares,
and dropped to a knee in front of him.
A single representative spoke up. “Lord Ares, we have sent a runner for General Bartos. How may
we serve you?”

The handsome War God smirked. “Good to see the value of a God still has some weight around
here.”
Moments later, a large battle scarred man strode around the corner of the nearest building. “Lord
Ares, what a pleasant surprise!” He strode up, kneeling briefly in front of his god, before
continuing. “Is all well? Do you have a job for me, my lord?”

Though Bartos was widely known as the meanest bastard around, no one would deny his strength
and cunning as a leader. At first glance, he was equipped with well-maintained armor, a
broadsword, and gauntlets of the finest Thracian metal; he seemed to be the very picture of a War
God’s dream. As a matter of fact, he had won many followers for Ares. Unfortunately for Bartos,
he was nothing more than a pawn in the God of War’s plans. Ares would be sorry to see him fall to
Gabrielle’s sword, but at least the army would be led by a superior warrior in the end. And maybe,
just maybe, Xena would rule by Gabrielle’s side. Ares smiled knowingly, and gave a little shiver of
pleasure.

“Hello Bartos, we need to talk about a favor that has come due…”

Bartos gave pause, but only for a second. He knew this day would come, returning payment for the
War God’s help in consolidating his power, all those years ago. And while he felt a little
trepidation, he was confident enough in his position to not be afraid of any requests. After all, his
god would not steer him wrong, they shared the same agenda. “Yes my lord, I will be happy to
serve you, with whatever you need. We should speak in private though, if you will follow me?”

Ares nodded, and walked along with him at a casual stroll.

Aphrodite watched Varia, the current head queen of the unified Amazons. As the Goddess of Love,
Aphrodite was completely aware of Cyane’s unrequited love. And being the Goddess of Love, she
was also aware of Varia’s unrequited love in return. She giggled to herself. “Oh yeah, my feathered
babes, I’m going to fix you right up!”
Not knowing much about war, but plenty about love, Aphrodite knew what drove people. Varia
had actually been in love with Cyane for years, but carrying the guilt of betrayal from many years
before, she did not think Cyane would ever return her interest. Because of that same guilt, the stoic
warrior queen refused to show her love, or tell anyone. If the Love Goddess could convince Cyane
to lead a group of warriors to accompany Gabrielle, Varia would be beside herself with worry. And
it might just be the thing needed to push her over the edge into Cyane’s arms. With one last
dimpled smirk, Aphrodite popped out and popped into the chair across from Cyane, where she sat
in her hut alone.
Startled, the queen stood and grabbed the nearest weapon at hand, which happened to be an eating dagger. “Who are you?” she demanded.

Aphrodite smiled. “Chill feather babe, I’m the Goddess of Love!” With the snap of her manicured nails, little hearts floated around the room, popping one by one like soap bubbles.

Not having Xena and Gabrielle’s experience with the Gods, Cyane looked stunned, and a little fearful. “Goddess! I apologize, how can I help you? Are you looking for Queen Gabrielle?”

Aphrodite smirked. “Nope, I’m looking for you!” She cocked her head to the side. “Let me tell you a story about two righteous babes you know well…”

Half a candle mark later, Aphrodite wrapped up her tale. “… and that is what is happening right now.”

“You mean to say Xena can be brought back if Gabrielle can make it to the Oracle of Preveza?”

The great goddess of pink tulle scraped her slippered toe across the wood floor. “Weeeel, not exactly. We THINK that having the Oracle confirm Gabrielle’s power will subconsciously convince her that she has the power to bring Xena back.”

Cyane jumped up excitedly. “That’s great! So when does she leave? We should have a feast!”

Aphrodite muttered “… What is it about Amazons and their feasts?” Then louder she said “Actually, that is why I’m here. You see, the Battling Bard of Potidaea is going to need some help.” Cyane, looking slightly deflated, sat back down and waited for the Love Goddess to continue. “So anyways, there is a big ugly warlord named Bartos, between here and there. With no way to go around, Gabrielle will need a band of warriors to go with her as a show of force. But you know she won’t ask any of the amazons, because she is stubborn. So?”

The Amazon Queen looked confused. “So, what?”

Aphrodite sighed in exasperation. “So, I’m asking. Will the amazons escort Queen Gabrielle to the Oracle of Preveza? … Oh, and perhaps stop in at my temples for a little worship on the way? Please, please, please?”

With a look of determination, Cyane stood once more, and walked over to where her amazon sword was hanging on the wall. “When do we start?” She waggled the tip of her sword a little, and added “We will send Bartos off to Hades, and show everyone that the Amazons are to be feared! Oh, and we can probably do that temple thing too. I mean, Artemis is dead now soo… eh.”

Clapping like a child given sweets, Aphrodite exclaimed “Yay! I’m so glad you’re helping. Ok, I’ll just let you handle the arrangements, and I’ll pop back out of here.” Right before she disappeared in a poof of pink glitter, she added “Oh, and if you could just let you tell Gabrielle that you’re going with her, thatwouldbegreat! Thanksbye!”

Cyane’s sword drooped and she sighed. “Hades, there’s always a catch!

Meanwhile, back in Louros, Ares was making progress with his plan. Lounging on large colorful pillows, Ares raised his mug of mead and took a long pull. “So anyways, Bartos, what I’ve been saying is that the amazons have crossed me for the last time!” He slammed his fist down on a low table. “I have a contract with a member of the Roman Council, to provide 100 Amazonian slaves, in good condition.” With an evil grin, he pointed his finger at the formidable warrior across from
him. “And you are just the guy to get them for me!”

With hesitation Bartos replied “But, my lord, with all respect the amazons routed us the last time we went after them on their land!”

“Exactly, this is why they won’t expect anyone to attack! And I happen to know that most of their warriors are off accompanying their council of queens in some half-baked vision quest, far to the north.”

Bartos scratched at his scarred and stubbly chin. “Hmm, this very good news.” His brain was calculating the amount of men he would need, and how long the campaign would take. “Where are we delivering the amazons, once they are captured? How much will receive per head, and what is our take?”

Ares full lips quirked into a smile, as he thought to himself ‘gotcha!’ “Two Roman Galleys will be waiting for your precious cargo, at the port of Preveza. Your contact is a young Roman commander named Tiberius. He will have your dinars.” He pointed a finger at Bartos. “They will meet there two days after the solstice. Don’t be late, and don’t short them on the merchandise! They are paying for one hundred amazon slaves, twenty dinars a head, and they better get one hundred amazon slaves. Do you understand?” when Bartos nodded, Ares added “And I expect one third to be donated at the Preveza war temple, the rest remains yours.”

The other man finally smiled, a truly evil look, on a well-known bastard. He was already anticipating the money they would make from this relatively easy venture. “Yes Lord Ares. That should not be a problem. Your wish is our command, and our pleasure.” With a wave of his hand, a servant refilled their mugs. And they toasted to the coming engagement. Ominous laughter could be heard by the guards outside.

Ares thought to himself ‘It’s the perfect plan, what could go wrong?’
Chapter 7

As soon as the Goddess of Love disappeared, Cyane immediately dove into action. She feared that Gabrielle would simply disappear, to try to take on the problem by herself. Cyane strode from her hut, her honor guards falling into place behind her. When she got to Varia’s hut, she sent her honor guard off to gather the rest of the council. With a deep breath, she knocked on the head Queen’s door.

Shockingly, it didn’t take very long at all to assemble the Queens on the council, and vote to send a group of warriors with Queen Gabrielle. Though there were equal parts skepticism and amazement at the plan to bring Xena back to the land of the living, all were very aware of the debt owed to the two women. It was agreed that, being the two that knew Queen Gabrielle best, Varia and Cyane would give her their decision.

When they knocked on Gabrielle’s door, she was practicing something called yoga, which she picked up many years before. Of course, her teacher was a meditative madman, but you have to take the positive where you can. Gabrielle had been frustrated because despite Ares and Aphrodite’s promise to return in a few candle marks, they never did. Typical gods. Gabrielle sighed and called out “Yes?”

Through the closed door she could hear muffled speech. “You’re not going anywhere, get back here Cyane! You’re not leaving me to tell her by myself!”

With one last deep breath, and another sigh, she stood and answered the door. Fixing green eyes on the two queens outside her hut she said “Tell me what?”

Varia drew herself up to her full height. “Queen Gabrielle, may we come in? It seems we have something to talk about.”

Curiosity piqued at the formality in Varia’s demeanor, she nodded and let them in. “Come, have a seat. Is there something wrong?”

After everyone was seated Varia answered. “No Gabrielle, nothing is wrong. Actually, we’ve been told about your quest. The council has voted to send 600 warriors to with you to Preveza, to see the Oracle.”

In a low, almost angry voice, Gabrielle uttered “What?”

Cyane jumped in. “Gabrielle, we know about Xena, and your power to bring her back. I don’t think you realize how important you both are to the unified amazon nations.” She reached across the table to lay her hand on top of Gabrielle’s tensed fist. “Every queen voted in favor of sending the warriors. There was no debate, other than deciding how many to send, and how many to keep here in reserve. It was finally agreed that every nation would send 50 warriors” With a quick glance at Varia she added “I will also be accompanying you on your journey.”

Varia looked at her in surprise. “What? You never said anything about that!”

Cyane gave her a level look. “Gabrielle should have people she knows and trusts with her. I will not let Gabrielle do this alone, and you are much too important as the Queen of Nations to risk yourself on a journey through hostile lands, if it can be avoided. I will not change my mind.”
Gabrielle was about to protest all of it when Xena spoke to her. She had been watching from the corner of the room. “Gabrielle, this is exactly what you need! And they have all volunteered to help you, without you asking.” She walked over to stand next to the table, where her blond soulmate sat. Worried blue eyes met angry green ones. “You didn’t want to ask, you said we needed to find another way. They found a way for you. Please, don’t turn down their help!”

The other two queens noticed Gabrielle staring off to the side of the table, with her head cocked as if listening. Then abruptly, her hardness in her green eyes seemed to soften, right before she bowed her head in defeat. Not sure what was going on exactly, they waited silently. After only a few seconds, and unsure who she was answering, Gabrielle uttered a resigned “Ok”.

The two younger queens both breathed a somewhat surprised sigh of relief. Not really expecting Gabrielle to give in without a lengthy debate. After collecting herself a little, Gabrielle looked at Cyane. “How soon can your warriors be ready to leave?”

Cyane thought for a second, muttering to herself as she worked the figures in her head. “hmm… twelve groups of fifty, six hundred warriors, supplies…” Looking up at Varia and Gabrielle, she responded “We can be ready to leave at first light, the day after tomorrow.” Her lips curled into a broad smile and she added “Which means, in honor of your quest, we can have a feast tonight!”

Varia perked up too. “I think that is a great idea!” Addressing Gabrielle, she said “Queen Gabrielle, we shall see you tonight.” She stood, and lightly kicked Cyane’s leg under the table. When she had the second Queen’s attention, she gave a slight nod toward the door.

Catching on, Cyane stood as well. “Yes, until tonight.”

As they were leaving, Gabrielle heard Varia mutter to Cyane “We need to talk!” She briefly wondered what that was about, then turned to look at Xena. “So… you got what you wanted.”

Xena knelt in front of her. “Gabrielle…”

“No, never mind. Its ok Xena, I’m sorry. It’s just…” She trailed off, unsure of exactly what was bothering her. “…I… I just don’t want them in danger.”

The Warrior Princes chuckled quietly. “They are Amazons you know? I think they’ll be fine.”

Her soulmate quirked a smile. “I know Xena. I’ve just lost too many people, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” Xena, trying to shake the blonde woman out of her mood said “So… a feast huh? How predictable.”

Gabrielle laughed. “Yeah, anything for a party.” Shaking off the last vestiges of apprehension, she decided to go get some sparring practice before the feast. “Xe, I’m going to practice at the circle.”

Sensing the smaller woman wanted some time to think, Xena decided to let her go alone. “Ok, have fun.” Seeing her grab the katana next to the bed, she added “Watch out for the outside feint. You always drop your guard on that. If you were any slower it would be fatal.”

Gabrielle smiled. “Not always, but thanks, I will.”

Xena watched her leave, wondering what the lonely queen would do if this plan didn’t work. She also wondered what she would do.

Gabrielle walked through the Amazonian city, looking around as if it were the first time. And for
her, really it was. She hadn’t paid much attention to her surroundings since she arrived. In all the
years she had known the amazons, the largest she had ever seen were villages. But this was no
village. Due to the layout of the city, the guest hut where she was housed was centrally located,
within easy walking distance of every part of the city. With head down and thoughts somewhere
else since she arrived, it’s not surprising she missed the scope of it all. The thing that shocked her
most was that they were in the middle of the forest. There were well planned roads throughout,
though not on the scale of a Roman city. Rather than set in the Roman grid, with streets at right
angles to each other, the Amazon city was set up like a large wheel. The largest streets looked like
spokes, running from the road circling the outer edge, all the way to the center. The sections
between the ‘spoke roads’ of the little city denoted separate districts. There was one district for
each Amazonian tribe, for obvious reasons each looked a lot like a pie piece. The outer-most area
of the district was devoted to merchants. This made it easy for traders to come in, without violating
the privacy of the amazons, it was also possible to walk a complete circle and visit all the merchant
stalls, without getting lost or missing something. The next section was devoted to security, with
warrior barracks for the standing armies. You could live in a family hut if you so desired, or private
huts if you were higher in ranks. Those were next in the pie piece, with general housing a little
closer to the center from warrior huts. The cook houses, bath houses and spas were between
general housing and military housing, large enough and open to everyone. After general housing,
there was the Queen’s lodge, with guest lodges and a private bath house. The tip of each ‘pie piece’
was dedicated to the religious shrine of each tribe. Finally, the very center of the city held the
council building, and the community gathering place. People would bring meals here to eat, gather
to talk, sometimes mark off an area for weapons practice, or sometimes it was cleared and used for
large festivals or gatherings. It was the area where all tribes were united, sisters, friends, and
queens.

The stables and large practice and training grounds for the warriors were actually outside the city
proper, but Gabrielle didn’t feel like going that way to spar. She wanted to be in the center of the
city, to feel the life flowing around her. She only hoped there would be someone to spar with. The
tribe-less queen didn’t have a long walk, from her hut to the city center. But she saw signs of
preparation for the coming feast the entire way. The gathering place had been cleared, and was
being transformed into a festival arena. Many of the warriors who would be following her on her
quest would come to eat, drink, dance, spar, and generally celebrate life and all its challenges.
Joking aside, Gabrielle knew why the Amazons cherished their feasts and celebrations. Life was
hard, and full of challenges. And sometimes when it comes down to a fight, it’s good to hold the
memory of those things you are fighting for. To remember what it is you love about living. She
wasn’t going to begrudge them their celebration, knowing the risk of the coming days.

Most gave Queen Gabrielle a wide berth, due partly to the incident with the training master, and to
the fact that she was wearing her katana over her shoulder. However, many more smiled or waived
to her as she passed through the city. The small blonde was happy to see that no one had cleared
the temporary practice ring yet, but a little sad that there didn’t appear to be anyone who would
help her work off some of the energy that cours ed through her body. Looking around, she didn’t
see any waiting warriors, but she did see Varia striding across the open area, heading toward her
own district. Seeing that Varia was wearing her amazon sword, she called out to the other queen.
“Varia!”

The brunette stopped, and looked around to see who had called her. When she spied Gabrielle, the
angry look on her face tempered a bit. “Gabrielle, what can I do for you?”

Astute green eyes took in Varia’s impatient stance, and general mood. She could tell the other
woman was upset about something, but Varia always did keep things close to the vest. Maybe it
would help them both blow off steam, if they sparred together. “Are you busy? I was looking for
someone to spar with, but it seems everyone is hard at work preparing for tonight’s celebration.”
Varia gave her a thoughtful look, memory briefly clouding her eyes. It was the fleeting glimpse of a challenge that had taken place many years before. Gabrielle had challenged her for rule of the tribes, in hopes of saving Xena’s daughter Eve. Gabrielle, not being the warrior she is now, was beaten badly. While it had been many years before, Varia was still hesitant to face the other queen in a sparring ring.

Gabrielle, seeing the hesitation on the other queen’s face, questioned “Varia, is something wrong? If you’re busy, I understand.”

The Queen of tribes looked back at the blonde, wondering if it was possible the other woman didn’t remember the sound thrashing she had received. “Queen Gabrielle, are you sure sparring is a good idea? We haven’t faced each other since Eve’s trial.” She looked down for a second, not wanting to offend her fellow queen, and unsure of how to arrange her words. “I’m not busy and I could use a good sparring session. But… I know you said you are warrior now, but it’s hard to forget how you looked that last time…”

The smaller blonde smirked. “Well, I trained with Xena for 6 seasons, I have successfully battled for the greater good, in every nation I’ve visited, from the Rhineland to the land of Pharaohs, and I have defeated samurai warriors in battle. I’m also the daughter of the God of War. So, I understand if you’re worried you may be hurt, but I will do my best to control myself.”

The queen of the united tribes dropped her jaw in shock. Not expecting the Battling Bard of Potidaea to respond quite like that, she fumbled for something to say. “Uh… no… I mean, I’m sure you are a very successful warrior, Queen Gabrielle. I would uh… be honored to spar with you.” She gave the blonde a weak smile and starting walking toward the sparring ring.

It was said that important news travels like a bird on the wind, but gossip travels like fire through a dry forest. The minute the two queens started walking toward the sparring ring, both carrying swords, activity in the immediate vicinity stopped. Women elbowed neighbors and fellow workers; others jogged off to their respective districts to pass word of the notable sparring session. It wasn’t just anyone heading to spar; it was the Queen of the united tribes, and the Queen with no tribe, a legend unto herself. Gabrielle had been a queen of three different tribes, long before they had united. The sparring match would be more interesting than the entire feast.

With just a slight head nod to each other, they both drew their swords, and started circling in the practice ring. Varia was taller, and clearly more familiar with the growing crowd around the ring. But Gabrielle was calm, completely calm. With sword arm at head level, she had the katana parallel to the ground, and the tip pointing toward the brunette. There was no hesitation in her gaze, no wasted movement in her step, and her arm did not waver in the slightest. Piercing green eyes stayed focused, while she waited for the other woman to make a move. And move she did. For her opening volley, Varia aimed a slice high slice at the other queen’s head, while targeting her midsection with a kick. Gabrielle just blocked and spun away before the kick could land. She didn’t even engage when she knew Varia was off balance from her missed kick, she just kept her eyes on the other woman and waited for her to recover.

Letting her recover only irritated the Queen of united tribes. She responded in a flurry of motion, testing Gabrielle’s skills on all sides, her sword never slowing. Exhausting minutes passed, yet Gabrielle simply parried all blows, in a seemingly effortless display of precision. Finding the smaller blonde quick with her sword, and difficult to intimidate, Varia tried another tactic. Experienced as she was, she knew that a prolonged full out sparring session would quickly wear the two women out, and Varia wanted a quick decisive victory. Spinning her sword in a figure eight, she did a running flip over the other woman, hoping to take her by surprise. Only, she never landed as expected. Knowing what the other queen was up to, Gabrielle quickly sheathed her
sword, and gave Varia a roundhouse kick to the sword hand. Not expecting the move, the Queen of united tribes was disarmed. She immediately dropped into a hand to hand fighting stance, surprised at how easily she had been disarmed. “I see you have certainly come a long way since we last met in the ring Queen Gabrielle. It has been many seasons since the last time I was disarmed.” She gave the smaller blonde a nod of respect.

Gabrielle, in her own fighting stance, acknowledged her in return. “Sometimes it is good to be reminded that we are all weak at times.”

Varia laughed, more than aware of the larger than average audience for their practice session. The queen who never quite grew out of her cockiness replied, “Oh, I never said I was weak! You’ve just given me an excuse to show off all my skills.”

The blond smiled in return. “I suppose I have.”

Then, in a series of flips, kicks and blows, both women showed the crowd their respective skills. Unbeknownst to the sparring partners, some of the amazons had even begun to make wagers on the outcome of the session. Varia’s strength and prowess on the battlefield was a well-known element in their city. However, many were on hand to witness Gabrielle take down the training master, just weeks prior.

The queen of the united tribes had half expected an easy win, and was surprised at Gabrielle’s level of skill. The more they traded blows, the more Varia was convinced that the blond queen was holding back. She had already started the battle frustrated and angry with worry about Cyane leaving to escort Gabrielle through hostile territory. Now she was even angrier to be facing, what she saw as, the cause of her worry in the sparring ring, and not being able to placate her anger.

For her part, Gabrielle could see the other queen’s anger start to take control. She didn’t want to hurt Varia, so felt it was time to bring the session to a close. Hoping to save the other Queen some face, she did a double back flip to the other side of the ring, away from her. In surprise, Varia stopped advancing and remained wary.

Gabrielle pulled herself up to her full height, and gave a short bow. “Queen Varia, I can see your reputation is well earned, and I’m honored you agreed to spar with me. Would you like to call this session a draw, so we can get ready for the festivities ahead?” She cocked her head, watching to see if the other woman would be stupid or follow her anger.

Varia looked at the smaller queen in shock. Her immediate thought was “Is she being condescending?” Then, realizing the other woman was giving her an out; anger blossomed bright in her chest. She spat on the ground and said aloud for both Gabrielle and the gathered crowd. “No, I think we should finish this. I wouldn’t want anyone to think we are too weak to continue.” With that, she launched a furious attack on the other woman.

The blonde warrior sighed internally and met the other woman in the middle. She could not diffuse Varia’s anger, and she didn’t want to hurt the other woman, so she was left with only one option. Ducking a blow at the last second, she gave Varia a quick punch to the solar plexus, and with a sweep of her leg, she dropped the other queen to the ground. Before Varia could even move from her prone position, Gabrielle was pinning her arms to the ground with her own knees, and rapidly stabbing her fingers into the base of the prone woman’s neck. Some of the older amazons in the crowd gasped, recognizing the move. There was much surprise, because they had only ever seen Xena do it. Gabrielle looked at the deathly still queen below her. “Varia, I know you know what I’ve done. You have about 20 seconds left, do you yield?”

Varia stared into the green eyes of her fellow queen, and understood. Her anger fading away to a gentle calm, she nodded to the other queen. Gabrielle leaned in, and in a low voice said “Everyone
is weak Varia.” Then she quickly removed the pinch that was blocking the flow of blood to the other woman’s brain. She offered her hand to help Varia up, and a sigh of relief went through the crowd when it was accepted. Once she was standing, Varia surprised the smaller blonde with an embrace. Quietly adding “thank you Gabrielle, I will not doubt you again.”

Sometime during the fighting, Gabrielle understood Varia’s anger. While they were sparring Gabrielle had remembered all the comments and glances between Varia and Cyane. She knew Varia was in love with Cyane, and realized that the other queen was worried about Gabrielle’s ability to keep her safe. In the end, Gabrielle acknowledged the weakness that love can bring, and Varia acknowledged that Gabrielle’s skills could keep Cyane safe. However, to the Amazons watching, it was just a good fight. Many had grumbled as dinars changed hands, many also cheered at their good fortune. However, no one would forget about Gabrielle’s skill and precision as a warrior. Actually, everyone thought it was a good fight, except for one amazon. Cyane rushed to Varia as soon as she exited the practice ring. “Are you alright?” she stopped short of the other woman, not wanting to give her feelings away.

The brunette looked at Cyane and gave her a crooked smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. I guess I didn’t realize how powerful she had become.” She shook her head ruefully. “I won’t make that mistake again!”

Cyane breathed a sigh of relief. Unable to completely hold herself back she used her thumb to gently wipe the blood that had trickled from the other woman’s nostril. “Look at you, a mess! I can’t believe she put the Xena pinch on you!”

Varia looked thoughtful. “Yeah, I wasn’t expecting that at all. I didn’t realize Xena had taught that to anyone. I wonder how many people have experienced it at Queen Gabrielle’s hands.”

The other queen sighed. “I suspect too many.”
In certain circles, Amazonian festivals have become famous for their level of spirit and showmanship. The rare outside guests of such events have described them as a mix of Greek comedy, Bacchanalia, and Roman circus. The feast for Gabrielle’s quest wasn’t quite on that level, since it would not be an all-day affair. But there were still demonstrations of weapons skills, feats of strength, singing, dancing, drinking, and eating. After the sun had set, and most of the illumination of the city center came from the bonfire, there was also plenty of debauchery. Gabrielle lifted a skin and took a swallow of Amazonian wine, and watched the dancers. Perhaps enhanced by the slight buzz she felt from the alcohol, she smiled and enjoyed the tingle of attraction while watching the graceful and athletic women. Many of the bolder amazons had asked her to dance, but she always declined, keeping the secret of her two left feet thoroughly intact. Cyane had kept her company for a while, but excused herself when she saw one too many Amazonian sisters vying for Queen Varia’s attention. One of the dancers in the center circle, laughed, and broke off from the group. She made her way to the cushion next to Gabrielle, not recognizing the queen in the firelight.

Her friends called out from the circle. “Come back Andreia, you can’t be tired yet!”

She laughed heartily. “I never get tired when the moon is high Basia, you should know that by now!” Getting a few chuckles she added “Just tired of you all! My mouth is as dry as your humor, now I need some wine.”

Gabrielle chuckled with the rest. She offered some of her wine to the attractive woman. “You can have some of my wine if you like. I’m not sure if someone is trying to tell me something, but I seem to be surrounded by wine skins.”

The amazon, Andreia, looked startled for a second, and then smiled. Taking the offered wine skin she said “Queen Gabrielle! I didn’t see you sitting there, thank you.”

“Please, if you’re going to share my wine, I ask that you just call me Gabrielle.”

Andreia grinned broadly at the attractive blonde. She could just make out the bright green of her eyes in the firelight. And always the incorrigible flirt added “Gabrielle… it would be my pleasure. And you can call me Andreia, or, whenever you like.”

Gabrielle was pleasantly surprised to not only be treated as a real person, instead of the persona of queen, but to also be treated as an attractive woman. She studied the other woman for a few seconds, unable to deny the allure of her curly dark hair and twinkling brown eyes. They were eyes that were full of laughter and sensuality, crinkling slightly at the corners. She recognized the flirting for what it was, and had no trouble returning it. Smiling playfully, she lightly touched the other woman’s thigh. “Well, I certainly wouldn’t want to be the one who denies you pleasure.”

Andreia was pleasantly surprised at the small queen flirting in return. “I had heard you were of a light heart, and lighter touch, as well as being beautiful. I can see now it was all true.”

They smiled at each other, acknowledging the attraction, and then turned back to the fire. Suddenly very thirsty, Gabrielle took another large draught of wine.
Little did they know, both women were being watched. Aphrodite had been keeping an eye on her other two charges, watching to see if the coming quest was working to push them together. After seeing Cyane go back to her hut, and Varia being fawned over by a gaggle of women, she gave up in disgust, and turned her attention to Gabrielle. She had been watching her friend, hoping she would interact more, hoping she would feel something. She worried that the little queen would cut herself off too much from the world. Of course, being a goddess who is prone to meddling, she decided to help out a little. When the dancer broke off from the circle, it didn’t take much to help the woman ‘randomly’ choose the cushion near Gabrielle. It was also child’s play to spike the wine a bit, ‘slightly’ encouraging a more than ordinary lack of inhibition. Being the goddess of love, she knew the attraction was there in spades, she was just encouraging a little action. There was no harm in that, right?

Andreia certainly didn’t suffer from things as trivial as inhibition. She had confidence and ambition in excess. And while she was a little intimidated by the legend of Xena, she had never actually met the Warrior Princess. Seeing the interest in Gabrielle’s eyes, it was easy enough to set her initial hesitation aside and play the game with her. She also figured that if the Queen was flirting with her, it would be ok to return the attention. She could do much worse than spend a fun night with the green-eyed woman by her side.

Gabrielle was feeling pretty relaxed, more at ease than she had felt in a long time. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was the company of friends, either way she didn’t care. And now, there was an attractive woman who seemed to find her attractive in return. No, she wasn’t forgetting about Xena, but she was also of the reality that Xena wasn’t really here. She occasionally took lovers for a night since their time in Jappa, as she had at the inn before coming to the Amazon city. Xena never mentioned it. While they loved each other very much, and were soul mates, they had stopped being lovers a few years before the Warrior Princess’ death. She understood that her soul mate needed to take comfort where she could. No matter how much she missed her life, or her little queen, she would not deny her that comfort.

Putting her hand on the curly-haired woman’s leg, Gabrielle pointed to the circle of dancers. “Can you explain this dance to me?”

Pleased, Andreia took another swig of wine. “Sure! It all started with two lovers being kept apart by the gods...”

After another candle mark had passed, many of the celebrants had wandered off, either alone or with company of various sorts. Andreia and Gabrielle had been pressed thigh to thigh, drinking wine and talking for a good portion of the time. Sensing the late hour, the dark haired amazon decided to make her move. She turned to the blonde queen beside her. “Gabrielle…”

Her words were cut off when soft lips covered her own. Hands threaded through hair, dark and light, keeping pressure on the searching kiss. After a few minutes, they pulled apart. Gabrielle, with a seductive smile and husky voice responded, “Yes? Did you have a question for me Andreia?”

Andreia smiled in return. “Well you definitely answered whatever I had to ask. But I can think of another.” She stood and held her hand out to the seated queen. “Would you care to finish this wine with me back at my hut?”

The blonde queen grasped the offered hand, and allowed herself to be pulled up. “I think I can manage a yes to that. Lead on oh dancing warrior.”

It was a pleasant walk back to Andreia’s district. Being a warrior of rank, she had her own hut, which made it easier to entertain guests. After entering, she lit a single lamp on the table, and then
turned back to Gabrielle. “You are very beautiful Queen Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle put a hand on her hip, and waggled her finger at the other woman. “Uh uh uh, what have I told you about calling me ‘Queen’?”

The curly-haired brunette laughed, enjoying the other woman’s playful side. “I’m sorry Gabrielle; it is a hard habit to break.”

Gabrielle smiled seductively, and took a step closer. “Well then, perhaps I should personally be the one to break you… of that.” She waited for a few seconds, to see if the Amazon warrior in front of her was interested in a slightly new game.

Instantly turned on, Andreia shivered in reaction to her words. “Please?”

The blonde queen pierced her with an intense green gaze. “Oh I will do that… and so much more.” She walked over to other woman. “Starting now, no talking and no moving, I want to look at you.” The brunette sucked in a surprised breath, quivering with sudden arousal. She didn’t expect Gabrielle to take command in such a manner, but she certainly didn’t complain, nor did she move.

Gabrielle stepped in very close to the other woman. She caressed her in various places, while slowly circling the muscular beauty. When she was back in front of the other woman, she leaned in toward her, whispering “You have too many clothes on…” before claiming her lips in an aggressive kiss. With Andreia only marginally taller, it made it very easy to do what she wanted while the other woman stood immobile. She knew Andreia’s fingers would be itching to grab her in return, but there would be time for that later.

She pulled away from the kiss, and when Andreia started to follow her, she placed her finger gently on the other woman’s lips. “No moving.”

First Gabrielle undressed herself, carefully laying her leathers over a nearby chair. Then, when the other woman seemed on the verge of arousal overload, she undressed her as well. Standing in front of Andreia she smiled, and commanded. “On your knees!”

Shocked again at the strength in the other woman’s voice, Andreia immediately complied. Completely aroused, but unsure of what was to come, she stared up at the blonde queen. “Yes Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle quickly stepped forward and fisted the other woman’s hair tightly. She quirked a smile and admonished her. “You were so hot to call me your queen before; you can continue to do so! I am your queen, do you submit to my judgment?”

The kneeling brunette drew in a ragged breath. “Yes your majesty!”

Gabrielle released her hold on Andreia’s hair, and immediately moved both hands to caress her own breasts. The curly-haired woman swayed for a second, unsure how much more teasing she could take. Luckily, Gabrielle stopped the teasing when she stepped in close, putting her royal treasure at Andreia’s lips. “Now… show me how you treat a queen.”

With a triumphant look in her eyes, Andreia grabbed the other woman’s hips and immediately surged forward. Her tongue delved into a bounty sweeter than the finest amazon wine. Gabrielle threw her head back in a rush of pleasure. The absence of human touch, the wine, and the hours of slow teasing light touches served to prime her for that very moment. Both women moaned with pleasure. After a few minutes, Gabrielle felt light headed and close to peaking. She grabbed Andreia gently by the hair, whispering “Wait.”
Andreia immediately stopped what she was doing, and pulled back to look up at the blonde queen. “Is there something wrong Queen Gabrielle?”

Gabrielle smiled down at the face that was slicked with her pleasure. “No, but it has been a while since I’ve been touched, and I don’t want this to end too soon.” She cocked her head at the other woman. “Now, I want to see just how indefatigable you really are. Go lie on your bed, on your stomach.” When the other woman hesitated for a second, she tightened the hand in her hair. “Now!” Releasing the curly head in question, she raised her hand and pointed toward the bed.

Andreia drew a shuddering breath and thought to herself ‘Hades or Elysia take me, either way I’m going to die happy tonight!’

Once the other woman was prone on the bed, Gabrielle walked over to her. Running sword callused hands over the other woman’s muscular back, she smiled. “What a fine warrior you are, muscled and gorgeous. So tell me warrior, what can you do for your queen?”

Andreia shivered at the touch, her arousal soaking through to the bed below. “If… if it pleases my queen, this warrior keeps her weapons in the chest next to the bed.” She turned her head, searching intelligent green eyes for a response. What she saw was a smirk, and a darkening of the other woman’s pupils. Gabrielle’s smile got bigger. “Weapons hmm? Good to know, now turn toward the other wall. Do not look at me or speak again until told!” She slapped the brunette on the ass for good measure, eliciting a gasp and immediate compliance.

Gabrielle, nude and aroused beyond measure, knelt down to open the clasp on the chest of ‘weapons’. What she saw inside made her sway with instant heat. Quietly selecting an item, she stood again. While her hands were busy she asked “And what if I find your ‘weapons’ lacking and unworthy of a queen?”

She ran a single finger down the length of Andreia’s spine, following the slit around until she reached a pool of nectar. No sooner than she felt the wetness, she immediately removed the questing finger and heard the prone woman whimper. Gabrielle chuckled in teasing delight. “Patience… now keep your eyes shut.”

Climbing onto the bed, she pushed the brunette’s legs apart and knelt between them. Leaning over, she massaged her hands up the other woman’s legs, settling in on the round globes in front of her. She leaned over further, and used her tongue to taste her way across Andreia’s lower back, then down to the cheeks of her ass. The other woman’s breathing was now ragged, and her fists were clenched tight in the blankets below her. Moving forward, she pressed her chest against the other woman’s muscular ass cheeks, sliding her way up Andreia’s body. The brunette raised her ass slightly, at the arousing contact. When Gabrielle got to a certain point, the woman below her suddenly gasped and froze in place. Quivering, she whispered “Please…”

Gabrielle wet her lips, and used her hand to reach down and slowly guide the hardened leather phallus into warrior below. Tied snugly around her waist and legs, it followed her motions exactly. Making her way back out, as slow as she went in, only served to draw a moan from the dark haired woman. She pulled back a little and grasped the other woman’s hips, and pulled upward. Understanding the soundless request, Andreia raised up to her knees. Once the position was better Gabrielle dove back in, digging blunt fingers into the brunet’s back. Thrusting in and out of the warrior below her, Gabrielle’s pleasure was also peaking. Being in control of a strong warrior was a high she never tired of. Sadly, it was something she never experienced with Xena, being young and inexperienced in their early years.

Her body was sweaty and humming, a heated flush crept across her chest and face. She increased her pace until she heard a high keening sound come from the other woman. “Do you like serving
Andreia tried to answer, but she was nearly over the edge. “uh… ye.. plea… nngghhhh!” Gabrielle slowed her pace and reached around her hip. When the blonde queen gently massaged the other woman’s clitor, it was all over. “Ngghhhh… Aaaahhhhhh!” As Andreia’s bucking slowed, so did Gabrielle’s thrusting, until eventually she pulled out completely. She removed the toy and reclined on the bed beside the panting woman. Laughing she asked “Are you still with me Andreia?”

Chuckling in return, and still panting, Andreia turned her head toward the blonde queen and gasped “No, I am in Elysia…” She sighed, and then lightly laughed. “Just give me a second to recover here; I still can’t feel my toes.”

Gabrielle got up and walked over to pour some water from the pitcher left on the table. After drinking some, she poured more and took it back to the recovering woman. “Here, this may help.”

Andreia turned herself over and sat up to drink. “Thank you. And that was amazing!” She set the cup down and grabbed Gabrielle’s hands. Noticing the enlarged pupils and flushed face, she knew the queen was on the brink still. She drew Gabrielle toward her. “Now how else may I be of service to my queen?” Gabrielle quivered and allowed herself to be laid out on her back. Andreia covered the queen’s body with her own, and began kissing her way downward. When she reached the area just below the little queen’s navel, Gabrielle gasped and gripped the bedding tighter. The first touch of Andreia’s tongue to the bud of her arousal drew out a long moan; and two fingers deep inside left the queen panting. Andreia, seeing and feeling the other woman in such a state of arousal, pushed harder and faster. It didn’t take long at all for the blonde to start continuously moaning and grabbing onto Andreia’s hair. When she yelled “Fuck me!” Andrea immediately removed her fingers, eliciting a whimper, and replaced them with the discarded leather phallus. And with that, Gabrielle was gone. She screamed “Oh gods!” over and over until falling over the edge of pleasure, into the abyss. Both women were silent, while the blonde jerked and twitched with the aftershocks of her orgasm.

Eventually, Andreia removed the phallus, and moved up the bed to lie down next to the spent queen. Looking at the fluttering eyelids of the panting woman next to her, she leaned over for one last gentle kiss. Quirking a smile she asked, “Did that please my queen?”

Gabrielle threw her arm over her eyes and broke out laughing. “Oh yes, I think the queen has been well and truly pleased.”

Enjoying the light mood, and gorgeous woman in her bed, Andreia made the offer, knowing there would be juicy Amazon gossip if it was taken. “You’re more than welcome to sleep here tonight Gabrielle. No strings attached.”

Gabrielle removed her arm, and smiled up at the other woman. “Thank you for the offer, but I think I’m going to walk around for a bit before retiring to my own hut.” She reached up and pulled the other woman down for one last kiss. Quirking a smile she asked, “Did that please my queen?”

Gabrielle gave her a brief sad smile. “Thank you, Andreia.”

After Gabrielle dressed and made her way out of the hut, Andreia covered her nude body with the slightly damp blanket. Letting out a sigh, before being thoroughly claimed by Morpheus, she
uttered “She can be my queen any day!”
Chapter 9

As she walked through the streets of the amazon city, she felt a pleasant ache. After the sparring session, and the romp with Andreia, she had intended to head toward the bath house near her hut. No sooner did she have that thought, when a muted pink flash momentarily blinded her. Blind or not, intuition had warned her ahead of time of the visitor and even with eyes shut she had her knife pressed to Aphrodite’s throat. Aphrodite froze until the blonde queen opened her eyes. Then, with a patented dimpled grin she said “Chill queenie babe! I just popped in for a wee visit!”

Gabrielle sighed and re-sheathed her blade. “’Dite, it’s the middle of the night. You couldn’t find a better time to have some girl talk?”

Aphrodite looked at the thoroughly sexed, but still tense, woman in front of her. Making no secret of her appraisal, or her appreciation, she licked her lips before continuing. “Well, I knew you were up, and no longer busy, so I thought it would be a good time to say hi.” The blonde queen quirked an eyebrow, in the face of such frank appraisal. Aphrodite unrepentant said “What? I’ve known you for like… ever! I’m gonna look bard babe!”

Gabrielle laughed at how some things never changed. “Don’t you mean spy? Based on the look on your dimpled face, I have no doubts about what you were watching for the past hour or two.”

The goddess put her hands behind her back, and dug a toe into the dirt. “Well… a goddess does like to watch the fruits of her labors.”

All humor gone, Gabrielle responded “Excuse me?” She took an angry step toward the other woman. “Did you manipulate that entire thing?”

Dismayed Aphrodite put her hands up to stop the instantly irate queen. “Whoa whoa whoa, it wasn’t like that Gabrielle. All I did was nudge her toward your side of the fire when she wanted to sit down from dancing.” She hummed… “Hmmm… and perhaps make the wine a touch stronger than normal.” She grinned and booped the demigoddess on the nose. “The rest was all you!”

Gabrielle rubbed her booped nose and sighed in irritation. But she trusted her longtime friend to tell the truth. “Fine, I believe you. Now is there something else you needed? Because frankly it’s late, and I just want to soak in a bath for a bit before bed.” She turned to head toward the bathing huts once again.

“Oh! You’re not actually going in there to bathe, are you?”

Gabrielle stopped at the tone in the other woman’s voice. “What’s wrong with in there?"

Showing utter disgust, Aphrodite rolled her eyes. “Oh please! I can do way better than that!” And with a snap of her fingers, both women found themselves in a glorious marble bathing chamber. With a three story ceiling, and separate pools for soaking, washing, and cooling, it was a marvel in beauty and architecture. Golden swan heads dribbled water into the different pools, while wall sconces cast dancing shadows on the myriad of marbled surfaces. There was an orgy size bed a few levels up from the soaking pools. A man and a woman, both crowned with short dark hair and looking like bronzed athletes, stood to the side. They were dressed in gleaming white togas and a smile. The man spoke up first, in a pleasant baritone. “Good evening Goddess, and Queen
Gabrielle.” The woman added in a melodic voice, “How may we serve you?”

Gabrielle’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Wow! I’ll give you that one ‘Dite, this place is amazing!” She turned to look at the Goddess of Love. “But what’s with the eye candy twins?”

The goddess giggled. “Well they’re not really twins, and I like eye candy. What’s wrong with that? Now, let’s go bathe, soak for a bit, and then get massages!” She immediately skipped down the steps toward the bathing pool, expecting the blonde queen to follow.

While Gabrielle was still feeling a bit tense, and was slightly put off by the abruptness and extravagance of it all. However, she was not going to be the one who turned down a little pampering. With a shrug of her shoulders, she smiled and followed the other woman down the steps.

Already undressed by the helpful couple, Aphrodite introduced them. “The beautiful man is Ludus, and the handsome woman is Agape. And they are here to serve us any way we wish.” She smiled seductively at her two disciples.

Gabrielle, having seen and participated in a lot stranger, just went along. It took less than a minute for Ludus and Agape to undress her, they were very efficient and fast. Once in the bathing pool, the disciples removed their togas and joined them in the pool. They took turns washing the Goddess and Demigoddess. Aphrodite clearly enjoyed the attention and much to her surprise, Gabrielle did as well. Ludus gave a delightful scalp massage while washing her hair, and Agape was perhaps a little too free handed when washing the rest of her body. Not that the queen was going to complain. Her heart rate sped slightly, but rather than allow herself to get worked up she sighed with relaxation instead.

The Goddess of Love smirked at her from the other side of the pool. “You would think you’d be tired after your romp with that amazon warrior earlier.”

The other woman smirked and with a twinkle in her eye. “I’d think you would know by now that I don’t wear out that easily! I could have gone all night, but I knew she had duty tomorrow.” The look of instant lust on the Goddess of Love’s face was priceless. Aphrodite had been her friend for decades, and Gabrielle knew she shouldn’t tease the other woman. But she was also aware that while the other woman was technically her aunt, the Greek gods and goddess certainly didn’t put much stock in blood relation when it came to pairing up. She also knew that neither one of the two women thought of each other as ‘aunt’ and ‘niece’, otherwise they’d have been more creeped out remembering their time with Caligula. So, because of all these ‘facts’, Gabrielle knew it would be easy to tease the other woman, and she felt no compulsion against it. Besides, there was no harm, since the Goddess had two of her disciples with her to ‘take care of her needs’ later. The queen interrupted the other woman’s lustful thoughts. “Aphrodite…”

“Aphrodite…”

Gabrielle smiled. “I think we could use something to drink and…” she snapped her fingers a few times with no result. “… and mine doesn’t seem to work.”

The dimpled blonde with golden curly hair giggled and snapped her own fingers. “Of course.” And as quick as that, they were both holding glasses of fine Venetian wine.

With wine in hand, they both made their way over to the soaking tub. Ludus and Agape detoured long enough to grab platters of fruit and cheese to set on the edge of the large size tub. Marble reclining shelves were built into the soaking area, near the edges. They were contoured and surprisingly comfortable. Soon, Goddess and demi-goddess were fully reclined, and submerged to
their necks in the hot water. The disciples occasionally fed them bits of food, and lazily caressed their bodies. Every so often, they would switch places and each bringing their own special touch to the service. And while the woman was definitely bolder with her up close attention, occasional brushes of silky hardness under the water let everyone know the man was happy to help as well.

After soaking for a bit, Ludus was standing near Aphrodite, feeding her grapes, when she let her hand wander under the water. Gabrielle looked over as he gave a quiet gasp and froze in place. His lips were parted slightly, and he had a glazed look in his eyes. The blond queen knew exactly what the Goddess of Love was doing under the water. She smirked over at her innocent looking friend. “Looks like you caught a fish. Are you going to throw it back?”

Aphrodite laughed. “Oh, in time. I want the thrill of reeling it in first.”

Gabrielle was so focused on watching the look of lustful pleasure on the handsome man’s face that she was taken by surprise by Agape’s wandering hand. While one of the disciple’s hands was busy feeding the queen her grapes, the other had wandered under the water to caress her breasts. Bold fingers tweaked sensitized nipples, and Gabrielle let out a gasp of her own.

The Love Goddess smirked. “You have to watch out for those little fishes over there Gabrielle. They are just full of mischief!”

Meanwhile, Agape’s hand had wandered down the queen’s belly, finding a wetter heat than even the soaking tub could offer. Gabrielle bit her bottom lip, and let her legs spread further apart. She caught a glimpse of Agape’s satisfied smile, before closing her eyes and succumbing to the exploration. However, that only lasted another minute before Aphrodite exclaimed “Like, it’s getting waaaay too hot in here bard babe! We need to cool off!” And with the snap of her finger, both women were dropped into the cooling pool, from about a foot above the water. Gabrielle screamed in shock when she came sputtering up for air, before thoroughly splashing the other woman. “Was that like, refreshing, or what?”

Gabrielle stopped splashing and laughed. “Definitely or what! And now, I have to get back to the Amazon city ‘dite.” Heading for the stairs leading out of the water she added, “Can you just… pop me back?” After a little silent jostling, Ludus was ready with a large towel. Understanding how bathhouses and the disciples of love functioned, she stood there and let him do his job of drying her thoroughly.

The blond goddess walked up the stairs into the waiting towel of Agape. “Oh no you don’t warrior babe! We haven’t even had our massages yet!” She presumptuously linked arms with the nude queen and led them up the stairs to the oversize bed.

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow at the setup, wondering how far it would go. She wondered how far she would let it go. She thought to herself, ‘Hmm, as far as I want.’

Agape instructed both women to lie on their backs on the bed. Ludus asked which oil they would prefer, olive or sandalwood. As one Gabrielle and Aphrodite said “Sandalwood.” He carefully set a covered bowl on the giant bed, between the two beautiful women. As if by some unspoken agreement, Ludus climbed up on the bed, kneeling over Aphrodite, and Agape did the same over Gabrielle. Then, with oiled hands, the disciples went to work on them. Necks, shoulders, arms, legs, breasts, there were no untouched areas in the very full body massage. Talented hands tweaked nipples to diamond hard points, before moving lower. Both of the prone women were flush with pleasure, and panting a little. Gabrielle opened her eyes, looking first at Agape, then at Ludus. Both were clearly enjoying their ministrations. When she turned her head toward Aphrodite, and the goddess gave her a look full of simmering heat. The little queen was about to say something when
a massaging hand moved through her heated center. She threw her head back with her lips parted; not expecting to feel such a high level of arousal so soon after taking care of her needs earlier. “Unngghh…”

Aphrodite couldn’t even enjoy the show, because Ludus was busy doing the same to her. Two sets of legs parted, and the only sound that could be heard was the heavy breathing and occasional gasps of sexual delight. Aphrodite, wanting to raise the temperature a little higher called “Disciples…” Getting their attention, she merely licked her lips at them. Never stopping the delicious motions of their strong hands, the disciples leaned toward each other and feasted on each other’s lips. When they pulled back from each other both grinned at the women below them. Seeing the glazed look in Gabrielle’s eyes, Agape moved one hand to pinch her nipple, while sliding the other hand down through the queen’s soaking wet slit. This elicited another gasp from the blonde queen, and more panting. Then, as if she had been waiting for that very moment, Agape slid two fingers deep into the other woman’s hot center. When she felt capable fingers gliding in and out, Gabrielle choked out “Gods!”

Meanwhile Ludus was busy with the Love Goddess. He had moved down the giant bed slightly, and had parted the other woman’s lips, like petals of a flower. Displaying unnatural skill, he worshipped his goddess with lips and tongue. At the same time Agape was adding a thumb to Gabrielle’s clit, Ludus was adding three thick fingers to the Goddess of Love’s hot depths. The disciples were well trained, and had done this many times before. They knew what to look for; all the signs and cues of pleasure, in order to best serve their goddess. They knew exactly when and how to make the writhing women peak with ecstasy and they timed it to happen together.

For the next few minutes, after the initial yells of release, all that could be heard were guttural moans and whimpers. Then Ludus spoke up. “If it pleases my Goddess and Queen Gabrielle…” Agape finished “… please turn over.”

Gabrielle moaned. “’Dite, I don’t think I can handle any more.”

The Goddess of Love laughed “Oh, so you’re all talk then?” She traced the other woman’s plump lips. “Hmm…”

Gabrielle captured the godly digit between her teeth, before releasing it with a sigh and turning over. She muttered, “I’m so going to regret this in the morning…” She opened her eyes when she felt the bed shift, and saw Ludus now knelt above her. She looked at Aphrodite and raised an eyebrow at her. All she got was a wink in return. She closed her eyes again, and relaxed into the strong shoulder massage he was giving her. It felt amazing, but she was a bit distracted by that hard presence, cradled in the cheeks of her ass. She squirmed a little bit and the man above her smirked. Neither one noticed Agape’s heated gaze directed toward them.

Aphrodite moaned as Agape’s strong hands gave her a deep tissue massage, and Agape smile, happy to pleasure her goddess. When Aphrodite noticed the placement of Ludus’ substantial manhood, she stuck out pouting bottom lip. “Hey! Like, not fair!”

Gabrielle looked at her. “What?”

Aphrodite pointed. “I want one of those too!” Noticing the attention, Ludus grinned broadly and rubbed slightly against Gabrielle, further nestling his length between her firm globes, making her entire body suddenly heat up. Then, with the snap of a finger, Agape found herself wearing a phallus carved from the finest marble. The Love Goddess did her own squirming and the cold length quickly warmed as it found its own place between the cheeks of her ass. “Ahh, much better!”
When Ludus started rubbing the entire front of his body against the back of Gabrielle, she stopped caring about who was massaging whom, or even what her own name was. She was deep within the throes of her own imagination. While she knew it was a beautiful man behind her, she was imagining it was her soul mate. She shuddered to think of Xena taking her from behind, the way she had taken Andreia earlier. She could only hope that the Warrior Princess would want to want to lover her physically once she was returned from the spirit world. The little Queen wasn’t sure if she could go back to the way they were after the crucifixion.

Gabrielle opened her eyes when she heard Aphrodite cry out. Agape was thrusting into her Goddess with abandon; their rhythm was fast and hard. Even while she hotly watched the two women next to her, she could feel her own hips being lifted by strong hands. Complying, she rolled her hips against Ludus, causing him to gasp aloud.

“Ludus!” Aphrodite called out. When she saw she had his attention, she said “Always wait for the lady.”

Ludus shuddered and took a deep breath. In a low voice he said “Yes my Goddess, your pleasure is my pleasure.” He drew himself back, and placed the tip of his silky hardness against Gabrielle’s well lubricated opening.

She looked back at him and with glazed eyes hissed out “Yessss…”

That was all the permission he needed to slowly work his length in and out of the blonde queen. He was large, and he stretched her fully. Because of his size, he kept his pace slow, letting the heat between them gradually build. Not sure if she had another orgasm in her, Gabrielle enjoyed the ride. She could feel the building pleasure, but it was like a far off mountain. At the first sound of Aphrodite’s low moans, Ludus did something a little unexpected. He rose up a bit, so the head was angled down. Then, with each thrust he gave gyrating swivel of his hips. This little move cause the engorged tip to rub deep inside her, giving that magical place a swirling caress. And suddenly, Gabrielle found the mountain right in front of her. A low wailing started, and then the heavens crashed down. The blond queen saw stars and bright flashes behind her eyelids, and overall, she held the image of long dark hair and blue eyes. Her final thoughts before release were of the Warrior Princess, and keeper of her soul.

Even Aphrodite looked spent after that. With a snap of her fingers both the toy and oil disappeared, another snap found clean bodies and bedding. Seconds later the two disciples collapsed on the bed between her and Gabrielle. It wasn’t really clear who started laughing first, but eventually the entire bath chamber echoed with the sound of male and female laughter. Aphrodite watched Gabrielle’s eyes sag shut, and knew she had accomplished the task of finally depleting the other woman’s nervous energy. With one last snap of her fingers, she deposited the little queen, safe and sound in her amazon appointed bed. Agape crawled to the other side of her Goddess and the three of them fell asleep in a tangle.
Gabrielle awoke with a jerk. No, there was no magic parchment in sight. It was a completely normal reaction, when faced with what she last remembered and where she was currently located. She looked around, unsure if the previous night’s events had actually happened, or if they were merely a dream. Her slight aches could be explained away as a result of her tryst with the dancing warrior. However, it was significantly later in the morning than she usually woke, and there was a lingering scent of sandalwood in the air. Yet, she was clean and in her own bed. ‘Hmm… maybe Xena can enlighten me.’

At the mere thought of her name, the ghostly Warrior Princess was suddenly in front of her. “Good morning Gabrielle, did you enjoy the festivities last night?” She smirked, as if being in on a big secret.

The blonde queen looked up at the other woman, suspiciously. “Yeeeesss…what is that look for?” Xena merely stared at her with those piercing blue eyes. Suddenly Gabrielle could feel a blush starting from what felt like her toes, and working its way up to her face. “Uh, so… was.I.in.a.mini.orgy.last.night.with.Aphrodite.and.her.disciples? Her question came out in a complete rush, because she was embarrassed to say it out loud.

The tall brunette burst out laughing at the flustered woman before her. What she was finally able to control herself she answered. “I don’t think I’ve see you get that crazy since you spent some time with Bacchus and the Bacchae.” She blew her ghostly bangs for emphasis. “Now that was intense!” She stepped closer to Gabrielle, and laid her palm against the queen’s hot cheek. “I only wish I could have joined you… both times.”

Gabrielle sighed, and leaned into the caress. “I know Xena, and we will be together soon.” Then she looked into the clear blue eyes of her soul mate, and smiled. “And I’m going to tell you this, my Warrior Princess, when you are returned to me, it will be just us.” She stood and started dressing in her leathers. “I know we both had our fun before, and it killed me every time.” She gave the other woman a sad look. “I regret all the years we weren’t lovers, and that it took me until you were dead to finally admit the totality of my feelings for you. And I will not throw away a second chance.” She smiled at the tall warrior in front of her. “I’m ready to make this commitment; do you think I can be enough for you?”

Gabrielle was slightly dismayed when Xena started laughing again. “Wha…” Xena quickly interrupted her. “Gabrielle, did you really just ask me that? After what I saw last night, both with your trysting warrior and with Aphrodite and her hot little disciples?” She stepped closer to the blonde queen. “I believe I could spend one hundred lifetimes exploring the depths of your passion, and still never come to the end.” Then Xena gently placed the lightest of kisses on Gabrielle’s lips. “… Never.” Gabrielle sighed after the kiss, and opened her eyes. “I love you Xe… and I’m glad to hear that. Then, with a smirk of her own, she walked over to strap on her sword and added “Perhaps Andreia can show me where she gets her ‘weapons’ from…”

Xena growled and mumbled under her breath “As long as she’s not giving you another
demonstration…” While Xena was happy that Gabrielle was still getting pleasure, and while she thought that everything she watched Gabrielle do the night before was intensely erotic, there was still a part of her that was insanely jealous. That part of her had always been insanely jealous; she was just very good at hiding it throughout the years.

Unbeknownst to Tall Dark and Intimidating, Gabrielle had never been fooled. She smiled and adjusted the knife in the sheath on her thigh, then walked over to her soul mate. “Don’t worry my love; the next time will be all you!” Then she booped the warrior princess’ nose, and walked out of the hut.

Startled, the ghost watched the door shut behind the little queen. Surprised at the level of heat she felt, despite the fact that everything was muted for her, she thought ‘I really hope this plan works’.

Even though the morning was mostly gone, Gabrielle wasn’t really concerned. She didn’t have much to do to prepare for the trip south. The only reason they weren’t leaving until the following morning is because of the length of time it takes to prepare six hundred warriors for travel. Her preparation was easy. Sword, check. Horse, check. Rations check… and done. Gabrielle was half way to the communal mess hut when she abruptly stopped walking. Sudden realization dawned on her, awareness of a new emotion. Instead of the simmering ball of anger, the burning pit she had carried since Jappa, she felt curiously light. She felt… hope. For the first time since she had learned of her godly parentage, she felt real and alive. She was happy.

When she finally arrived in the mess hut, they were serving lunch. Gabrielle noticed Varia was seated at a table near the front, so after grabbing her own plate she joined her. When Gabrielle pulled up a bench and sat, she noticed the tired looking queen staring intently at a limp, unidentifiable vegetable. Varia turned to her. “Do you know what this is?”

Gabrielle snatched it from the other woman’s fingertips, and popped it into her own mouth. Chewing carefully, and then swallowing, she shrugged her shoulders. “Nope.” Moving on, the little queen grabbed a small animal leg from her own plate and started eating. Mumbling around a mouthful of masticated meat, she moaned. “I’m starving!”

Varia shuddered. “Eh, we really need different cooks.” Picking something safe from her plate, she started eating as well. “So, did you enjoy yourself last night?” She smirked at the blonde sharing her table. “I noticed you walking a little funny on your way in.”

Gabrielle looked at her and smiled sweetly. “Well, if you had spent a few hours with an amazon warrior… then the rest of the night in an orgy with Aphrodite and two disciples… you’d walk funny too.”

Food forgotten, shocked eyes started at her. “Uh… you did what?”

Cyane had walked up with her own plate, just in time to hear Gabrielle’s comment as well. “Did you just say orgy?”

Licking her fingers, the unconcerned blonde enjoyed her friend’s shock. “Sure. Large marble bath house, bathing pools, two disciples, full body massages, a giant bed…”

Varia laughed loudly. “Gods! Now I know my decision to sleep alone was a mistake!”

Startled by the Queen of United Tribe’s words, Cyane looked at her sharply. “Oh? What happened to your little harem?”
Unsure what tone her right hand queen was using, she replied seriously. “None of them caught my eye.”

“Oh my gods, they just brought out nut bread!”

The pregnant look shared by the other two women was interrupted by Gabrielle jumping up and taking off for the food table off to the side of the large mess hut. She was humming off key when she returned to the table, with a loaf of bread in each hand. Noticing the weight gaze of her friends she looked up and swallowed a large mouthful of bread. “What? Um, did you want some?”

“I know what you’re thinking. I’m not crazy, and I didn’t just need a good roll in the hay.” She set the bread down and leaned in slightly. “I’ve decided that I am no longer going to wallow in self-pity, anger, and grief. I want to be happy, I want to enjoy my life, and I’m going to get Xena back.” She paused. “… and if for some reason I can’t… well, there are other pleasures to be had in the world.” She held up the nut bread and grinned, then leveled her green gaze at the other two queens. “And there is always more good to be done.”

Cyane and Varia smiled, seeing the life come back into their friend’s eyes, and a ghostly watching Xena smiled as well. No matter what happened, Gabrielle was going to be ok.

The following morning, the sun broke over the back of a palomino colored mare. Argo II stood placidly while Gabrielle finished tying on her packs. She slid her staff into a special holder built into the side of the saddle. Others were busy with their own horses. Sixty of the six hundred would be on horseback; the rest would bring up the rear on foot. While it seemed like a great number of women gathered, Gabrielle knew it was only about half the total amount of warriors in the Amazon city. It was imperative that the remaining citizens and queens have protection. They would never leave their home unguarded. All the queens were gathered to bid farewell to Gabrielle, Cyane, and the amazon warriors. Varia, catching Gabrielle alone for a few minutes, clasped hands.

“Safe journey Gabrielle, bring them back to us.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I will do my best, you know this.” She smirked and added “Cyane will be back before you know it.”

A rare blush made its way up the other woman’s face. Flustered, she shook her head and walked off.

Once the procession was underway, Gabrielle was much more at ease. The amazons had no trouble from the neighboring towns and villages. It was because they observed common courtesy by not trampling fields or hunting unless given permission. Good weather and plenty of rations made for easy travel. Each night, they would set up camp in places scouted in advance. The warriors would rotate who was on the setup and tear down teams, and guard duty, each night. Six hundred people took a lot of planning, from meals and water to sanitation and shelter. Everyone worked hard to make sure the trek went smoothly.

On the evening of the third day a runner came in, exhausted and out of breath. She was brought to Gabrielle’s tent, and Cyane, as well as the three commanders on the trip, all joined them. Once the scout was given some water and a chance to catch her breath, she addressed Gabrielle directly.

“Queen Gabrielle, we have sighted the forward scouts of an advancing force. The three other advance scouts with me stayed to gather information, while I came back to warn you.”

Gabrielle was shocked. “What? There is no army near Pedini!”
Xena was listening next to her. “Gabrielle, I smell a rat… and I think his name is Ares!”

Momentarily distracted, Gabrielle looked at Xena while she spoke. With the exception of Cyane, the rest of the small group had no idea why she seemed to be talking to herself. “I don’t get it, what would Ares have to do with this?”

“Gabrielle, think about it. We know how the God of War works. He disappeared while we were just starting to plan this quest. Like me, he would have come to the conclusion that you needed an army. Only he isn’t as friendly toward the amazons as we are. He has wanted one of us commanding an army for him for years. And he is not above concocting some elaborate ridiculous plan to make it happen.”

The little queen looked at her in disbelief. “Seriously? What was all that talk about making amends, and wanting to connect with the only family he has left?”

The Warrior Princess snorted. “Oh, I’m sure he thinks he’s doing this to help you. I bet he sent some ragtag army up this way, with the hopes that you would challenge their leader and take command of it. I bet he’s got a big boner in his leathers right now, imagining you commanding an army as the ‘Daughter of War’.” She looked thoughtful for a few seconds. “I just wonder who he would have sent up here that would give you enough people to stand a chance against Bartos…”

Gabrielle sighed and ran a hand through her short blonde hair, then turned back to the small confused group gathered in her tent. “So, apparently this may be some sort of round-a-bout attempt by the God of War to help with this quest.”

Cyane snorted in disbelief. “How does it help you to send an army against us?” The other commanders agreed with her.

The tribe-less queen paced, agitatedly, back and forth. “Oh, it is exactly something he would do. Stupid, spineless, asinine piece of pig…”

Xena cleared her throat. “Gabrielle!”

The blonde queen stopped and fixed angry green eyes on her soul mate. “What!”

Xena nodded at the gathered group. “Focus, and fill them in. Let’s just see what happens, hmm?” She smiled. “I have faith in you.”

Gabrielle took a deep breath and smiled back. “Thanks Xe.” She turned to face the others. “Ok, so we think he is sending some army up here, hoping I’ll fight the leader for control and take command of it. I bet he’s got a big boner in his leathers right now, imagining you commanding an army as the ‘Daughter of War’.” She looked thoughtful for a few seconds. “I just wonder who he would have sent up here that would give you enough people to stand a chance against Bartos…”

One of the commanders, Xiomara, spoke up. “So, this could be good, right?”

Cyane spoke up as well. “She’s right Gabrielle, this could be good. But I still wouldn’t trust anyone but Amazons at your back.”

Another commander, Aella, spoke. “This may just work. I’ve seen you fight, Queen Gabrielle; I would lay odds on you over any other fighter I’ve met, save maybe Xena. And even then…” She shrugged.

Xena raised an eyebrow at that last bit. Mumbling “As if…” Gabrielle snorted at the Warrior Princess’ pride.
Hermine, the last commander, added “But we need to keep our own fighters with us, no matter the outcome. I agree with Queen Cyane, I don’t trust anyone else at your back.”

With hands on her hips Gabrielle look back at them all. “What if their leader doesn’t accept a challenge?”

Xena chimed in again. “Gabrielle, the commanders for the God of War have all possessed a certain personality trait. Almost to the last, they all believe in their own superiority. And not one single man I faced, with an army under his belt, believed a woman could beat him in battle.” She smirked and said, “Of course, they were all wrong.”

Gabrielle relayed the message to the group. “Apparently followers of Ares all seem to think they are the God’s gift to battle, and none of them would believe they could be bested by a mere woman.”

Aella, figuring out that Gabrielle was getting information from a source they couldn’t see, addressed the space near Gabrielle. “So what’s the plan?”

The Warrior Princess thought about it for a minute. “Well, find out from your scouts how many are in this army. If it is even close to the size you already have, I would offer to parlay. Bring your entire force forward and meet with the commander. When you challenge him, make sure as many people as possible from his army can hear you. The more witnesses he has to the challenge, the more likely he will be to accept to prevent losing face to his men.”

Gabrielle nodded at her and turned back to the rest of the group. “Ok, here is the plan. We are going to send forward a portion of the mounted warriors to assist the scouts, and bring back information. We will march like normal at first light. And I believe there is a large tract of forest, where the road heads south of Pedini?” Hermine nodded, so Gabrielle continued. “That would be advantageous for the amazons if it does come down to a battle. That will give us some time to prepare the area, set traps, rig the trees, and create a defensive strategy, before they march into the area. Does everyone agree?”

Serious faces nodded around the tent. “Ok, commanders, please choose your mounted scout assists. Tell them to take six hours rest, and then head out. Tell them I also want one mounted scout to report back as soon as they know the size of the army we are facing, and who their leader is. We can prep the rest of the warriors tomorrow when we stop early. Ok, that’s it; you all know what to do.” Seeing the end of the meeting, they all filed out save Cyane.

“Gabrielle, this worries me.”

The little queen clasped her shoulder. “I know. It worries me as well. I was hoping to just march down to Louros, rattle some Amazon swords for passage, then complete the trip to Preveza. The good thing is that if this plan works, I will have an indisputable force to take me to Preveza. If it doesn’t work though… we will be dealing with casualties and I will turn us back to the Amazon city. This is a one-time shot; I will not risk my Amazon sisters here and against Bartos.” A look of consternation crossed her face. “Of course, if this plan does work, I’m going to acquire an entire army of who knows what kind of warriors. What would I do with an army? I’ve never wanted to be a leader.”

Cyane smiled at her softly. “Gabrielle, you’ve always been a leader. And I am very thankful for that. I’m sure you will think of the solution when the time comes.”

Gabrielle was still contemplating Cyane’s surprising words when the other woman left the tent. Finally she shook her head, and followed her outside. ‘It can’t hurt to get a little training in.’
Chapter 11

The next day, the Amazon army had been stopped at the scouted forest for nearly two candle marks. Much had been accomplished in that amount of time, the queens and commanders didn’t have much to do other than wait for word from the forward scouts. Gabrielle was using the idle time sparing with a handful of Amazon volunteers. Each one took turns against the skilled queen. They were all armed with a sword, while she remained unarmed. Systematically, she would disarm each one, and then start on the next. The technique was called tachi-dori, meaning ‘sword taking’. It was a skill she picked up in Jappa, one that even Xena had never learned. Practice was interrupted when a mounted scout came galloping into the camp.

“Queen Gabrielle, I have news!”

The warrior dismounted and Gabrielle led the woman toward her tent. She sent runners for the other Queen and commanders, and gave the scout her water skin. “Let’s wait for the others to get her, and then you can report.”

The scout, drinking her fill, nodded. “Yes Queen Gabrielle.”

Myrina, the scout, began after everyone arrived. “Sorry it took so long to get information, but their scouts move in advance, nearly as far as ours. First, they are definitely heading towards us. There are no other large ok, cities along this route, except the Amazon city. Second, from what we could gather, they have around four hundred men, well-armed and armored. Perhaps two score on horseback, a hundred with sarissas, and the rest are foot soldiers.”

Gabrielle and the rest of the leaders smiled at the recited numbers. Aella laughed outright. “Sarissas? Those spears can be anywhere between five and ten strides in length! Those pig stickers will only do more harm than good for them in the forest.”

Cyane smiled and prompted, “Go ahead Myrina.”

“Well, that was the basic makeup. It looked like there were about 3 commanders, and one overall leader of the army. Based on some of the conversations the scouts overheard, we believe the leader to be a General Barto or Bartos. None of us could decide; their scouts have a bit of an accent.”

At the mention of the opposing general’s name, Gabrielle’s face paled, and Xena cursed. Cyane exclaimed “Bartos! But why is he up our way? Isn’t he supposed to be down in Louros?”

Xena stood in front of a pale Gabrielle. “Listen to me; this doesn’t have to change your plan.”

The little queen looked up at her. “What do you mean? Of course this will change the plan!”

“No, clearly he is coming here for a reason. Again, my instinct is telling me that Ares is behind this. Instead of sending you some random army to help in your quest, he has sent Bartos himself.” She growled. “Ares wants you to take over Bartos’ army; he wants you to challenge him.”

Gabrielle sighed. “I think you’re right. I think Ares is skipping the middle man, and just wants me to fight and take over Bartos’ army directly. But two problems with that are, can I win, and what happens if I do?”

Hermine cleared her throat. “Excuse me, but I don’t think any of that really matters. Clearly they
are on their way to the Amazon city to do us harm. I’m actually glad we are here, in this place of our choosing and well away from our loved ones.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Whether you win the challenge or not isn’t so much relevant as the fact that we have to stop this army by any means necessary. Even if you decide not to challenge this Bartos, the facts are that we still have the superior force, and the superior battle ground. We will win, and you should be able to continue on your quest with only a small honor guard.”

Cyane nodded her agreement. “She’s right Gabrielle. Whether you decide to challenge or not, we will still be faced with this army. If you challenge and win, you will simply save us a lot of fighting and lost lives. But is it too risky for you? I can’t be the one to decide.”

Gabrielle had her eyes shut, working through the thoughts and scenarios in her head. She startled a bit when she felt a caress on her check. Clear blue eyes looked back at her. “You can do this Gabrielle; I think you are ready to make your own legend.”

“I agree with you all. This confrontation was going to happen, since they are clearly coming after the Amazons for whatever reason. I’m sure Ares is behind this, so who knows what he told them to prompt them to campaign against the nation.” She looked at Myrina. “How far out are they? How likely is it they’ll follow this forest road?”

The scout scratched her cheek, thinking. “Well, I doubt they’ll push through the night, they had no idea we were shadowing them. Most likely they’ll make camp as usual, that should put them here around noon tomorrow.”

Xiomara spoke up. “I can answer your second question. It gets extremely hilly all round this area, if they are going to bring any size force through, this low forest road would be the easiest way about it. Armored soldiers, and horsemen alike, would find it difficult to go through the hills.”

“Ok, I will parlay with Bartos. But I want to start with a position of power; it is hard to do that on the road. Amazons are unmatched in their tree walking, so I want a third of our force out in the forest. Stick to the trees as much as possible, I want their army flanked on both sides. If it does come to a battle, I want a decisive win for our side.” She looked at gathered queen and commanders before her. “As for my part, I will offer to parlay with Bartos. I will take... Aella and five mounted warriors.” Cyane tried to protest but Gabrielle silenced her with a look. “No! If I should fall to Bartos, we need a queen to take over. The rest of our sisters will depend on you and the commanders to lead them to victory.” She looked around at the battle hardened faces. “Does everyone understand?”

Grudgingly, the rest nodded in agreement. “Good, send the warriors into the forest now, I want them firmly in place and well hidden when the other army marches in. No cook fires tonight; and keep those bow strings dry from the dew. The element of surprise and underestimation by the enemy will be our greatest weapon here. Ok, let’s get moving people!” She shooed them out of the tent.

A chorus of “Yes Queen Gabrielle” preceded their exit. Cyane turned back to her, just before exiting, and mouthed the word ‘later’. Gabrielle nodded. Once they were all gone, she walked over to sit on her cot.

“Are you really sure I can do this, Xena?” She turned sad eyes to her soul mate. “One Amazon death here will be too many.”

The ghostly warrior knelt in front of her. “I am absolutely sure you can beat him. Now let me give you some tips, since Ares can’t and won’t help us out here. You can think of it as a crash course on everything Bartos. First thing to remember is that he is tough, and he knows it. He will be over-
confident when faced with a small woman…”

The next morning, all the scouts on horseback returned. They didn’t want to be seen by the oncoming force. The scouts on foot were pacing Bartos’ army, and would take to the trees as they neared the forest. Gabrielle had instructed the warriors who were hiding in the trees to quietly capture any enemy scouts that came ahead. They were hoping to maintain the element of surprise on the forest road. The road itself could comfortably fit 10 horsemen abreast, and had enough twists and turns to benefit the Amazons.

They could hear the approaching army long before they saw it. Amazon scouts reported Bartos had entered the forest with his long columns of troops. Horsemen were immediately behind Bartos and his commanders, all but ten rode toward the front. The last horsemen brought up the rear. Spearmen with their sarissas marched a little ways back from the horsemen, to give them room to maneuver their long weapons during an attack. All foot troops were in long snaking columns, ten men across. The columns of spearmen were ten men long, while the rest of the foot soldier columns snaked around a bend in the trees, twenty-six men long. At the very rear, being guarded by the last ten horsemen, were the supply wagons and support staff for the army.

Gabrielle, Cyane, and the three commanders were waiting at the head of their own army, when Bartos came around the last bend. Gabrielle held a white flag to show she wanted to parley. Initially, when the advancing army saw the Amazons, they stopped, and the giant man she assumed was Bartos, seemed to be angrily addressing his commanders. They sent horsemen to gallop back along their lines, probably looking for the scouts. Gabrielle called out, pushing her voice to reach the hundred or so yards between troops. “Bartos, we wish to parley.”

For his part, the minute he saw the Amazon army, Bartos started cursing Ares. He knew the War God’s scheme seemed too good to be true. He didn’t know the God of War had actually double crossed him. He just assumed that the amazons had somehow gotten word of the army heading north and were coming out as a precaution. Seeing that their force was near his in size, he made the decision to ride forward and see what the cursed women had to say. While it would be foolish to start a battle with Amazons in the middle of the forest, he had confidence that he could win in the end, though the losses may cause him to barely break even on Ares little venture. Pointing at a few men on horseback, they started forward, closing the distance between armies.

Gabrielle did the same with her mounted escorts. She was nervous, but felt safe enough knowing the trees were full of Amazon archers. Subtly, both armies moved slightly closer to their meeting leaders.

Bartos aggressively called out “Why do you block our path woman! Go back to your tree city and leave us men to our work!”, then spat on the ground next to his horse.

Gabrielle responded in a clear voice, one that carried to the front ranks of the opposing army. “What business do you have that takes you so near our lands?”

Blustering, the big man answered “Our business is none of yours! Now take your nursemaid army back the way they came, and we shall be on our way.”

The little queen snorted. “And leave you at our back? I don’t think so, Bartos.”

The enemy warlord cocked his head, staring at her intently. “Do I know you? How do you know my name?”
Gabrielle laughed again. "Bartos the Bastard… I know so much more than your name. I know you owe your command to the miserable God of War, I know where your army should be, I know who your first commander was two score and ten years ago, and I know that a woman once kicked you so hard in the behind that you flew head first into a dung pile!"

Bartos roared, causing his horse to shy and prance in place. "By my lord Ares, you have no idea who you are messing with! I should wipe that lying mouth off your face!"

The blonde facing him seemed to glow in response. "No! You have no idea who you are messing with! I am Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons, companion to deceased Warrior Princess, and samurai trained daughter of War!" She gave him a sneer that made even her Amazon escorts wonder about her state of mind. "And I challenge you, Bartos, to try wiping anything off my face. You are no warrior, you are the son of a pig farmer, and you will die smelling as bad as when you were born!"

The battle hardened warrior was slightly taken aback, wondering exactly how much of what the woman said was actually true. Could she really be the God of War’s daughter? None of it matter now because she did exactly as she intended, she had stoked a raging fire of anger inside him. Even if she was the God of War himself, Bartos needed to see the challenge through, partly to satiate his anger, and partly to save face with his men. "Fine! Clear us a space and I will be happy to teach another Amazon whore what it means to succumb to a real man!" He smiled evilly as he dismounted. "When I’m finished with you, my army will tame the rest of your so-called women" One of his commanders and a few of the other men behind him laughed. They had no doubts that he could make good on his promise.

Gabrielle dismounted as well, and sent Argo back with her escort. Aella gave her one last look, before backing up to let the two leaders battle. Gabrielle immediately drew her katana and started circling with the big warrior. He spun his large sword and laughed. While she was armored heavier than the typical Amazon warrior, it wasn’t nearly enough protection against the giant of a man and his sword. She knew her only chance to win would be with her speed and cunning. Watching for the minute signs of attack, she was ready when he gave a great roar and swept his sword across her middle. As with most sword blows, it would have been fatal had she still been there. But the little queen was an expert at reading a swordsman’s tells, and had already spun out of the way, taking a minor glancing blow on her own blade.

Loudly, the bastard yelled "Typical woman, too weak to face a man, so she runs away."

Even the glancing blow from the big man left Gabrielle’s hands stinging slightly. She started circling again, keeping her gaze locked on his. Many of his men, and her Amazons were cheering around them. But she ignored all the noise, focused only on the man in front of her. Xena’s words were still echoing in her ears from earlier. ‘You can do this Gabrielle; I think you are ready to make your own legend.’ The voice was knocked soundly from her head when Bartos got a solid punch to her kidneys when she was spinning away from another sword slice. Worry nagged her at the flash of numbness along her left side. She couldn’t let him hit her again.

A quarter of a candle mark passed, leaving both Bartos and Gabrielle sweating profusely. Gabrielle had drawn the only blood so far. While she was quicker than Bartos, she had to be careful to get out of the way of his solid swing, and damaging blows. That meant she couldn’t drive through with her blade as much as she would have liked. Gabrielle back flipped a few paces away from the bastard warrior. Seeing this he laughed aloud, and with a sneer said. "What’s the matter little queen, are you giving up already?" Inside though, Bartos was getting worried. In full armor, he knew he couldn’t keep up the pace much longer. He would have to end it soon.
Gabrielle knew her only chance would be to disarm the man. He had the reach of her with swords. And while she didn’t want to wrestle with him any time soon, she had a plan that would distract him, and would give her a moment to disable him completely. However, her plan was not without risk. Unfortunately it involved giving up her own weapon, and letting him attack her from a position of strength. She had to time everything just right, and be completely confident in her skills, or she would die. She also had to make it look like an accident that she was disarmed, otherwise he would be suspicious. Spinning the katana in a figure eight pattern, she ended it by spinning the blade around into a reverse grip, or Zatoichi style. There were a few reasons she chose that position. It obviously reduces the swordsman’s reach, and it’s also harder to hold the blade stable. And she wanted Bartos to notice those two things, adding to his overconfidence. Now the Zatoichi style of fighting had its strengths, but the benefits were only really found in enclosed fighting. Of course, if she were disarming him, she would probably be left holding his sword in the same position. No, it would not be the way she would fight under the current circumstances, but for the sake of drawing him in closer, it was perfect.

Seeing Gabrielle’s grip on the sword, he grinned at her mistake. And before she could second guess her plan of action, he roared and charged forward. He quickly engaged her and just as quickly spun the katana from her weakened grip. With triumph etched across his weathered face, he gripped his sword in both hands and raised it up for a killing blow.

In those precious seconds it took for him to raise the sword, she darted forward inside his guard, and won the battle with a few well-placed finger jabs. The look of shock replaced triumph as he dropped to his knees. Gabrielle kicked his sword away and stood looking at the big warrior. For a few critical seconds, the blonde queen debated on what to do. She leveled a grave look at him. “Bartos, I’m sure you know what I’ve just done. I don’t really wish to kill you, but you only have a few seconds before the lack of blood to your brain will finish this. However, I’ll let you go if you agree to leave this place, and leave the Amazons in peace. Just take your warriors and go. Do you agree?”

Blood trickled from the furious man’s nose. At first it looked like he wouldn’t agree, then with mere seconds to spare, he gave a short nod. Gabrielle quickly released the pinch, and stepped back, watching him recover. When she was satisfied his rage seemed to have abated she turned around to go pick up her own sword. In an instant he drew a knife from his thigh sheath, and with expert precision launched at Gabrielle’s back. Everyone watching, the front ranks of both armies, the commanders, Bartos, and a ghostly Xena, all thought she was dead. But instead of sinking into the tender flesh of her back, there was a flash of light and the knife dropped harmlessly to the ground. It was with a shocked awareness that Xena knew that her soul mate had let him throw the dagger. She also knew that the little queen didn’t just let the bastard attack, but she let his knife hit her. For the first time in their lives together, Xena had no idea what Gabrielle was thinking.

Before anyone could react, before Bartos could get over his surprise to attack again, Gabrielle whirled with katana in hand, and launched it at the chest of the kneeling man. The katana, with more than a dozen folds and over five thousand layers, buried its full length into the great bear of a man. Its forward progress was only stopped by the tsuba, or hand guard. All the people who knew Gabrielle were shocked, all the warriors who didn’t know her, were impressed and wary.

Slightly confused, but knowing the rules of combat, Bartos’ commanders all dismounted. Gabrielle gave the Amazons in the trees a subtle hand signal to let them approach. The oldest one, who had a scar running from the corner of his eye to the base of his jaw, spoke. “By right of battle, we are yours to command.” He drew his sword, then knelt and laid it gently at her feet. One by one, the rest of the commanders, followed suit.
Suddenly, there was a flash of blue light, and Ares appeared near the body of Bartos. He smiled and started slowly clapping. “Bravo Gabrielle, well done! You have truly proven yourself as the daughter of War.” He pulled out the katana and kicked the body over. Bartos had died kneeling, as if in prayer of a god that would never come. Well he came, just too late and with too little concern. With a wave of his hand, the blade was clean, and he examined the beautiful damask pattern along its length.

Gabrielle, tired and angry, addressed the God of War with impudence. “So did I pass your little test… father? Is this what you wanted, for me to kill Bartos and take over his army? Just what am I supposed to do with an army?”

Ares smiled but didn’t look at her. “Well, you almost passed my test.”

A confused look flickered over Gabrielle’s face. “Wha…” Suddenly, Ares spun and launched the katana at his daughter, exactly the way she had done to Bartos. Reacting instantly, she spun pulling her chest back and to the left, while her right hand grabbed the sword handle out of the air. Then continuing the spin, she used her momentum to launch the katana back at the War God.

With much surprise, he magically stopped the sword’s forward motion, but not before it pierced the leathers over his heart. Her last move actually left him slightly afraid of her, not that he would show it. Too many armies, and one too many ghosts were present to admit anything. He smirked and walked toward the dangerous queen. Grasping the blade gently he handed the katana back to her, tsuka first. “Very impressive, that was why I never doubted your success. And as for the army, well they’re all yours. So I guess you better figure it out fast so you can get on with your quest.”

“Wait, why are they so far from Louros? What did you promise Bartos to get him to come after the Amazons?”

Ares scratched at his cheek. “Well, I may have told him I had a roman buyer for one hundred Amazons, and that most of the tribe would be away. So they were coming up here to make some dinars.”

Gabrielle looked at him intently. Knowing how the God of War wove plans like a spider weaves a web, she asked “And? Are there really going to be Romans waiting for one hundred Amazon slaves?”

Ares smiled a great and devious smile. “Oh absolutely! However, I may have downplayed a few details. It seems they aren’t just looking for Amazons, but they are looking to conscript Greek soldiers as well. And they won’t be bringing two galleys; they will have three quinqueremes waiting in the Preveza harbor, each carrying three hundred oarsmen, two score fighting men, and four score of legionnaires.” He raised an eyebrow at the skilled woman in front of him. “So, if you have any thoughts about sending your new army away, you may want to think again. Preveza will be crawling with soldiers, and they may be looking for you specifically.” He chuckled, “Well, you and Xena. But I’m sure they will take just you if they get the chance.”

Gabrielle growled her displeasure and decided to ignore him. She looked at the kneeling commanders. “Stand and tell me your names.” After they all introduced themselves she continued. “Do you, Cadmus, Alala, and Drea, personally swear allegiance, for yourselves and for your army?”

The man, Cadmus, spoke for them all. “You have won the right to lead us. And we have seen with our own eyes your prowess in battle, we can see that you are an Amazon queen, and Lord Ares himself has called you daughter. You are a more than worthy leader!”
She nodded in acknowledgement. “Ok, I need you to direct the army back through the forest, and set up camp in the fallow field on the other side.” She pointed to Cyane and Aella. “I need you to direct the amazons the same way. No matter what, I want the armies kept separate and I want guards posted to enforce the border between the two groups!” When the soldiers have been settled, I want to see the commanders from both sides in my tent.” She looked at Cadmus, and then turned her gaze to Cyane. “I want you and Cadmus to personally take charge of the two armies and make sure all is done correctly.” The little queen looked toward Aella and added “Disturb the forest as little as possible.” The other woman nodded, understanding Gabrielle’s directive to leave that portion of their force untouched. Though she had the God of War on her side, and the pledge of Bartos’ commanders, it was still nice to have a couple hundred Amazon warriors in reserve. With one last look of contempt at Ares, she mounted Argo. “I will return at sundown… now get those troops moving!” She then spun Argo around and headed back down the lines of Amazon warriors, toward the other end of the forest road. She needed time to think and come up with a plan. She needed to talk to Xena.
Chapter 12

Amazon warriors had just started to move forward by the time Gabrielle galloped Argo out of the forest. About a quarter of a candle mark after she passed the last amazon, she entered the town of Pedini.

A few paces down the main street yielded the type of building she was looking for. After leaving Argo with the boy tending the stables, she walked into the ‘Jug and Thorn’. The innkeeper was an older woman with long dark hair, faded well to gray at the temples. Wisps were escaping from the kerchief she had tied around her head. Gabrielle smiled at the way she was reminded of Cyrene, Xena’s long dead mother.

The woman wiped her hands on a cloth tied around her waist. “Welcome to ‘The Thorn’. Don’t got no rooms ready yet, but there’s still some late lunch.”

The blonde queen cocked her head slightly at the other woman. “Just ‘The Thorn’?”

The other woman snorted. “The Jug’s a dead, the mealy mouthed bastard! And I’m a better off without him. Mah boy handles the horses, and mah two girls take care of the rooms, and waitin’. I work the food and ale, mah name’s Adelpha. Now what can I git yah?”

Gabrielle smiled at the forthright woman. “Well I left my horse with your boy; he just needs some fresh water. But I’ll take a late lunch and… say, do you have any nut bread?”

The woman showed a gap tooth smile, framed by her heavily lined face. “Eeyup! Jus came out this morning. I’ll bring you a loaf with yer lunch. And lunch is some mashed radish, dried fish cakes, cheese and olives. It’s a dinar for the lot, and fer watchin’ yer horse. Does that suit yer taste?”

The little queen’s stomach rumbled, the fight having left her extremely hungry. “That sounds amazing.” She removed a dinar from her pouch, but not before the woman saw the rest of the money.

Adelpha looked from the money, to Gabrielle’s clothing, and then shifted her gaze to the strange sword strapped over the small woman’s back. Never afraid to speak her mind, she said “Yer a strange type to be one of them Amazons, ain’t yah? And what’r yah doing so far from yer lands?”

The blonde smiled. “Well, I am Queen Gabrielle, and I’m just here to eat lunch and to do some thinking.” There was no point in telling the woman about the two armies under her command, both awaiting her at the southern end of the forest road. No sense alarming her.

The woman’s mouth dropped open in shock. “By ye gods! Tis really who yer is? Yer the young amazon queen, the Battling Bard of Potidaea, the one who traveled with the Warrior Princess?”

It would be mild to say Gabrielle was taken aback by the woman’s exuberance. “Um… yes, that is me.”

“Why, I can’t but hardly believes it! I have a legend in mah inn!” The woman’s eyes excitedly twinkled. “Are yahs here to stay a night, and maybe tell a story or two? Or are yer on a campaign, are are yah here for the council?”

The blonde was bombarded by questions from the suddenly loquacious innkeeper. She held up her
hands. “Whoa, hold up Adelpha. First, I’m not staying the night, so I won’t be speaking. Second I am on a campaign of sorts, so I’m only here to have lunch and do some thinking.” She paused for a second, and then continued. “Actually, I’ll give you a total of ten dinars if you can guarantee me some privacy for a few hours.”

The other woman smiled broadly, nodding her head. “Oh, sure thing yer highness! Whatever yer need, I kin gets it.” After Gabrielle handed her the rest of the dinars, and went to sit down at a table across from the door. Satisfied her guest was comfortable; Adelpha disappeared into the other room, presumably a kitchen. A short while later, she emerged carrying a platter off assorted food. It was all the items she mentioned, plus a few extra delicacies. She also brought a flagon of wine. “This is mah own special brew, been told it’s the best around.” When Gabrielle looked ready to protest, she added “Oh, I know yers did’nt ask for it, it’s my treat. If yer don’t mind mah sayin, you look like you could use a drink.”

The little queen mentally sighed, sensing she wasn’t going to get rid of the innkeeper easily. And while Xena had not shown herself since she arrived, Gabrielle wouldn’t be likely to speak with the beautiful shade while the innkeeper was listening. “Would you like to join me Adelpha? I knew an innkeeper once; she was very dear to me. And I wouldn’t mind some company for a bit.”

The older woman glanced around nervously. “Well, it wouldn’t be proper ‘n all fer me to sit with a guest, ’specially not one as grand as you!” With one more glance toward the door, she smiled. “But since ain’t no one gonna be here but yer, and yers did invite me, I kin have mahself a sit down for a spell.”

Gabrielle started eating, and between bites she asked “So why did you think I would be here for the council?”

Adelpha looked chagrined. “Oh, well that’s nuthin to worry yers head about, just a bit of trouble with some raiders once a month or so.”

Munching on an olive, the blonde replied “Oh? What sort of trouble?”

Adelpha leaned forward a bit. “Well… the council says we’re not really supposed to say. They don’t want it affecting traders that come up the forest road. But we gots about a dozen raiders that come down the road from Anatoli, but ther council don’t think that’s where they’re from. One of the council members spoke with her sister’s cousin up there, and the raiders are comin’ from around the lake. They gots some big army up near Kastritsa, and they’re always lookin’ fer supplies and such.” She shook her head sadly. “Most get lucky, they gots their money and goods hid, just savin’ out a bit o’extra for the raiders to take. But sometimes they grab our girls too. I just sends mine up in the hayloft the minute we hears trouble. Not everyone’s so lucky though.”

Gabrielle’s brain was working overtime. Having any army near Kastritsa was too near to the Amazon lands for their comfort. And she just happened to have an army of her own that she didn’t know what to do with. Maybe she could kill two birds with one stone. “Adelpha, do you know if the council has tried hiring some guards?”

“Well, they were gonna try, but the raiders keep stealin’ all there extra cash they save from the forest road trade. So it’s makin’ it hard to bring good folks in. Why, all our business is sufferin’! One of the biggest inns in town has already closed, though there’s a part of me that don’t mind the lack of competition. But ol Joss got tired of fearin’ for his wife and girls, so he went up to Ioannina, to stay with his wife’s family. He just up and left his whole inn and stable empty! It was a big un too, with more’n twenty-five rooms, and a big stable. I’d buy it from him if’n I could afford it!”

Now Gabrielle’s mind was already formulating a plan. She swiped the last bit of bread through
some olive oil and chewed thoughtfully. She calculated how many soldiers the town would need, the cost for the soldiers, and wording of a potential contract that could be written between her and the town. ‘Hmm, it just might work… and keep the Amazon borders a little safer’ Adelpha, I need to talk to your council, I may be able to help your situation.

The older woman looked at her in shock and awe. “Oh! Really? That would be truly amazin’ yer highness! Bless you! I’ll go get them right now!” She hopped up from the bench with a spryness that belied her middle age. “Enyo, Corli!”

Two girls hustled to the top of the stairs, and spoke in unison. “Yes ma?”

“I need yahs to go get the council. Tell ‘em we have a queen that wants to speak with them. And hurry!”

They quickly clattered down the stairs and out the front door of the inn. Beaming with her gap-tooth smile, Adelpha turned to Gabrielle. “They should be back in just a little bit. Everyone on the council should be here in town; most have businesses that have been affected by the raiders.”

It was a short time later that a group of men and women shuffled into the inn. One portly man complained to the innkeeper. “Adelpha, what’s the meaning of this! I thought we told everyone to keep quiet about the raiders?”

Gabrielle stood and walked over to the group. “It’s actually my fault, I asked her to tell me what was going on.”

The councilman looked at Gabrielle intently. “And who the blazes are you?”

The little queen smiled and held out her hand. “I’m Gabrielle, Amazon Queen. And I think I have the solution to your problem.”

He paled a bit. “Qu… Queen Gabrielle? Oh, my apologies. We are always willing to speak to our neighbors from the Amazon nation.”

Another woman, slightly older, stepped forward. “Queen Gabrielle, I am Councilwoman Thorra. Let’s all take a seat and listen to your proposal.” She turned to Adelpha. “Adelpha, can you be a dear and get us some more of your wonderful wine?”

Adelpha grinned and winked at the councilwoman. “No problem, I’ll take care of yers right quick!”

Once they were all seated with some good wine, Gabrielle began. “I’ve been thinking about your problem, and how it could also become a problem for the Amazon nation. Do you think two score of soldiers would be sufficient for protection?”

Thorra looked at her shrewdly. “Well, it would be sufficient for a bit, until their army started sending larger raiding parties out. But I’m sure Adelpha would have told you that we don’t have any extra dinars right now because they keep taking so much each month.” She gave the little queen a wry and somewhat apologetic look. “And I hate to say it, but I don’t know how comfortable the town would be with Amazons guarding. The Amazons are… different, and people are afraid of things they don’t really understand.”

Gabrielle gave her a cunning little smile. “Oh, I have a plan for that too. Let me lay it out for you. I have an army, and not an Amazon army. Though, I have one of those too.” She winked at the shocked faces around the table. “So I’m on a quest right now, and while I will need some fighters, I don’t know what I’m going to do with two entire armies under my command. Now I bet I could
handpick two score good men and women, who would be interested in taking up a guard position. After a certain point, many warriors start thinking about living a little longer, and maybe having a life and family outside of war.” She took a sip of wine and continued. “You essentially be hiring me to protect your town. In regards to your financial situation, I can pay and lodge the soldiers for the first month, as long as it’s written into the contract that you build them lodging before the season’s end. I will provide a captain for the troops, that that you can direct as you wish. They will protect the town and surrounding lands to the best of their ability until the day comes when the contract is nullified. They will follow your orders in all matters, unless those orders pit them against the Amazon Nation, or their allies and interests. If you find that you will need more soldiers, we can re-negotiate the contract at that time. Finally, because I am providing you with the soldiers, I will ask for exclusive trading rights for the amazon nation, all for a cost of seventy-five dinars each moon.

An explosion of comments happened around the table. “Who are these soldiers?” “Where would they be lodged, we have no room!” “What are ‘Amazon Interests’?” Thorra, as head councilwoman needed only to hold up a hand for silence. “I think my fellow council members have some very good questions. Could you address them please?”

Gabrielle ticked off the items on her fingers. “The soldiers are from an army I recently acquired from Bartos the Bastard.” There was a slight gasp and she continued. “I would have trusted Amazon commanders evaluate them for temperament, personality, and skill, before assigning them to your town. I believe there is an empty inn that should sleep everyone. Soldiers are used to barracks style lodging, with two people to a room, plus the inn has a stable for everyone’s mount. The Amazon nation will either rent or buy the inn from Joss, the innkeeper. He may wish to come back to Pedini when the raiders are taken care of. That is why it would be the town’s responsibility to build a new barracks and stable for them before the end of the season.” She sighed and covered the last thing. “As for ‘Amazon Interests’, well that is easy. Do not send our soldiers against the Amazon nation, its representatives, or allies. If you have a complaint about something, send an envoy to the city and we will address it. If any soldiers are found to have committed a crime, they will be tried according to our laws, in our city, until a better system can be worked out.”

There was murmuring around the table, and Thorra looked back at her with a pleased smile. “Queen Gabrielle, could you give us a few minutes to discuss your offer?”

“Oh, I’ll just go check on my horse.”

She could hear loud discussion start as soon as she walked out the door to the inn. When she heard someone chuckle nearby, she quickly turned. Xena smiled at her and winked. “That was some fancy negotiating in there, I’m impressed. You came up with a solution to their problem, and a partial solution to your own and a small yearly income. Nice job Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle smiled at her and started walking toward the stable where Argo was kept. “Well, they had a problem, and I had the means of a solution. It’s seemed like an easy negotiation.”

After a little less than half a candle mark later, Adelpha’s eldest daughter came out to the stable. She curtsied, and kept her shy eyes focused on Gabrielle’s boots. “If you please Queen Gabrielle, the council is ready to speak with you again.” Glancing up at the little Queen’s face, she smiled, and then hurried off.

Gabrielle returned to the common room of the inn. “Have you decided?” Thorra smiled broadly. If you cover the pay and lodging for two months, and lower the cost to 30 dinars per month, I think we have a deal.”

Gabrielle countered with “Sixty dinars”
Adelpha came back with “Fifty dinars”

Gabrielle thought for a second, and then nodded. “We have a deal, fifty dinars it is! Could you have a scribe write up a contract for us?”

Thorra looked surprised for a second then nodded. “Sure. We usually just shake on such things but the council has had actual contracts before.”

Gabrielle looked at her seriously. “I would trust you on a handshake Thorra, but I’m hoping this lasts longer than our memories. And I would also like something to take back to the Amazon Queen of Nations. I think Varia will be very displeased to learn of an army so close to the Amazon border, and very happy to know there are people down here who would be allies. Plus the trade deal is good too.”

Thorra agreed. “I have heard of your Queen of Nations, though not in the same way as I have heard of you. But you’re correct; I think everyone will be pleased with this deal.”

“Good. Now, let’s talk details. Could the council contact Joss the innkeeper, and ask about purchase or rent of his inn? I will ride back south of the forest to speak with my commanders there. We will talk to the new army and look for volunteers. I will pick out two score for now, with one of their captains, and an escort of ten Amazons. Once they’re settled, I’ll send the Amazons back to Varia with the contract, and they will bring payment for the soldiers. Does that meet with your approval?”

There was a response of nodding heads around the table. “That sounds good. We will send a runner up to Ioannina to get permissions and costs from Innkeeper Joss, and we will send a few folks over to his inn to stock some food and get it ready for the soldiers.”

Gabrielle, with the new contracted tucked safely into her pouch, mounted Argo. The council had already departed, and Adelpha had come out to say goodbye. “Thank yous fer all yer help Queen Gabrielle! Yer a real gods send! Please, if yer ever back in our little town, I would be honored fer yah to stay at my inn.”

Gabrielle’s eyes twinkled. “Thank you Adelpha, I would be honored. And thanks again for the flask full of your delicious wine.”

By the time Gabrielle caught up with her armies, they had two camps set up. It was all very well organized, and the soldiers and Amazons seemed to be going about their duties with no issues. She could see duel Amazon and new guards around the perimeter of each camp. ‘Huh, that’s a good idea. Nothing like boring guard duty to get to know people’.

When she entered the Amazon camp, she could see Xiomara standing near the picket lines, speaking with one of the commanders that came with Bartos. “Oh, Queen Gabrielle! Come meet Drea, he was one of Bartos’ commanders. He was just telling me about a string of horses they bought from a trader coming in from Mesopotamia. I’ve been looking at one of them and I have to say it’s some of the best horseflesh I’ve seen in a long time!”

The little queen smiled at Xiomara’s exuberance. She was known to be a bit horse crazy, an unusual trait in an Amazon. She dismounted Argo and studied the horse standing between Xiomara and Drea. She was studying its clean lines, wedge-shaped head, and large eyes when Drea gave a slight bow.
“Queen Gabrielle, I look forward to serving under you. Do you have a plan for what we will be doing next?”

She studied him critically. He was clean shaven, with a scar on his chin. Rather than detract from his looks, it made him ruggedly handsome. He smiled easily, and she could see his armor and weapons seemed well cared for. “Drea, I do have a plan, I have multiple plans actually. I would like all the commanders to gather in my tent in a quarter of a candle mark. Drea, can you send one of your men for Cadmus and Alala? And Xiomara, can you do the same for Aella and Hermine?”

Xiomara looked uncomfortable and Drea spoke up. “I’m sorry, my Queen, but Alala left. And if you don’t mind my saying so, It’s probably best that he did.”

The blonde cocked her head at the handsome warrior. “And why is that?”

“Well… he was too much like Bartos in my opinion. He never would have served you well. We also lost about a hundred fighters as well, but I refused to let them take a horse unless they paid for it. I know the worth of those horses, having trained more than half myself. On Cadmus’ recommendation, they all received their severance pay from the army.”

Gathering a slightly shocked response from the two commanders, she replied “Well good. That solves one of my problems for me! And Cadmus is a smart man! That should keep most of them from being bitter and coming at our backs later.” She smiled. “Now, gather who you can, and I will explain all shortly. I want to get rid of some of the road dust before everyone crashes my tent.”
Her tent seemed overly crowded with the five commanders, and Cyane, all seated on a large blanket inside. She looked around the circle of Greek warriors; they seem incongruous with the current layout of her tent. Gabrielle leaned forward, with elbows on her knees. Her fingers were steepled as she debated her words. “So I’m sure you are all wondering where we go from here. I’m sure my Amazons have informed the army commanders about my quest. The events of the past few hours have added a few complications, or perhaps solutions. At first, our only goal was to pass through Bartos’ lands unhindered. Now I have acquired an extra army, and news that Preveza is crawling with Roman soldiers. These are soldiers on Greek soil… OUR soil. I’ve had more unpleasant dealings with Roman soldiers than not, and I’d like to scourge Greece of their presence.” She paused, seeing everyone in the circle nodding in agreement. Romans, while bringing order and infrastructure to the nation of Greece, also brought a lot of pain and misery. Greeks no longer wanted to be controlled by Rome, and did not want to be conscripted to help bloated Roman emperors with their nation-building efforts.

Cyane, ever curious since the fight with Bartos spoke. “Will we take both armies to Preveza then?” she looked around the circle. “From what I can tell, both sides seem to be getting along well. At least since all the rabble left.”

Cadmus agreed with her. “The Queen’s army will happily go where you direct us.”

Gabrielle’s head snapped around to look at grizzled commander. “Excuse me? What did you just call them?”

Cadmus looked uncertain at the tone of her voice, so Drea piped in. “The Queen’s army. That is what the men wanted to be called.”

The little queen looked at them in shock. “I didn’t ask for this. They don’t even know me, other than I just killed their previous leader.”

The older warrior cleared his throat. “Excuse me Queen Gabrielle but…”

“It’s just Gabrielle.” She corrected him.

He nodded and continued. “Gabrielle, you are wrong about them. You are wrong about all of us. Many, if not most, people know who you are. You and Xena are legends throughout Greece. We know of your deeds, and of your fight for the greater good. It has been years since the news of Xena’s death reached Greece, and you’ve been gone from the land until recently. But your scrolls have spread throughout Greece, many people talk of your heroic tales and sacrifices. The men who stayed today, all of us, we are proud to have you as a leader. However unwilling to lead you may be.”

Gabrielle swallowed a lump in her throat, and caught a bit of motion off to the side of their circle. Her soul mate seated herself behind the little queen, wrapping strong arms around her. “He’s right Gabrielle; you’ve been so closed off inside your own head that you haven’t seen the people around you. That is why the people of Pedini recognized you. That is why the Amazons treat you as some sort of mythical queen of old. Because in a way, you are. And it’s time you accepted that and used
it to continue the fight for the greater good."

Gabrielle nodded, and looked up at Cadmus then toward Drea. “Thank you, I’m very honored.” She cleared her throat. “Ok, continuing where I left off… I would like to take a force down to Preveza and clear the city of rats. I also want to complete my quest to bring Xena back. But…” she looked around the circle, seeing nothing but expectant faces staring back. “I have picked up a little extra work for us. I figured that as long as I have this unexpected fighting force, the Queen’s Army, that I could use it to protect the area around Amazon lands.”

Cyane’s eyebrows raised in surprise. Gabrielle smiled at her and chastised slightly “I was actually listening during all those council meetings that you and Varia roped me into.” Then turning to address the rest she added “The situation is this. There is apparently an army of unknown size that is somewhere near Anatoli or Kastritsa. They have been sending raiders around the region, collecting ‘taxes’ of goods and dinars, and sometimes abducting women. The town of Pedini, at the head of the forest road, would normally do very good trade, and could normally pay for protection, but the first few raids took all the extra tradable supply and dinars they had. I spoke with their town council and worked out a treaty with the town, to provide protection in exchange for exclusive trading rights for the Amazon nation and the added security of soldiers that are contractually bound to protect the Amazon nation, their allies, and interests.” She pulled out the contract and handed it to Cyane to review.

Cadmus spoke up. “So what does this mean for the troops? How many will they need and how soon?”

Cyane interrupted. “Wow, this is a really good deal Gabrielle, very fair to both sides.”

The smaller blonde smirked at her. “Well, I have been negotiating since many of you were in diapers at least.”

Aella, the oldest in the group, snorted. “Oh please! You were asleep for 25 of those years! I’ve been a warrior since YOU were in diapers!” The entire group laughed at her good natured ribbing.

Cyane finished reading and looked up at Gabrielle, when the little queen nodded to her, she handed it off to Cadmus. Gabrielle got down to the details of her planning. “Cadmus and Drea, I need two score of soldiers who are looking to settle down a bit. I need good men to take over protection of a city and the surrounding lands. They will be housed and paid their normal wages. I will also need a captain for them.” She turned to the three Amazon commanders. “I will need ten amazons and a squad leader to accompany them until everything is settled. And lastly, I need one more Amazon scout to take the treaty back to Queen Varia. Technically she has to give the final seal of approval, but I don’t think she will have a problem with it.”

Cyane smiled. “You know she won’t! This is quite a bonus for the nation, getting a stable region and trade rights.”

Drea smiled his new queen. “I don’t think we will have a problem finding volunteers. Many stayed knowing that while they wouldn’t have the profit of Bartos’ brand of brigandry; they also wouldn’t have the danger. I think many would like to just find work doing what they are good at, and getting regular pay.”

“Gods, you’re right, we may have a hard time narrowing it down to only forty!” Cadmus grimaced.

Gabrielle smiled a secretive smile. She had more plans in her head that she wasn’t ready to disclose yet. “Never fear gentlemen, I may have other ideas in the works. Until then, narrow it down based on disposition and seniority. I need a good working unit, with a good solid captain. It would be
preferable if the captain worked well with Amazons and had a slight knack for diplomacy.” She slapped her thighs, garnering everyone’s undivided attention. “Now, I expect the people heading north to be chosen by tomorrow. I would like to keep the armies here another day beyond that, perhaps do a little team building between the troops. Then, we will head for Preveza.”

Hermine cocked her head. “So, what exactly are we going to do in Preveza?”

Gabrielle laughed aloud. “We’re going to take their gold, and run them out of Greece of course! Let them sail back to Rome with their tails between their legs!” She glanced behind her at Xena and smiled. Though, to everyone else, it looked as if she was bestowing a loving look to thin air. “And then, I will get my soul mate back.”

Cadmus looked concerned. “Gabrielle, will we have enough soldiers to accomplish that, after losing the men to Alala, and with another forty heading to Pedini?”

Gabrielle smirked and looked at Aella. “I think it’s time to call the birds down from the trees, don’t you?”

When Xiomara saw the confused look on both Cadmus and Drea’s faces, she burst out laughing. Gabrielle explained “We have another two hundred warriors in the forest, just in case things looked troublesome with the new army.”

Cadmus put his hand over his face and just shook his head. “Oh gods, that Bartos really was a fool!” Everyone chuckled at the slight trickery on the Amazon’s part.

After a minute, she stood and the rest followed suit. “Drea, can you get the troops sorted out, between who is going up to Pedini and who will march with us to Preveza? And Cadmus, I’d like to walk through the Queen’s Army camp. I want to meet the soldiers who have so much faith in me.”

As Gabrielle walked through the Queen’s Army camp, then through the Amazon camp, she was struck with the realization that the people really did see her as some kind of legend. She also realized that she felt responsible for them. Their faith in her was a weight on her shoulders, an expectation to do her best by them. And she didn’t want to let anyone down. She could also see, having met the men, and the few women, in the Queen’s army, that she had good people to draw from, to make all her other plans a reality. Time would tell how those plans would unfold.

The combined armies left one day after the Pedini guards and Amazon escorts departure. As predicted, Drea had to narrow down the volunteers by those with the best suited personality and most seniority. The ones who were not chose soon got over their disappointment when Gabrielle announced their plans to win the city of Preveza from the Romans. After that, the anticipation of a new adventure took hold and they were all excited to begin.

Travel was surprisingly easy, despite having a larger than anticipated force with her. She sent scouts from both armies in all directions, as usual. But she sent extra ahead, partly to keep an eye out for trouble, and to negotiate passage for all the soldiers. She didn’t want any hard feelings toward the warriors from the surrounding farms and towns. The Queen’s Army was instructed in the rules of Amazon travel, which included no looting, damage, or crimes to the people. Not many grumbled, mainly because the ones that were partial to that sort of thing all left with Alala. There were also quite a few friendships starting between the armies and Gabrielle wondered how many of
the men would be interested in locating to the town outside the Amazon city. It was the place where all male children were raised, and where the male mates of Amazon women lived.

Gabrielle made the choice to detour through Louros, to let the armies pick up supplies, and allow the Queen’s Army to make arrangements for more life on the road. There wasn’t much left of Bartos’ belongings, probably Alala or another soldier had already come through and looted his quarters. However, Cadmus knew of a small chest of dinars that Bartos had stashed in a wall. The little queen used that to help buy supplies and replace any of the inferior gear in the Queen’s Army. The Amazons, as always, had excellent weapons and gear.

At around midday, nine days after leaving the Amazon Nation, the combined armies reached Nicopolis. It was a city a little over a league from Preveza. Gabrielle’s plan was to send the Queen’s Army on to Preveza, with one hundred Amazon warriors. The Warriors would look as though they were shackled, and the Queen’s Army would carry various extra weapons on them for the Amazons to use when the time was right. Against the wishes of every person under her command, Gabrielle decided she was going to be one of the one hundred prisoners. The rest of the plan called for a score of Amazons to circle the city to the port, and sneak onto the Roman ships, for a purpose Gabrielle didn’t disclose to anyone but them. Typically the only ones left on board would be the large numbers of oarsmen needed to row the giant ships. But they were not fighters, and the Amazons were good at what they did. They were deadly with close quarters fighting and should have no trouble finding their way onto the ships undetected, and defending themselves if necessary. Diversion tactics worked very well. As for the rest of the Amazons, they would take what cover they could until the battle started.

The road was dusty as the Amazons marched in the middle of the Queen’s Army. It was hot and uncomfortable, and many were ill at ease with the plan. After all, no one liked to be without their weapons when faced with danger. Their large force marching toward Preveza was obvious, and garnered the Romans attention immediately. A legionnaire sent a runner for, what was probably, their commander. Roman soldiers formed a phalanx in front of Cadmus and the soldiers behind him. The grizzled warrior called out “We’re here to meet with Tiberius!” Bartos had mentioned the Roman commander’s name when they were told about needing the amazon slaves.

It wasn’t long before the runner succeeded in bringing Tiberius, as well as the rest of the Roman legionnaires and auxiliaries. Tiberius strode forward, confident in his superiority as many aspiring Roman leaders were. He gave Cadmus a judgmental look and declared “You must be Bartos. Funny, I thought you’d be bigger.”

Cadmus grinned, and put a little swagger as he stepped forward to meet the cocky Roman. “I’m not Bartos; I put that bastard down like the dog he was. My name’s Cadmus and I are here to complete the contract as Lord Ares directed.” He spat on the ground, indicating his thoughts on both Bartos, and Ares’ direction.

Gabrielle noticed the legionnaires subtly surrounding the Queen’s Army; and more seemed to be approaching from the city. She gave a discreet hand signal that was passed along the ranks of both Amazons and Queen’s soldiers. ‘Be ready’ it said.

Tiberius grinned broadly, and laughed at Cadmus’ attitude. “Well Cadmus, I’m certainly glad you could make it. But I’m afraid, the deal has changed slightly. You see, for the lure of more dinars, your lord Ares promised both Amazons and conscripted soldiers. So I’m afraid, you’ll have to come with us.”

Suddenly, a loud bird call pierced the air, and both Amazons and Queen’s men jumped into action. Not expecting the ruse in the slightest, Tiberius barely had time to draw his gladius when Cadmus
engaged him. The surprise prevented the Roman soldiers from forming an effective defense, and a chaotic battle raged for the next half a candle mark. Gabrielle, whose katana had been carried by a nearby Drea, was dispatching Romans with ease. She was fighting back to back with Cyane when she heard the other queen cry out. Quickly finishing her opponent, she spun around and also dispatched the roman standing over her friend. The other queen was on the ground, blood seeping from an ugly stab wound in her side. Seeing the queens occupied, Aella grabbed some warriors and moved to cover the two women. Gabrielle was working to pack the wound and staunch the blood flow. It was too far to the side to hit any organs, but it was still bleeding enough that Gabrielle was concerned. She needed to get Cyane out of the battle and somewhere safe, until her wound could be treated with more care. Once she was finished, she called for more help in guarding the queen, and then continued to cut a swath through the Roman soldiers. She yelled out “Drea!” when the man had made it to her side she instructed “Guard her with your life!” He looked into serious green eyes and nodded.

When she caught up with Tiberius, she was in time to see him catch Cadmus across the temple with the pommel of his gladius. She immediately stepped in and engaged the skilled Roman. “Hello there Tiberius, I think it’s time you and the rest of your plebs went back to Rome!”

The big man laughed. “Oh, so it’s like that hmm? You and Cadmus were working together, maybe hoping to catch us unawares? Pity we didn’t bring the dinars with us. You see, we left it all on the ship, until our precious cargo could be secured.”

Gabrielle smirked at him while parrying another thrust. “Pity.”

Her mind’s eye flashed to the image of Cyane lying on the ground for a split second, and her anger suddenly took hold. The little queen started speeding up her attack, driving Tiberius back again and again. The smile he had been sporting just minutes before began to fade. He grunted when he took a kick to the midsection, and just barely got his sword up in time to block another swipe to his chest. He yelled in frustration, that such a small woman, an Amazon, was beating him in battle. “Who ARE you?”

She growled out in response “I am Gabrielle…” With each word, she drove him back another step. “Amazon Queen… once crucified companion of Xena Warrior Princess… once walker of The Way of Eli…” Her voice thundered with her fierce protection and anger. “The Green-eyed sun of Egypt… Daughter of Ares!” Another step “and killer of Romans!” One final step with a sword flourish that knocked Tiberius’ gladius from his stinging hands. “And I am the reason you will leave the shores of Greece, and tell your Roman emperor that you are not welcome back!” She was panting while she held the katana point to his throat. Glancing around, she noticed her army had defeated the scattered Roman soldiers and were busy tying hands as she had directed earlier.

She turned fierce green eyes to the man on the ground below her. “I should kill you all for entering our land, and plotting against the citizens of Greece.” Tiberius didn’t dare to move, recognizing his imminent death in her eyes. She lowered her sword. “Tell me Tiberius, are you an intelligent man?”

He thought for a second, and decided she was the type who would appreciate honesty over honor. “I would say I am no more intelligent than the average man, just better connected.”

She nodded. “I will not kill you, nor will I kill what is left of your men. I will let you be my messenger to Rome; tell them that the Queen’s army will no longer suffer Roman meddling in our land.”

Tiberius swallowed. “I am not so well connected as emperor, but will tell the senator who sent me. But if I may speak?”
The blonde queen stepped back, and waved for the man to get up. “Go ahead.”

He rose and bowed slightly to her. “Queen Gabrielle, I do not believe you will have any more Romans on your shore, at least not for many years. You see, you may not know me, but I have definitely heard of you. Many in Rome have heard of you and the Warrior Princess. Once I take word back, I don’t believe they will risk your defense again. You two have been much in Roman history, longer than I would have thought possible for one so young. But never the less, I shall carry your message.”

He waited, while she gauged the truth of his words. Then, she gave a slight nod. “We left your ships intact, though a few guards may have been killed. We did however lighten your load a bit. Consider it penalty for spilling Greek blood. My soldiers and Amazons will escort you and your men back to your ships. You will be released, and expected to leave immediately. If you do not leave within half a candle mark past the return to your ships, I will have archers set fire to your quinqueremes while you are inside. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I will do as you say.” He gave a small smile. “I will not say I’m sorry for attacking you and spilling the blood of your people, because I was following orders. But I will still be grateful you spared my life. I owe you a debt now, should you ever come to Rome. I will not forget.”

Gabrielle gazed at him, eyes remembering his face and his words, as only a trained bard can. “I will not forget either. Now go!”

Drea came forward with the rest of the army that wasn’t tending wounded, and they started marching around the city, toward the harbor.
Once she could see they were well out of the way, she made her way over to the newly erected tents, where wounded had been taken. With only a few questions she quickly found her way to where Cyane and Cadmus were located. Cadmus was awake and upright, with his head wrapped in bandages. Cyane was asleep, lying on a bedroll. There was an Amazon healer tending to her, Gabrielle didn’t know the Amazon’s name. The blonde queen knelt by her friend’s side. “How is she?”

The woman looked up and smiled. “Oh, Queen Gabrielle! She’s fine actually, just in some pain. I gave her a draught to help her sleep, and put a compress on the wound before wrapping it. It wasn’t serious, not going that deep and all. We just don’t want her to take fever.”

Gabrielle looked down and smoothed the other woman’s hair. “Good, I’m glad to hear it. I want you to do everything you can to make sure she mends quickly. Let me know if you need anything special.”

“Yes Queen Gabrielle!”

She stood and walked over to Cadmus. “How are you feeling?”

He grimaced. “Like the entire blasted army ran me over, but I’ll survive. The healer said I’d have blurred vision for a few days, a headache, and a sick stomach, but that I’d mend.” He nodded toward the area of battle and the various bodies scattered throughout. “What are we going to do about that?”

Gabrielle never got a chance to answer because Aella and Hermine walked up. Aella pointed toward the field. “Gabrielle, I’ve sent some Queen’s men and Amazons out to collect the dead. I instructed them to burn the Romans in a bonfire downwind. And they will bring the handful of our own back for a ceremony tonight.”

Hermine added her own report. “Good news, our little raiding party was successful. We have the chests still tied to horses. Where would you like them offloaded?”

Aella and Cadmus looked at her in surprise. In unison they said “What raiding party?”

Gabrielle chuckled. “Well, it would have been a shame to let all that gold go back to Greece, now wouldn’t it?”

They all smiled at her statement. Aella looked around, and spotted Cyane, then looked around a bit more. “Where’s Xiomara?”

Knowing she feared the worst, the blonde calmed her fears. “No worries Aella, she went with Drea to escort the Romans back to their ships.”

Aella elbowed Hermine in the arm. “Oh ho ho, look who’s getting cozy with Drea, eh?”

Hermine snorted. “Well I’m not surprised, they’re both horse crazy.”
Gabrielle shook her head. “Well I’m neither surprised nor disappointed by it. As long as you all do your duty I don’t care about your liaisons. And I think Drea’s a fine man.”

Cadmus nodded in agreement, and then grimaced at the pain he felt at such an action. “Uh, yes he is a good man. He’s a great leader too.”

The queen smirked at the thought that Cadmus had no idea the other commanders were talking about a romantic liaison between Drea and Xiomara. “I told Drea to post a watch until evening, just to make sure the Romans actually leave. They will be back by sundown for the ceremony of fallen soldiers.” She looked at the bandaged man. “Cadmus, are you up to organizing the ceremony with Aella? I would like to incorporate both armies’ traditions.”

He nodded ever so slightly, and gave a little grin. “Certainly, as long as we can do it from here or my tent. I don’t want to risk the wrath of your blasted Amazon healer over there!”

Aella laughed. “Oh, a big tough warrior like you has been around Greece a few times I’m sure. You can’t tell me you’re afraid of a little old Amazon healer…”

“I’m not afraid of anyone, but that woman has the bedside manner of a harpy!”

Aella smirked. “Maybe she just doesn’t like men…”

Cadmus made a face. “Maybe men just don’t like her.”

While enjoying the banter, Gabrielle decided to put a lid on it. “Children… can we finish business here?”

Cadmus paled slightly. “I apologize, Queen Gabrielle.” Aella just smirked.

She instructed the three commanders. “I need you to get things organized here, set up camp, and get the warriors ready for funeral pyres. I am going to head into Preveza, to find out where the temple of the Oracle is located, and find out how I get an audience.”

Hermine looked concerned. “Shouldn’t one of us go with you? Or at the very least, you should take some guards!”

Gabrielle started to protest the suggestion. “I hardly think that’s nece…” But abruptly stopped when she saw the nodding heads of her other two commanders. Realizing she should probably play it a bit safe, since the Romans had only just left, she agreed.

“Fine. Send me three from Queen’s Army and three from the Amazon army. Make sure they all have mounts, and have them meet me at my tent in half a candle mark.”

When Cadmus began to stand, Hermine waved him to sit again. “I can go round up the appropriate guards, you two need to discuss the ceremony for tonight.”

Cadmus smiled in relief. “Thank you, I’m not sure I’m up to traipsing around a battle field right now.”

A short while later, Gabrielle and her guards prepared to ride toward Preveza. She was slightly surprised to see that Andreia was one of her mounted escort, but not unsettled by it. The two
women smiled at each other and Gabrielle gave her a slight nod. “Good to see you again Andreia.”

Turning to the other five members of the group, she asked “Could the rest of you introduce yourselves please?”

One by one, she learned their names. The three from the Queen’s army were Tibus, Agis, and Alcaeus. The remaining two Amazons were Bojana and Dalka. After they mounted and started off, Gabrielle explained where they were going. “Most or all of you know by now that I’m on a quest to bring back my soul mate, Xena. In order to see if my quest is even possible, I need to speak to the Oracle in Preveza. So that is where we are headed now.”

They all nodded, keeping eyes alert to their surroundings. It was an honor and privilege to be in Gabrielle’s guard, and they were not going to fail in their duty. Even the relatively new Queen’s army soldiers seemed to worship the ground she walked on, though the little queen was oblivious. It took a little over a candle mark to traverse the city and reach the top of the hill where the temple of the Oracle was located. The entrance was large and imposing, and surprisingly empty. Gabrielle had a brief concern that the Oracle was no longer giving audience to anyone.

Her fears were soothed however, when a disciple came out to greet them. “Welcome to the temple of the Oracle. Do you wish an audience?”

She stepped forward. “Yes I do.”

The disciple nodded just once. “If you wish an audience, you must be cleansed. If you are ready, leave all your belongings here and follow me.”

A chorus of protests arose from her guards and Gabrielle waved them down. “I will be fine.”

Turning back to the disciple she asked. “Do you know how long this will take? We have a ceremony for our dead this evening that I do not wish to miss.”

The disciple answered in a clipped tone. “The cleanse will last from sunset to sunrise. It would be best to come back when you have the time to devote fully to your quest.”

Tibus, with hand on his sword, responded “You cannot speak to our Queen like that!”

Startled that the man considered her his queen, Gabrielle laid a hand on his harm. “Easy Tibus, she means no disrespect. She is only speaking the truth.” She turned serious green eyes back to the disciple. “I will return tomorrow at sunset to begin. Can you tell me what to expect?”

The woman blocking the Oracle’s entrance smiled enigmatically. “You cannot come searching for an answer without first knowing the question. Wisdom is not born of a babe in earth; it is forged in the fires of soul. Expect to be broken and reformed. Expect to be cleansed of doubt, for in its absence your questions will be answered.”

Giving her one last look, Gabrielle said “Thank you. I will return tomorrow.”

Andreia looked over at her as they made their way back down the hill. “What does that even mean?”

Gabrielle smiled. “It means I need to be ready.” They all lapsed into silence for the rest of the trip back to camp. Gabrielle’s thoughts were all about the missing Warrior Princess. She had not seen her soul mate since before they reached the outskirts of Preveza. She was gone for longer and longer stretches now. A bit of worry niggled at the back of her brain, saying it might be too late to bring her back.
Every culture had a difference celebration of the dead. Even among the Amazons, each nation seemed to do things just a little bit different. The Queen’s Army also had its own unique traditions. Incorporating them all was truly a miraculous feat, but Cadmus and Aella somehow managed. More than once, Gabrielle wished for Xena’s beautiful voice to sing the song of Amazon dead. There were only a handful from each army, but every death was like a shock to the little queen’s soul.

It started with the Queensmen paying a tribute of arms, and reciting the brave deeds of each dead warrior. Then the Amazons sang and danced around a central fire, friends of the dead warriors throwing trinkets onto the pyres to aid them in their journey to the Golden Mountain. Eventually, the funeral pyres were lit, and it was requested that Gabrielle say something as their Queen. Cyane was the one who encouraged her the most; she was seated a short distance away, uncomfortable with her healing injury. Gabrielle stepped up on a tall platform, gazing out at the gathered warriors, Queensmen and Amazons alike. Hundreds of eyes sparkled in the combined fire and moonlight. Many more were lost to the shadows. She pitched her voice as loud as she could comfortably speak, confident she would be heard with her bard trained voice. And because of that confidence she was heard, surprising many.

“I have had many travels in my life. And my life has been longer than most would assume. But I do have a bit of wisdom to pass on, if you wish to hear.” There was a great roar from the crowd, giving their assent. So she continued. “I have been to Olympus and fought the gods, and returned. I have spent time in the underworld with all its vile creatures and torments, and returned. I have spirit walked the Amazon Land of the Dead, and returned. I haven even spent time in the Christian’s heaven and their hell, and still made it back alive. Those things do not make me brave, and they don’t make me special. I am no better a fighter for having gone, nor am I more compassionate for having returned. Returning from death has not made me immortal, nor has it made me appreciate life more than I already do. What I have been is lucky. I have gone where very few have gone, and still come back with my flesh and soul intact. But I was lucky, not brave. And not everyone is the subject of such fortune. Living two lifetimes, I’ve lost more friends and loved one’s that a single person should. And every loss hurts me, just as the loss of any of you would cut me to the core. For all those Queensmen and Amazons who lost their life today… they are the brave ones. They gave up flesh and soul for a cause they believed in. They did not expect a return to the life they loved, and yet they went with fight and ferocity, they went willingly into the unknown. They are all ones who deserved honor, and I will honor them with every beat of my heart. Whether their souls seek the Elysian Fields, the Golden Mountain, or even the heaven that Eli spoke of, I hope these fires will guide your way. And I ask that our warriors be forever at peace.”

Other than the crackling fires, there was a great silence that spread through the crowd of hundreds. Great men and women, soldiers all, freely allowing tears to fall at the emotion of their Queen’s words. The ones in front watched her make her way down from the platform, then turn slightly in surprise as a smile came over her face. None of them knowing the cause was the sad spirit of the Warrior Princess. She had found the power to reappear, for Gabrielle had become her Queen as well.

It wasn’t until the following afternoon that Gabrielle was able to leave the camp again. And when she did, she found herself with the same escort as before. After checking on Cyane, she left instructions with the commanders to remain there until her return. They were to replenish supplies, mend or replace gear, and make sure healers had all they needed to care for the injured. They balked a bit when she explained the requirements she needed to meet to see the Oracle. The biggest complaint they all had was the lack of transparency to the process. She assured them that
everything would be fine, and they finally calmed down. That was how she eventually found her way to the bath house near the center of Preveza. She invited the guards to join her, but they all took their duty much too seriously. She intended to spend a good amount of time there, and even hired out a private room. Consequently, this also made it easier on her guards. The men, somewhat uncomfortable seeing their Queen nude, volunteered to guard outside the room, while the Amazons stayed inside. The room was grand, having been purchased with pilfered Roman gold, but not nearly as ostentatious as Aphrodite’s bathing chamber. There was only one large bathing tub, though it would have easily held a dozen good friends. Instead, it merely held Gabrielle and two female attendants. Off to the opposite end of the chamber, there were large and small lounging areas. And next to the tub was a beautiful fixture that rinsed you from above, like a small rain shower. The little queen took much pleasure in rinsing under the cool water first. She never even noticed the appreciative glances from Andreia and the other two Amazons, Bojana and Dalka. Andreia smirked at the other two, a private pleasure in knowing that she had sampled from the beautiful queen’s bounty. She was an Amazon warrior after all; they all were a bit cocky when it came to their conquests. While she would never expect a repeat of that fateful feast night, she wouldn’t turn down a little harmless voyeurism either. Two of the Amazonian guards stood near the only entrance, and the third stood near the only window in the room. Privacy and safety were well covered.

Gabrielle leaned her head back, thoroughly enjoying getting her hair washed and scalp massaged by the first attendant. They attendants were nothing like Aphrodite’s disciples. While the students of love had the lean muscled bodies of athletes, these women had the lush bodies of concubines. Gabrielle knew however they were not concubines, but free women earning top dinars for their services. She tried to remember their names… I think it was Aglea and Iantha, but which is which? She called out “Aglea?”

The woman washing her hair answered. “Yes mistress?”

The little queen kept her eyes shut, but replied “Please, call me Gabrielle. And could I have a bit of that lavender in my hair?”

The brunette washing her hair smiled. “Yes mis… Gabrielle.”

Addressing the redhead gently washing and massaging her feet, Gabrielle asked “Iantha?”

Learning from the other attendant, she said “Yes Gabrielle?”

“That feels amazing!” Then to both of them said, “It all feels amazing. You are making it very easy for me to relax.” Taking the positive praise for what it was, both women continued their ministrations. Once the shaggy golden hair was washed and rinsed, Aglea joined the redhead in giving the Amazon Queen a full body wash. Each brush of fingers and sponges brought a pleasant tingle to Gabrielle’s skin. When the bathing was finished, they stepped out and bid her to follow. Once she was dry, she was led to the large lounging area. When asked, she chose the sandalwood oil, and let the two women begin their massage. Together, both women massaged the back of her body. During, she let her mind drift and thought about the possibilities of what the Oracle could say. She knew that no matter what was said, it came down to her belief in self. But, it would be nice to get a little direction from the Oracle too.

She came back to the present when Iantha indicated she should turn over. “Mistress, would you like the frontal massage as well?”

The sleepy queen waved her hand slightly in the air, not wanting to rouse from her relaxed state. “Yes, whatever you like. Thank you.”

The Amazon guards smirked at the Queen, each one was thinking that she was so relaxed that she
had no idea what was coming next. Andreia noticed the small smile play across the blonde’s lips and thought to herself Or does she?

Skilled hands worked the muscles of her legs and arms, feet, hands, hips and calves. Each one was focusing on her own side of the prone woman, but they moved in tandem like sensual twins. The blonde sighed when two sets of hands moved up her rib cage and gently started massaging her breasts and pectoral muscles. Gabrielle’s face became flushed and her nipples hardened in reaction. It took a lot for her to loosen this far, her battle reflexes often left her taut as a bow string unless she found a way to work off the excess energy. She never had the problem back when she was a staff wielding bard from Potidaea. It seemed that the harder her body had to work, the harder it demanded to play after. The entire purpose for coming to the bath house was to find a way to relax before going to see the Oracle. Something told her that she should not be highly strung when she arrived to start her cleanse. So, the skillfully wandering hands of the attendants were a welcome relief.

“More…” she breathed to the brunette and redhead above her. They smiled, happy to attend the beautiful queen, and gave her what she asked for.

Aglea leaned down, and nibbled a line from collarbone to ear, all while rolling a rock hard nipple between her fingers. Iantha released her nipple, causing a whimper from the little Queen. The whimper turned into a gasp when the fingers were replaced with a warm mouth. With her now free hand, Iantha slowly skimmed fingers down Gabrielle’s abdomen. Her urgent sounds of need were swallowed by a kiss from Aglea.

Andreia, having seen the show up close and personal, was not as engrossed in the action as the other two guards. When she noticed Bojana and Dalka were not paying attention to their prime duties, she gave a low whistle. While the sound seemed to be unheard by Gabrielle and her attendants, the other two looked at whistling guard immediately. Flushed faces paled, realizing they were caught being derelict in their duties. They immediately turned away from the glistening bodies, and resumed their attentions toward the door. Both knew riding a horse back up the Oracle’s hill would either be a ticket to the Underworld, or a fast ride to the Elysian Field. Bojana gave a great shuddering sigh, and Dalka wiped sweaty palms on her leathers. Andreia just chuckled to herself at the state of the other two guards. You’d think they were new to their feathers.

Aglea’s skilled fingers joined those of Iantha. One set dove deep inside the little Queen, while the other rhythmically stroked the sides of the delicate bud above. In a matter of seconds the Amazon Queen peaked with pleasure. Her cries of release rang throughout the chamber. Of course this immediately brought the three Queensmen through the door in alarm. Only to immediately march back out with faces red in embarrassment. Agis elbowed Alcaeus. “I told you we should have volunteered to be inside the room!”

Tibus adjusted himself discreetly and murmured “Show some respect! Now, not another word from you two!” Sufficiently chastised, Agis pulled the door shut behind him, and laughter followed them out of the chamber.
The Temple of the Oracle looked exactly the same as the day before. They arrived shortly before dusk, and Gabrielle turned toward the sea to watch the dying sun. It reminded her of another sunset, in a land far away. She shook the memories from her head. Now is not the time to remember mistakes of the past, but rather to put mistakes right again.

Without warning or preamble the disciple appeared in the doorway. Seeing that Gabrielle had already divested herself of all belongings except her leathers and boots, she instructed “Follow me”, then abruptly turned, confident the Amazon Queen would follow. Once they were inside proper, she instructed Gabrielle to remove the last of her clothing, and don ceremonial robes and sandals. Finally, the Queen was led into a stone chamber with a great arching ceiling and no windows. The room was lit with a single candle, and the only amenities were a chalice of water and a woven mat in the center of the floor. Gabrielle entered first, and the disciple stopped at the doorway. “You will remain here, meditating on your question for the Oracle. Once I retrieve you, and take you before the Oracle, you will have just one chance to get your answer. And be very careful you ask the correct question. I will return for you at sunrise.”

Gabrielle nodded in understanding, and watched the other woman leave. As the wooden door was pulled shut, leaving her in near darkness, she heaved a sigh. May as well sit down.

In the hours that followed, Gabrielle thought about many things. She thought about the beginning years after she met Xena. She thought about their adventures and experiences together over the years. Eventually her thoughts turned to the different phases of her life. The early years as a fumbling bard and clueless queen. The subsequent years with the death and saving of Xena, the death of her husband, her rape and subsequent birth of Hope, the influences of Eli, Indian deities, Egyptian deities, and eventually Roman persecution. Then her mind moved on to Xena’s miraculous pregnancy with Eve, their twenty-five year sleep, and eventually the fated trip to Jappa. Through it all, she knew one thing irrevocably. Xena was her soul mate, and keeper of her heart. Their lives together were so full, and so very short, but irrevocably bound together.

It was late, and the candle was nearly burned down, when her thoughts moved into her parentage and power. She specifically remembered all those times when her persuasive tongue had saved her a good about of trouble. She remembered all the times she had expected death from behind, and taken risks she knew were foolish, only to survive surprisingly unscathed. And most recently, she remembered the feel of Bartos’ knife hitting her back. There was no pain, just a tingling sensation and the feeling of pressure. She knew what he was going to do; she could read it in the man’s eyes. She wasn’t just being reckless turning her back to him. She was putting every bit of faith she had in herself. She had to see if she had the power that Aphrodite and Ares spoke of. Because if the power wasn’t there, and she died… better that than living any longer with no hope of bringing Xena back. And now she knew for certain she had it. Over the past few weeks, she had become a believer. She no longer needed the Oracle to tell her if she could bring Xena back, she needed the Oracle to tell her how to bring Xena back. She was ready to right that wrong in Jappa. No sooner had the thought gone through her head, than the candle snuffed out. Left in darkness, she felt calm. Sitting in a windowless chamber, without even the single flame of a candle, she knew her light came from within.
When the disciple re-entered the room at sunrise, she wasn’t surprised to see the Amazon Queen sitting cross-legged on the mat, with her back facing the door. However, she was surprised to see the vague outline of a dragon glowing through the thin fabric of her robe. The disciple cleared her throat, garnering Gabrielle’s attention. “It is time.” Gabrielle followed her from the room, into a large chamber that probably took up most of the temple. Seated on a dais, piled high with cushions, was a young girl.

Once the queen knelt in front of the dais, she became just another supplicant. That was when the girl spoke. Her voice was as young and sweet as the girl seemed. But there was a wisdom in her eyes that belied the years shown. “You have a question for me.” It was a statement of fact.

Gabrielle, solemn as the occasion warranted, responded. “Yes Oracle.”

The young girl giggled. “Ah yes, Queen and mother, war and peace, woman of two lives… a study of dichotomy you are.” She cocked her head the blonde queen. “Well, ask your question, child.”

The supplicant raised an eyebrow in surprised. Perhaps she had misjudged the young girl’s age, or perhaps Oracles had no age. Either way, she would not waste her chance. “Oracle, I have come to ask how to bring back Xena Warrior Princess back to life, back to flesh and bone, back as my soul mate and physical companion, in this reincarnation on the wheel of time. Can you tell me?”

The Oracle gave Gabrielle a small smile. She looked as if she were bursting with secrets, which of course she was. Finally, in a curiously resonant voice for such a small frame, she intoned,

“Dark water will rise in the middle of a draught. The lyrical dragon will let the rain out. At the crossroads of change there are buried seeds of war. Mix the blood and ash of two souls for a hero to be reborn.”

The once-bard, warrior and Queen took in every word. She soaked up each like spilled wine. Once she had the words, she would find the meaning. And then, Xena would be hers again. The Oracle, once the words were spoken, closed her eyes and spoke one last time. “You have your words; it is up to you to find the meaning you need. Now go, child of Ares, Greece needs you!”

Unsure of the last bit, Gabrielle nodded once and stood. With her head full of words and thoughts, she was grateful when Tibus led Argo to her. Once mounted, she gave the order to head back to their camp. “Let’s go! The sooner I get back, the sooner I can eat, sleep, and start thinking on the riddle I was given.”

A chorus of “Yes Queen Gabrielle” followed her words.

When the little Queen mumbled “I wonder if they have nut bread…” Tibus chuckled. He had already heard about the Queen’s legendary appetite for nut bread.

There was a crowd gathered by the time they entered the camp proper. They all dismounted near the picket lines for the horses, and Gabrielle allowed Argo to be led away. She immediately strode toward her tent, pulling up short when she saw her six guards were still following her. She turned to face them all. “Whoa there! You all need to go take some down time.” When they started to
protest, she added “Look, I’m not going anywhere and you are useless to me unless you get some food and rest. Those are the two things I myself will doing. So go on, you’ve got until tomorrow morning free. As a matter of fact, you are all free to visit the city, just let commander Drea or Xiomara know if you go, and tell them I gave you permission.” She started to turn back toward her tent, and paused. “And you should definitely check out the bath houses, I hear they do wonders for relaxing a person.” She winked at the stunned warriors, and continued on her way. Andreia stared at the back of the retreating Queen for just a second, then threw back her head and laughed heartily. After a beat, Tibus joined in. the rest of the guards were left red-faced.

Andreia looked at the embarrassed faces of her group and clapped her hands together. “Well I am definitely not going to waste a chance at leave in the city… and I’m definitely going to check out the bath house. I’m ready to relax about now. Are you lot coming?”

Receiving a variety of affirmative replies, and one “Hades yes!” they made their way as a group back toward the city on foot. It was going to be a great day for site seeing.

Gabrielle went to check on Cyane as soon as her guards were gone. She was worried about her friend and fellow Queen, despite the healer’s reassurance that the wound was not very bad. After all, she had a promise to keep to Varia. Cyane was still in the healer’s tent, but awake and full of questions.

“Did you get to see the Oracle? What did she say? Can you bring Xena back?”

Gabrielle smiled at her prone friend. “Yes I did, she gave me a riddle. And I know that I can bring Xena back, I just have to solve her riddle to find out how.” When Cyane started to ask more she interrupted her. “But first… I haven’t eaten or slept in more than a day, so I am going to my tent for a while. I will come find you when I’m rested, ok?”

Cyane leveled a glare at the little Queen. “You better! I’m leaving here as soon as the healer comes back. I’ll send word that you’re not to be disturbed, when I head back to my own tent.”

The green-eye queen smiled gratefully. “Thank you! Now, I really must go before Morpheus takes me right here.”

She left the tent and heard Cyane call out to her “Eat something first!”

Shaking her head, she chuckled at her friend’s mothering. Food, and then sleep, that was definitely next on her list. It was only a short time later that Gabrielle found herself falling asleep to the riddle, repeating its way through her head.

“…Dark water will rise in the middle of a draught. The lyrical dragon will let the rain out. At the crossroads of change there are buried seeds of war. Mix the blood and ash of two souls for a hero to be reborn…”

Her subconscious searched for answers, breaking down each part of the Oracles words. Her dream started overwhelmingly. She found herself back on the ship from Jappa, and a great ocean of dark water rose up, crashing over her. She was on her knees, and leaned forward curling her head down. She thought for sure she would be washed overboard, but the water changed into another familiar darkness. When she looked up, she was in the arms of Xena. She met the blue eyes of her soul mate, and both ocean and ship disappeared. Now they were standing in the middle of a desert, with
the hot Egyptian sun raining down on them. It is my drought… Xena is my dark water.

With that thought, her mind skipped back to Jappa. She was lying on her stomach, with eyes shut, listening to the delicate sound of chimes. There was water nearby, a small gurgling brook. Occasionally she heard the sound of a koi fish breaking the surface. She started to doze in her dream, only to be awakened by a great crashing sound. Eyes open, what she saw made her leap up and run from the tea house. The dragon was covered in green scales, and had a long and twisting body. Small red wings and flashing claws were in constant motion as it pursued the Amazon Queen through the paths around the tea house. With a roar, the beast gave a great leap toward her. She paused, cringing, expecting a swift and painful death. Instead, there was nothing but an instant flash of intense heat along her back, which dulled to a warm ache. I am the lyrical dragon who releases the rain. The rain is the dark water, the rain is Xena! But what of the rest? There have been many wars, many changes in my life. Where did it all start?

Her mind raced, like stars, around her head. Thoughts whirled around and around, until she cast out onto the ground in a forest. There were whistles, and screams, and Gabrielle found herself running. Faster and faster, the people around her were a blur. She had a vague impression of bird whistles, and feathers. Amazons! The little Queen heard the person next to her cry out and fall to the ground, so she stopped with the other woman. Suddenly, arrows sprouted from the fallen woman’s body, growing like fast rising saplings. Understanding the danger, without understanding the consequences, Gabrielle threw her body over the other woman’s. Please don’t die, please don’t die! The clash of swords rang around her; the sound of arrows in flight filled the air with a quieter dread. She lay there, protecting the other woman until the sounds of fighting died away. Gabrielle slowly eased back from the fallen woman, watching the saplings draw blood from the soil. Leaves on their branches morphed into the fletching of arrows. Her eyes filled with tears at the pain of loss. Then, in a move that surprised all, the fallen woman reached into her chest and withdrew her slowly beating heart. “Take this” she said. “This is who you truly are!” Then she died.

“This is who you truly are… this is who you truly are… this is who you truly are…”

“Am I who I am, or what you made me?”

” My heart is hurting beyond words. The pain is tearing up my soul. Please tell me, how can I retrieve the life that all this sadness stole?”

” But if we sit here long enough it will go back to being still again. It will go back to being calm.”

“If I kill you… you win. I become like you.”

“Xena and I are meant to be together. We didn't make it that way, it just is.”

“What are you fighting for? You want to win my love? You're going to shed blood for what? For me? You call that love? You're sick.”

But what if… the blood is my own? Could I shed my own blood for someone else? Yes, yes I could. I need to find the crossroads! With that final thought, Gabrielle was awake. Gauging the way the light slanted into her tent, she could tell it was afternoon. She smiled as Xena appeared next to her cot.

The tall ghostly warrior looked a little more ghostly than normal. “So, have you figured it out yet?” Gabrielle bit her lip, and nodded slowly. “And?” the brunette prodded.
“Xena…” She swallowed and tried again. “Xena… are we still… us?”

“What do you mean?”

Gabrielle stood from the cot and poured herself some water. After taking a few swallows, she elaborated on her question. “I mean, after all that has happened… what are we? Are we truly meant to be together this time around, or was our cycle together interrupted prematurely? Should I be doing this?”

Xena walked over to her, taking the smaller woman in her arms. “Do you really care?”

Gabrielle closed her eyes and whispered “No.”

After a late lunch, she called her commanders together in her tent, for a status update and to discuss their next move. She turned to the Drea. “How did it go with the Romans, did their ships leave the harbor as planned?”

He grinned. “No issues at all. We actually ended up loading their wounded onto our supply wagons, and took them to their waiting quinqueremes. Lucky for them, the tide was going out so they were able to leave almost immediately. Rowers certainly are a handy thing, when you don’t want to depend on the wind.

Aella snorted. “Unless you’re one of the rowers. No thanks!”

They all chuckled at the aged Amazon woman’s comment. Gabrielle smiled along. “Anything else?”

Drea scratched at the scruff on his square jaw. “Well…” He seemed almost relieved when Xiomara interrupted.

“On our way back from the harbor, we were actually approached by the mayor of Preveza.”

Gabrielle’s eyebrows went up in surprise. “Oh?”

Xiomara continued. “Yes, apparently the Romans taking over half the town, and the port, have left them concerned that they don’t have the manpower to defend themselves if the Romans return.

The little Queen frowned. “But they aren’t going to return, isn’t that what Tiberius said?”

Cyane added, “But do you trust him?”

Gabrielle thought for a second. “Hmm… well I don’t really trust any Romans; it’s a habit I got into decades ago. However, I trust that he believes what he told me. And from what I know of Rome, he’s probably right. I did put a stinger in his behind, but it’s not the Emperor that sent him, it was just a senator. And I’m definitely not afraid of a repeat attack from a senator, this failed campaign cost him a large sum of gold.” Her comment was met with smiles all around. “So what else did the mayor have to say?”

Drea continued. “Well, he wanted to know if we were going to be in the area for a while, and wanted to meet with you.”

“Why me?”

Cadmus cleared his throat, subtly interrupting. “Because Gabrielle, you are our Queen and
commander. We answer only to you.”

Gabrielle suddenly realized her problems had come full circle. She was no stuck with an army, and had no idea what to do with them. She sighed and ran her hand through shaggy blonde hair. “Alright, I’ll meet with him. How many do you think he would need, for a city this size?”

Hermine mumbled “Boring, smelly, Greek cities…”

Cadmus grumbled “Oh hush woman, not everyone wants to dress in feathers and live in the trees like birds!”

“Does someone have an answer for me?”

The grizzled Queensman reddened slightly. “I would think for the city, port, and surrounding region, they would need about one hundred and twenty, a few captains, and a commander.” He looked at her shrewdly. “Are you thinking of another deal similar to the one with Pedini? We are a long way from Amazon lands…”

Cyane also gave her an unreadable look. “Yes we are. What are you thinking Gabrielle?”

She looked around, gauging if it was time to expose the inkling of an idea she first had days before. “I have a dilemma. You see, I never set out to gain an army; I just wanted to get my soul mate back. But I find myself with an army now, and I still have that drive to fight for the greater good. I have all this possibility at my fingertips, would it be so wrong to use it?”

Xiomara cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

“Well I have an army, and there are many towns that seem to need protecting. There are too many rogue warlords and other threats to Greece and nobody with the power or will to stand up and fight. Well I have the power and will, and I have an army that needs not just deeds, but funds as well. We have an opportunity here to be a calming influence to the region, and to provide some stability to the soldiers under our command.” She turned to Cadmus and Drea. “Well, what do you think?”

Drea grinned broadly. “I like it!”

Cadmus shook his head. “Of course you do, you just want to settle in somewhere and raise your horses! I don’t know Gabrielle, it almost sounds too good to be true.”

Gabrielle laughed aloud, startling the small group. “Have no fear Cadmus, I can make it happen. Now, before I go any further, I will need to have a leadership structure in place. Cadmus, I would like you to be my general for the entire region, you will be in charge of all the army posts overall, and in the beginning you will also be looking for new contracts. Drea, I will need to find a city to establish the heart of the army, with training and education facilities. I will need someone to oversee that portion. Do you both accept?”

Both men and the three amazons were speechless at Gabrielle’s bold plan. Cyane sputtered “But… this is… gods Gabrielle! Do you know what this will mean? You are essentially taking Epirus under your protection!”

She gave them all a slow measuring look. “Yes I will. Do you any of you have objections to that?”

Aella cracked a smile. “Not likely!” She looked at her fellow Amazons. “What this means, ladies, is that the Amazon nation will never have to worry about their western or southern borders again, and we will not only have expanded our trade network, but we have allies to call on in times of great need!”
Cyane, being a savvy queen herself, already figured that part out. She was more concerned with Gabrielle’s emotional state of being, and the wisdom of letting the Daughter of War build an army on their doorstep. She would just have to trust her longtime friend and fellow queen to keep fighting for the greater good.

“If there are no objections, I will need to meet with the mayor of Preveza. I will write a proposal similar to the one with Pedini, tailoring it to Preveza’s needs. I will also need you to see who we can station here, and who is ready to be promoted to lead that large a group. I would suggest you consider Tibus; he has a great head on his shoulders, and commands the respect of a lot of the Queensmen. Also, if we don’t have enough volunteers, why don’t we set up a rotation, so the soldiers are only deployed for part of the year, then they are rotated out with fresh ones.”

Cadmus looked thoughtful. “Yes, I think that will work. I know many men still want to travel and see the land. This will give them security, steady income of dinars, and they will still get to travel. It’s perfect!”

Gabrielle nodded. “Good. Xiomara, please send a messenger to the Mayor, telling him I am available to meet this evening. Cadmus and Drea, please put together a regiment for Preveza come back to me with your suggested commander and captains. Aella and Hermine, can you make sure the armies are ready to travel the day after tomorrow? Purchase more wagons and horses for the wounded if you have to. The remaining Queen’s Army and the Amazons will be heading north again, the sunrise after next.” She turned to her fellow Queen and friend. “Now I’d like a private word with Cyane, before I have to make myself ready to bargain with the mayor of Preveza.”

She sat on the cot, next to the still recovering queen. “I know you have a lot of questions, so go ahead.”

The other queen looked at her. “This has moved well beyond your quest Gabrielle, have you spoken with Xena about this?”

Gabrielle shook her head and frowned a bit. “This is not about Xena, this is about me! This is who I am, and what I want to do for my country, for the people that now depend on me. And my quest is still very much in front of my mind.”

“So what did the Oracle say? Can you even share it with me?”

Gabrielle’s eyes twinkled. “Oh, not only can I share, but I think I have it mostly figured out. She said ‘Dark water will rise in the middle of a draught. The lyrical dragon will let the rain out. At the crossroads of change there are buried seeds of war. Mix the blood and ash of two souls for a hero to be reborn’, then she said I had my words and needed to find my meaning. Then she called me child of Ares, and said Greece needed me.”

Cyane looked shocked. “So what does it all mean? I mean, I understand the part about Ares, and I think Greece needed me. But the rest?”

“Well, when I returned to camp, I had the strangest dreams. It was almost as if I was back in Illusia, but I was reliving parts of my past. I realized that the drought was me, missing Xena in my life. And that the dark water rising represented my soul mate. I am the lyrical dragon that will bring back Xena. The references to blood and ash were also easy. The hardest part was the bit about the crossroads of change.”

“Gabrielle, with your life, that could be almost anything!”

“You’re right, it could. Except I also had a dream of the time I saved tried to save Terreis, when I
first received my right of caste. That was the pivotal moment that changed the rest of my life. While I have been to many places, and made many new friends, I have also lost family and loved ones. But through it all, I have never lost the Amazon nation. That has been my one constant.” She looked at the other Queen. “Cyane, do you think we would be able to find somewhere in the Amazon record books that mentions the place Terreis was killed? I remember we were in the middle of the forest, but that is all. It was so long ago…”

The other woman looked thoughtful. “I don’t know… but there’s only one way to find out. We need to get back to the Amazon nation, someone there would know.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”
Two days later, the Amazons and remaining Queen’s Army were on the road north, back to the Amazon city. Negotiating with Preveza’s mayor was surprisingly easy. Cadmus handled the details of who would be stationed in the city, and who would continue on the journey with Gabrielle. Drea had already selected a score of men that would help him find, and build up, a training city. Cadmus had also hand-selected half as many that would assist in the day to day management of the troops stationed across Epirus. Each evening, after camp was set, they would drill them on their prospective duties. All the men, not just the ones chosen to assist Cadmus and Drea, seemed to like the idea of being a military guard force for hire. It wasn’t that they liked being for hire in the manner of mercenaries, but rather for the purpose of protecting people, and Greece itself if necessary. The average man, if good at heart, will choose the noble cause over the unjust one.

The army was nearly a half candle mark from the town of Pedini when Gabrielle could see a rider coming towards them. She gave the appropriate signal that immediately stopped the advancing columns. It was an Amazon signal, but one of many that had been adopted by the Queen’s Army. “Amazon approaching!” she called out to the troops behind her.

The Amazon warrior pulled up her horse right in front of them. Both were streaked with dirt and sweat. “Queen Gabrielle, Queen Cyane! The raiders are attacking again, but they have brought a much larger force. It is too great for our garrison to handle! Please, we have to be quick!”

Gabrielle turned to Cyane. “Stay behind the foot soldiers, send all mounted personal ahead to follow!” She turned back toward the troops and yelled out. “Mounted warriors, follow me!” then turned and galloped toward Pedini with the Amazon guard. There was a thunder of hooves as the rest of the mounted Amazons and Queensmen raced after her. Cyane could be heard in the distance calling for a double-time march.

When Gabrielle and the others arrived at the battlefield, just east of Pedini, she could see the poor guards were hopelessly outnumbered. However, they were managing to hold the advancing force back with well-placed volleys of arrows. When a young Queen’s Army soldier saw them coming from behind, he gave a great war whoop. The rest, seeing the cause of his excitement, cheered along with them. The mounted warriors simply galloped around the entrenched soldiers and engaged the enemy straight on. Gabrielle had drawn her katana, and was working tirelessly with Argo to take out as many invaders as possible. It had been discovered years before that Argo II was a veritable fiend on the battle field; sometimes using hooves to strike behind her while Gabrielle was striking in front. By the time the foot soldiers arrived, the invaders were in full rout. Gabrielle gave a loud whistle, and a series of the same whistle echoed through the ranks. All troops pulled to a stop, letting the retreating troops go. There was a lot of panting, from chasing the running invaders, but surprisingly few injuries. They were clearly a ragtag force, more bullies than well-trained soldiers. This was a fact that Cadmus emphatically remarked on in their meeting later.

Luckily they had stopped the force before it had entered the town, and the original guards had prevented them from doing any damage to the surrounding farms. Gabrielle spoke with the council of Pedini, and reassured them that she would follow the army and make sure they couldn’t attack anyone again. While the army was taking a break in the high heat of afternoon, the Queens and commanders discussed their options.
Cyane spoke first. “I know you really want to complete your quest Gabrielle, but this army is a little too close to the Amazon lands for comfort. Not to mention Pedini and the Queensmen stationed there would suffer their wrath if they came back to attack again. I think we should go after them.” The three Amazon commanders all nodded and verbalized their agreement. No one wanted a criminal minded enemy force mere days from their border.

When the little queen looked at Cadmus he simply said “This is what we’re here to do, right? You wanted a force to protect the citizens of Greece, and this is a prime opportunity to do just that! Of course, we are mostly relying on the Amazons at this point, since we are only down to about four score of Queensmen.”

Drea added “I’m with Cadmus. This is what we’re meant to do, let’s clean house!”

She nodded, glad everyone was in agreement. “Alright, now that we’re all in agreement, let’s start planning. I’d like to march again after the troops have had their break.”

The planning was fairly simple, based on the intel they got from the council and from their own guard force, they knew the enemy army was only a few hundred strong. They had taken over a small town of Kastritsa, about three leagues northwest of Pedini. It was very close to the great Limni Lake. The warlord’s name was Loukas, and he really was nothing more than a bully. Rumor was that not all his soldiers were willing, he was known for taking conscripts and slaves. Gabrielle was personally going to change that. The army was just going for a straightforward attack. Gabrielle would call out the warlord if she could, though it was hard to say if he would fight her.

It only took a candle mark to reach the outskirts of Kastritsa. They had sent scouts ahead, to see if the town was preparing for their arrival. When the scouts returned they brought word of battle preparations. There was no doubt the raiders had tucked tail and ran all the way back home after their defeat at Pedini. The town itself was bisected by a river that eventually led to Limini Lake. They actually had to cross the small river shortly before they arrived at their destination. Not long after fording the river, about fifty horsemen approached from the other direction. The man leading the warriors had long dark hair tied back in a braid, and a thick beard hanging down to his oversize belly. Gabrielle’s eyebrows shot up. She murmured to Cadmus, “How does this guy lead anyone?”

Cadmus snorted. “I suspect that is why they raid so often. He provides just enough organization for them to maintain pockets of dinars and plenty of ale.”

“Oh, well let’s go see if the man smells as bad as he looks.” She kicked Argo into a trot and Cadmus followed slightly behind. A few guards came with them. She had asked Cyane to stay near the back of the combined army, since the Amazon Queen was still healing. When they were within fifty strides of the dirty warlord, they pulled to a stop.

Luckily they were upwind from the man when he spoke. “Take your feathered freak women and go back to your trees!”

Gabrielle’s next words came out sotto voce “And he has such a winning personality too…” In a voice loud enough to carry the distance she responded. “Your warriors have been attacking towns in the region. We are here to make sure it stops. Do you have anything to say for yourself in defense?”

Loukas spat on the ground next to his horse. “Who are you to tell me what to do? I have nothing to say to an Amazon whore! I answer to no one!” Cadmus reached for his sword at the other man’s harsh and offensive words, but Gabrielle waved him down. This caused Loukas to laugh heartily. “If you want to fight, you should cut those apron strings and come fight me. Or is she so good in the furs she wore off those parts that make you a real man?” The warriors around him laughed at
his crude joke.

Gabrielle just smiled. “From where I’m sitting, he’s the only real man I see. But then, I see how you could get confused, when you spend your days rutting with the pigs, you forget what real men look like.”

Anger swept across the other man’s face. With a face mottled red, and saliva flecks spraying with each word, he yelled “No woman talks to me that way! A woman’s worth is slightly less than my steed; she’s only working when she’s under me. Though I suppose my horse is more trustworthy, right boys?” More laughter followed.

Gabrielle urged Argo forward a step. “I will talk to you any way I see fit, at least until you’re dead. It’s not like you could touch me anyways. The way your horse is straining under its load makes me wonder if you do more swinging of an ale tankard than your sword. But then… if the only women you ever fight are in chains, they wouldn’t know that your lack of skill on the battlefield matched your lack of skill in the furs.”

Loukas drew his sword. “I’ll show you my skill, and then I’ll add you to my collection of whores when I’m finished with you!” Without another word, he spurred his horse toward the Amazon Queen. She quickly drew her katana, and charged forward as well.

Gabrielle easily parried his sword strokes, and Argo had no trouble staying out of the way as they exchanged blows. A few minutes later, she gave a precisely placed poke to his mount, causing it to crow hop and dump the poor excuse of a warrior on the ground. She easily flipped from her saddle and allowed him to pick up his sword again. Once off his horse he seemed to sweat more profusely, and became out of breath. She taunted him. “What’s the matter Loukas, you can’t keep up with this mere woman?”

Loukas roared and attacked. “Shut up, whore!”

It was a short fight after that. With a quick disarm, and a roundhouse kick to the head, Loukas was down for the unforeseeable future. The amazons quickly moved in and rounded up the brunt of his hired thugs. Once the willing were sorted from the unwilling, they were left with deciding what to do with their prisoners. Cyane was very vocal in her opinion. “Well we can’t just let them go, they will be back raiding in less than a moon!”

Cadmus nodded. “I agree. These men, they are all the same. Once they go down the easy path of anger and greed, they rarely come back.

It was Hermine who had a suggestion that seemed the best. “Queen Gabrielle, Queen Cyane, what if we send messengers to the neighboring towns, looking for a representative from each town to come here and pass judgment. It would be a council of sorts, just for the sake of deciding what to do with the men who systematically attacked and robbed the entire region.”

Cyane gave her a broad smile. “Hermine, that’s brilliant!”

Gabrielle nodded. “I like it. Alright, let’s find someplace secure to keep everyone, and start sending out messengers to the neighboring towns. Tell them we need their representative here in two days for the… trial of these men. Take half a dozen amazons with each messenger, and take one of the conscripted soldier with each party, they would best be able to direct them to the towns. Drea and Cadmus… let’s see what this town has to offer. It would be a good location for our own Queen’s Army, don’t you think? We wouldn’t have to build up from scratch, and perhaps we could talk some of the conscripts and other support staff into staying, with better treatment and more dinars of course.”
Drea chuckled. “No who’s being brilliant, eh? Come on man; let’s go see what we have to work with.”

When all the commanders had left to go about their business, the two Queens were the only ones that remained. If you didn’t count the ten or so guards lounging around. They had been instructed, back at the Amazon nation, to never let Queen Cyane out of their site. It was a huge blow when Cyane was injured on the battlefield, and none of them would fail their duty again. Gabrielle led the other queen into an alehouse, to get the pale woman off her feet. “You are not quite healed; you should have said something earlier!”

“I’m fine Gabrielle; I just over did things a bit. What about you? This little excursion is going to push back your quest again.”

The little tribe-less queen gave her friend a gentle smile. “Don’t you see? This is part of my quest. Yes I want Xena, but I also want my friends, my people, and my land safe. I can do both at the same time. I am aware creating this safe haven in Greece will take time. But you know what they say… Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

Cyane looked at her sharply. “Is that what you’re doing, creating another Rome?”

Gabrielle sobered, and answered in a low voice. “No. I am definitely not building another Rome. But I don’t mind building Greece up a bit if I’m able.”

The other queen gave her a wry smile. “I suppose if you can’t find the peace to live your life, you just have to create it. Well for all our sakes, I hope it works.”

Days later, the trial council of representatives was deemed a success. Because it went so well Gabrielle spoke at length with the representatives about her plans, and the need to have regular representation all over the region of Epirus. They were skeptical at first, but agreed to take Gabrielle’s proposal of protection back to their individual town councils. Essentially, the towns would contribute money, based on their size and wealth, which would go to the Queen’s Army to protect the entire region. It was a good contract, and not only would they provide safety and protection, but they would also serve as a place to send those men and women who insisted on a rougher way of life. Turning a man with the soul of a soldier into an olive farmer was bound to yield a poor harvest. The best part of her proposal was actually suggested by Drea. She added a portion that stated the Queen’s Army would also come to the town’s aid in times of natural disaster. It wasn’t good enough to just protect people from raiders and other seedy types. No one could pay their fees if crops were wiped out, or fire and flood took their homes. So the Queen’s Army would also help replant crops, rebuild homes and barns, and help plan improvements. There were a few men who served in Rome, and had a fair mind at the engineering of aqueducts, roads and solid building structures. She instructed them to send their answers back to General Cadmus, in the town of Kastritsa, as she had duties that would take her back to the Amazon nation.

The morning Gabrielle and the rest of the Amazons were set to leave, she found that Cadmus and Drea had a surprise for her. All the remaining Queensmen were lined up in formation at first light. There was newly installed flagpole on the peak of the main hall in town. The design on the flag was that of a sword crossed with a quill, circled by what looked like the outline of the chakram. When the little queen saw the design, she was silent. Everyone waited, unsure if she would like it, or approve. She glanced at Cyane, the only person who would know enough about her and Xena to have helped design the flag. The other queen had been holding her breath, afraid that Gabrielle wouldn’t like it. However, she lost her doubt when she saw the tears in her friend’s bright green eyes. When Gabrielle looked out at the army, her army, then looked at the smiling faces of the
Amazons, she was nearly undone. These are my people; they are the ones I’m fighting for. Clearing her throat, she raised her voice and spoke. “I’m not going to pretend that I’m not surprised, because I am. And I’m not going to pretend that this doesn’t touch me deeply. But I will say that I’m glad we have this opportunity to help the greater good. And I’m glad that each and every one of you is doing this with me!” She thrust her fist in the air. “For Greece!”

The answering roar seemed to shake the walls of the town. “FOR GREECE! FOR THE QUEEN!”

When the noise died down, Cadmus cleared his throat to get her attention. “Um, there is one more thing…”

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow and the grizzled warrior, and her new general. “More?”

He spoke up a little louder. “The soldiers have been coming to me, all requesting that we change the name of our new town. Many of them, having heard stories of your travels with Xena, have suggested the name of Greater Good.”

The little queen mulled it over in her head for a few seconds. “Hmm… Greater Good…” She snorted. “It sounds so puritanical! I agree with a name change, but this is a town of warriors for Ares sake! That’s the best they could do?” She glanced at Cyane and winked, perhaps assuming they would come back with something a little tougher. She was, however, totally shocked when Cadmus spoke again.

“Actually, Queen Gabrielle, I agree with you there, and that is what I already told them. That is why they got together and came up with a different name.”

Gabrielle looked at him. “And?”

“Queensford.”

Green eyes twinkled up at the man. “I LIKE it!” Then, turning to the rest of the Queen’s Army she proclaimed “Welcome to the town of Queensford, home of what will be the best army in Greece!”

More cheering and revelry met her words. They left shortly after the naming, with Gabrielle promising to either return by the next full moon, or send a messenger. They also had strict instructions to send a messenger to the Amazon nation if anything unusual were to come up. She left most of the Roman gold with Cadmus, but saving a large bit to give to the Amazon nation. On their way back through Pedini, they picked up the ten Amazons who had been left there to help the Pedini soldiers. The Amazons were weary from all the traveling, but in good spirits. All of them were ready to be back with their loved ones, and the Amazon nation was only a few days of marching away.

They were a few hours from home when one of the city scouting parties greeted them. Gabrielle sent them back with news of their success. They had only been gone about a candle mark when Cyane weakly called Gabrielle’s name. The normally talkative Queen had been quiet for the past couple days, but Gabrielle had thought it was due to her wound being irritated by all the riding. When she heard her name being called, and saw the flushed and sweating face of her friend, she leaped from Argo’s saddle and just managed to catch Cyane before she slid off her own mount to the ground. The Amazon’s around them quickly dismounted to help her with the sick Queen. They laid her on the ground and Gabrielle felt her forehead. “Get the healer, she’s burning up!”

One woman ran back to find the healer, while the other’s looked worried. When the healer came up, she quickly removed Cyane’s leather shirt, showing the red and infected wound. Glancing at
Gabrielle she said “She’s caught fever, and her wound has gone bad. Why didn’t she say something, she told me days ago that she could change her bandages herself!”

Gabrielle reassured the other woman. “It’s ok Banya; Queens are known to be stubborn. This is not your fault. Do you have the herbs you need to make a poultice?”

Banya looked anguished. “That’s the problem, no I don’t! I had no idea she wasn’t healing, and I used the last of the wound herbs when we fought the raiders near Preveza. I knew we were almost home so I haven’t worried about it. They don’t grow around here, but I have a large selection in my healers hut in the city.”

The little Queen grimaced. “I used mine as well. I should have known better than deplete my supply! Well, we better get back to the city then.” Looking at the gathered Amazons, she called out to her commanders. Let’s get Cyane on Argo, I’ll take her and ride ahead as fast as possible. I need one of you to follow with the healer. The other two, continue as planned with the army.” There was a flurry of action, and with only a few minutes gone by, Gabrielle found herself seated behind Cyane on Argo, and galloping full speed toward the Amazon City. Xiomara followed right behind her with the healer. Both Gabrielle and Xiomara had directions to the healers hut; their plan was to run the horses straight into town to get the sick Queen there as soon as possible. There would be time for ceremony once Cyane got the herbs and poultice she needed.
Chapter 17

The city guards saw the swiftly approaching riders, and once they realized who they were, did their best to clear their way. It didn’t take long to get to the healer’s hut. Xiomara and Banya helped get Cyane down from Argo, and the three of them carried the sick queen into the hut. A few more healers and apprentices stopped when the saw the commotion at the door, then quickly made a place for the prone woman. Banya instantly went to work mixing a poultice, while Gabrielle steeped some herbs to help Cyane fight infection and bring down the fever.

It was only a few short minutes after their arrival that Varia burst through the door. “NO!” She looked at Gabrielle and whispered “You promised me!”

Gabrielle, still working on her mixture glanced over at the distraught Queen of Nations. “She is going to be ok Varia, she just got a fever and infection from a minor wound, but she hid it from us for a few days. We didn’t want to take any chances, so we rushed her here as soon as we realized how sick she was.” She roused Cyane enough to drink the herb-infused broth, and then set the bowl aside. She turned to one of the apprentices. “We need the coldest spring water you can find, and clothes. She needs to be stripped and have her skin covered in the cold clothes to bring her fever down. Keep changing the clothes as soon as they start to warm.” A few apprentices grabbed urns and ran to fetch water from the spring; others went to find enough cloths. Another healer was helping Banya with the poultice.

Gabrielle straightened and walked over to Varia. Looking the strong queen in the eyes, she grabbed both her hands in her own. “She will be ok; we just need to bring the fever down.” She stepped back and waited until she had the distracted Queen’s attention. “We have much to discuss, but the rest of the army is due in less than a candle mark. Stay here with her; even if she is asleep I know she’d be comforted by your presence. I’ll return in a little while.”

Varia looked at her and gave a weak smile. “Ok. If you’re sure she’ll be ok?”

“Yes.”

Varia nodded. “Alright, I’ll stay for a little while, but I really must gather the other Queens and greet the returning army. And we have heard a few rumors here, and if even half of them are true we do have much to discuss. We’ll talk later.”

Gabrielle left after murmuring to herself “She will be ok.”

Back in her own hut, she found a spare set of leathers. None of her gear had arrived yet, her saddle bags had been removed when she brought Cyane ahead with the healer. She briefly contemplated changing then decided she needed a good soak instead. When she turned around to head back toward the door, she was startled to see Xena. “Xena! Where have you been?”

The warrior looked slightly confused. “I don’t really know. It just takes more and more of my energy to appear, so I’ve been trying to conserve as much as possible. I feel like I’m in a fog most of the time.”

Gabrielle immediately went over to her. “Please, you have to hold on just a little bit longer! I almost have the Oracle’s riddle worked out, and I can get you back!”
The tall woman smiled, and put her arms around the little Queen, her soul mate. “I know you can, I
have faith in you Gabrielle.” She looked sad and pulled away. “I have to go now, but I can’t wait to
hold you in my arms for real.”

Gabrielle continued to stare at the empty spot after her Warrior Princess disappeared. “Me too
Xena, me too.”

She didn’t spend long in the bathing hut, just long enough to get herself clean and soak away some
of her worries. She had just finished dressing and slinging the katana across her back when she
heard a commotion that she could only assume meant the army had returned. It was early
afternoon, and she knew there would be a feast tonight. She also knew that there would be Queen’s
council meetings most of the day tomorrow. But after that, she was going to finish her quest. And
maybe, she could get someone working on the last of the riddle while she performed all her other
duties. She just needed to find the oldest member of her original tribe. No problem… yeah right!

After leaving the bathing hut, Gabrielle immediately went off to the Telequire section of the city, to
speak with Queen Andromede. While the queen wasn’t old enough to remember Princess Terreis,
she suggested that the tribe historian would know. “Magdelus was a warrior of the tribe back then
and from what I understand, a friend of the princess. But it was before my time. I’m sure she would
remember more about the event, she may even have a scroll on it somewhere.”

That was better news than she had hoped. She thanked the Queen and went in search of the
historian. During her walk, she tried to remember who Magdelus from the time of Queen Melosa.
She wracked her brain, but it was too long ago and it was too crazy of a time in her life. It took only
a short time to find her, she only had to ask two passing Telequire tribeswomen for directions. She
knocked on the historian’s hut, and was immediately answered. “Come in!”

Inside she found an older woman, somewhere near sixty winters. She was thin with medium brown
hair, gone mostly gray. She had a handful of scrolls clasped in ink stained hands. She looked up in
surprise when Gabrielle entered. “Oh, Queen Gabrielle! What brings you to my hut?”

Gabrielle smiled, the historian’s appearance reminding of her of her own time as a bard years
before. “Magdelus, I was given your name by Queen Andromede. She said you might know a little
more about the time princess Terreis was killed.”

“Oh, that was quite a time wasn’t it? You were so fresh faced and innocent.” She chuckled. “I
remember even then, confused and new to everything, and you still put Ephiny in her place when
she took an attitude with you. “

The little queen cocked her head. “I’m sorry, I’ve been trying, but I can remember you. When did
we meet?”

Magdelus moved over to her table, and sat down. She waved Gabrielle to join her. “I was a good
friend of Terreis. I was in the party that first found you and Xena, and later I took you to pick
clothes and a weapon from the princess’ things.”

Green eyes widened with memory. “I remember you! Yes, you told me that ‘Terreis was an
Amazon in the purest sense’, and told me that denying her belongings would dishonor her
memory.”

The older woman’s eyes twinkled merrily. “You remembered all that hmm? But I suppose I’m not
surprised, with you being trained as a bard and all.” She nodded her head. “Those were the days;
we sure had some fun back then. Oh, not with Melosa and all, but afterwards when you became Queen and Ephiny served as your Regent.”

Gabrielle shook her own head. “I’m afraid I wasn’t around the tribe as much as I should have been. I was dead set on traveling with Xena, fighting for the greater good and seeing the world. I don’t think I was the best Queen I could have been.”

Magdelus leaned over and put her weathered hand on Gabrielle’s. “You were just fine my dear. It was a different time back then. And you and Xena helped make the united Amazon nations possible. You have put yourself between danger and the Amazons time and time again. And I, for one, and extremely grateful for it.”

The little queen swallowed, accepting the emotion and praise. “Thank you.” She paused for a second to gather her thoughts, and then continued. “I suppose you would like to know why I’m here.”

The historian shrugged. “I figured you’d tell me when you got around to it. I don’t get company much, so I was just enjoying a little human interaction.”

I like her. Gabrielle smiled, enjoying the interaction as well. “As you probably know, I’ve been on a quest to bring Xena back to the land of the living. I’ve nearly solved the riddle of the Oracle. The problem is the line ‘At the crossroads of change there are buried seeds of war’. I’ve had visions that tell me this is the place where Terreis was killed, and I accepted the right of caste. The blood spilled that day very nearly started a war.”

Magdelus nodded gravely. “Yes, I remember that. It was a sad day when we lost the princess. She would have been a great queen, I’m glad she picked her successor wisely.”

Gabrielle blushed at the faint praise. “So anyway, I need to know where that place is. I know the Amazons sometimes make a memorial where our sisters have fallen. Do you know if the place was ever marked?”

“Oh!” She closed her eyes and thought for nearly a minute. “We did create one; it was a totem as tall as me. I carved a hawk with its wings outstretched, just for her. It was the second animal from the top. It took a horse and a sledge to drag it out there, and four of us to get it upright into the hole.” She thought for a second. “I’m trying to remember where it was… I know it was off the old trail, deep within the trees. The new city of the united tribes was built closer to the edge of the forest, to make trade with outsiders easier.”

The blonde queen prompted “Do you think anyone else would remember where it was?”

The older woman’s face seemed to droop with sad memories. “No, no one left but me. Vensa and Sholi died in one of Melosa’s attacks on the village. Corlani took an arrow from some raiders, years ago. And Talassa died of lung fever just last season.” She looked at the disappointed face of the little Queen. “If… if you want, I think I could remember the way there, once I’m back on the old trail. It shouldn’t be more than a few hours from the city.”

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow at the older woman’s suggestion. She took in the thin, frail looking body of the historian, and had some doubts. Magdelus read the look on the queen’s face and cackled. “Oh, I’m not going to break! I have an old horse that I go out on about once a week. I can’t stay cooped up with my scrolls all the time.”

The blonde smiled. “If you’re sure…” When Magdelus nodded, she continued. “We will be having a feast tonight to welcome the returning warriors. However, I can be ready around midday
tomorrow, if that is a good time for you.”

Magdelus nodded and gave the younger woman a smile. “That would be perfect! Tomorrow at midday, I will meet you by the stables.”

When Gabrielle was leaving the historian’s hut, she stopped one last time in the doorway. “Thank you for all your help, completing this quest means the world to me!”

The older woman dropped decorum, and hugged the queen. “It is my honor to help.”

Instead of heading back to her hut, she took a detour by the healer’s hut where Cyane was recovering. When she entered, she was surprised to see the other Queen awake and sitting up. “Hey, you’re awake!”

Banya set down the bandage she was rolling. “It was the most amazing thing. Not long after you left, she started to come around. We had only just started cooling her with the spring water when she woke. Her fever broke within half a candle mark. And nearly all the swelling around her wound is gone.” She looked at Gabrielle. “You said she was going to be ok, but I was actually pretty worried.”

Cyane looked up at her friend. “So you said I was going to be ok huh? And now I find myself practically healed, hours later?” She chuckled. “Interesting…”

Gabrielle gave her a wry grin. “Actually, I didn’t really even consider that. But I’m not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. I guess it’s just another way my power can manifest itself.” She looked at the two women. “Have you told Varia?” Cyane shook her head no. Shocked, Gabrielle exclaimed “Why not?”

Cyane gave her a sly look. “I was hoping to surprise her at the feast.”

“Are you well enough for that?”

The injured Queen remarked “Well I won’t be dancing, but I see no harm in eating and watching some dancers.”

Gabrielle laughed loudly. “Just be sure that’s all you! You don’t want to aggravate your wound again; I won’t always be here to wish you well again.”

“No, but I’ll be fine until the next time. Now, off with you! Banya is going to help me get cleaned up. I’ll see you at the feast later?”

The tribe-less queen crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ll be there tonight, but I’m going to busy tomorrow. And since you’re feeling so much better, I’ll leave you to explain the past few weeks’ events to the council.”

“Have you figured out the last part of the Oracle’s riddle?”

The little queen smiled. “I believe so. The historian for the Telequire tribe thinks she remembers where they placed a memorial marker. We will follow the old trail tomorrow and see if we can find it.”

Cyane’s eyes widened. “And if you do?”

“Then I will do my best to bring her back.”
If the going away feast was raucous, the coming home feast was even wilder. Tables were laid out overflowing with roast pig, fowl, vegetables, pine nuts, fruits and sticky deserts of all kinds. Honey was a favored sweetener, often drizzled across warmed flat bread and shared by lovers. After the feast, honors were recited for those warriors who had shown exceptional bravery. Recognition and sad remembrance was also given for those few who did not come back. When Gabrielle finally arrived, she noticed right away that Cyane was seated to Varia’s left. Both women looked happier than she had seen them in months. After eating, she wandered over to the storyteller’s fire. There, she listened to different women recite tales of battles past, stories of lost loves, and various other completely fictional flights of fancy. She even heard a few or her own scrolls recited, written about Xena’s past deeds. But she wasn’t truly surprised until the first story about her began. She wasn’t even sure how the story had made it to Greece, let alone all the way to the Amazon nation. It was about her visit to the Land of Pharaohs after Xena’s death. She helped a king and was eventually rewarded with the nickname The Green Eyed Sun of Egypt. It was only a few years ago, but it felt like a lifetime.

Eventually, she wandered off to watch the dancers. The sun had gone down, and the Amazon wine was freely flowing. Many had offered seats next to them, but Gabrielle opted to stand and watch for a while. She enjoyed the free flowing athleticism of the women, and the accompanying drums and singing. It was primal, and erotic. Perhaps that was why she had accepted Andreia’s offer of a no strings roll in the furs. She missed Xena, but she still craved human touch. And perhaps that was why she found herself watching the dancers once again.

She was aware of someone walking up and standing next to her, but she continued to watch for a few minutes longer before finally speaking. “Hello Aphrodite, going native tonight?” She glanced over at the Goddess, noting the amazon leathers adorning the other woman’s body. When she looked up at the curly-haired blonde’s face, she was met with a dimpled grin.

“Like totally! Isn’t it great? So what’s up bard babe? Why haven’t you taken one or five of these hunky dancers off to play Find the Quill?”

“Dite, um, wrong gender for that game.”

The Love Goddess snorted. “Oh please! Like I haven’t seen how butch some of these women are. Besides, I think they could almost teach me a thing or two!”

Gabrielle smirked at the other woman. “I highly doubt that, and I should know.”

Aphrodite turned to her and ran a delicate nail down the edge of Gabrielle’s ear. “Oh sweetie, you’ve only had your toe in the water of my lake. I let you sample my disciples for a reason. Like, there’s no way you could handle a full dose of the Goddess of Love.” She giggled and winked at the little queen.

The Amazon Queen sighed, remembering the bath house. “You’re probably right. So, are you here to ask me about Xena, and my quest? You and Ares have been noticeably absent lately…”

Aphrodite smirked back at her. “Nope.” She made a popping sound at the end of the word. “I’m just here to have a good time, like everyone else.”

Gabrielle glanced sideways at her. “Uh huh…”

The Goddess of Love gave her a dimpled grin. “Weeeellll… I’m also checking on my side project.” She looked pointedly toward where Varia and Cyane were seated across the fire. The two queens
looked decidedly cozy.

The little queen laughed. “THAT’S your side project? They were headed down the love road, with or without your help.”

Aphrodite snorted. “As if! Those two feather babes were so stubborn, no way were they going to get together without a push in the right direction from little ‘ol moi!”

“And what exactly did you do?” Gabrielle stopped to think for a second. “Oh! Cyane! You were the reason she came with me?”

Another smirk answered her question. “Uh yup! And a pretty good job I did, if I say so myself.” The Love Goddess buffed her nails on her leather top. Then she glanced and the fire and her eyes seemed to light up. “Oooh, is that the little warrior hottie you entertained a few weeks back?”

Gabrielle followed her gaze and saw Andreia, once again, dancing around the fire. She chuckled. “Yes it is.”

Aphrodite ran her tongue across her lower lip. “Oh, she’s yummy!” She fanned herself playfully. “I think I’m going to have to recruit that one to be one of my disciples!”

The blonde Queen laughed. “Good luck with that. However, if you do manage to explore her virtues tonight, make sure you ask to see her weapons.”

“Like eww! Why would I want to ruin a perfectly good evening by looking at her sword?”

Gabrielle smirked. “Oh, I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’m ready to head back to my hut.”

Aphrodite pouted. “Oh poo! You’re no fun! Fine, run off and leave me here to fend for myself…and the mercy of all these dangerous amazons…”

“I’m sure you’ll be just fine.” She said, as she walked away from the fire. The last thing she saw before rounding a corner was the Goddess of Love pointing at Andreia, then curling her finger in a ‘come here’ motion.

As she walked back toward her own hut, the sounds of music and revelry faded behind her. She wasn’t really sure why she wasn’t in the mood to celebrate. Perhaps because she knew her quest wasn’t quite finished. And maybe, because she knew that being this close to having her desires fulfilled, there was only one person she wanted to celebrate with.

Those were her very thoughts, as she drifted off to sleep. Soon Xena… soon.
Chapter 18

The next day started overcast. The entire city seemed to be asleep when Gabrielle left her hut. There were a few people moving around, those unlucky enough to have morning duty after such a big celebration. But for the most part, all was quiet. It took many candle marks to fall asleep the night before. Part of it was restless energy, and the other part was in deciding what she would need to do once she found the ‘crossroads’ mentioned in the Oracle’s prophesy.

“Dark water will rise in the middle of a draught. The lyrical dragon will let the rain out. At the crossroads of change there are buried seeds of war. Mix the blood and ash of two souls for a hero to be reborn.”

Eventually she drifted off, not settling on anything specific. She decided to just wait and see what happened once she found the place.

Now, she was ready to get started. After an unidentifiable breakfast, Gabrielle assumed all the cooks must be nursing sore heads. She arranged for an afternoon meal to be packed up, for her and Magdelus. A little before noon, she had Argo saddled and waiting. The historian walked up and looked the little queen up and down. Noticing the tense expression and lack of pain around her eyes she said nodded to the other woman. “Ready to get going I see. Well truthfully so am I, I haven’t had this much adventure in years! And to think, me, Magdelus, could help bring back the legendary Xena!” She chuckled, and then went off to saddle her own horse. Gabrielle just grinned and shook her head at the other woman’s antics. She came back a short time later, sitting atop an older but solid looking mare. “This here is Tilly, and she’ll take me where ever I need to go.” She leaned forward and stroked the neck of her, clearly well-loved, horse.

The Queen grinned. “Well Tilly, this is Argos. Now that you two ladies have met, shall we go?” Argo whinnied in response, voicing her seeming approval.

They traveled for about an hour when they came to a small stream with a waterfall. Gabrielle suggested a break for some food, and Magdelus agreed. She was stiff getting off her horse, but Gabrielle respected that the older woman didn’t complain at all. The area around them was a little rocky, the woods having grown up around the terrain. But there was a small flat clearing near the base of the waterfall. It wasn’t much of a waterfall, just enough to make the place seem idyllic.

The small stream continued on its merry way, through the thickest section of woods. Gabrielle heard a little splash, and smiled with delight when she saw a couple of otters playing near the shore. The older woman, chewing her flatbread and olives, smiled as well.

Gabrielle broke the silence. “It’s nice here, so secluded.”

The historian nodded her head. “Yup, it sure is. I remember this place from when I was just a kid. We used to come here in the heat of summer to cool off. Then a few years later, we’d come down here to tryst under the light of the full moon.” She pointed to the top of the waterfall. “At one time, there was a statue of Artemis up there. But I think someone pulled it down around the time the gods fell.”

Gabrielle sighed. “It’s strange how your entire world can change overnight. And it’s sad when it
Magdalena looked at her. “Isn’t that why we’re here Queen Gabrielle, to get a little of your own back?”

She nodded. “I’ve told you before, it’s just Gabrielle. And yes it is. And I am more than ready to right this wrong.” Standing, she brushed off her leathers then offered a hand to the older woman.

The historian accepted her hand and stood. She tossed the last bit of bread on the water, then made her way back to Tilly and mounted the placid mare. “Well Gabrielle, let’s go then! We can’t keep the Warrior Princess waiting!”

They traveled for barely another candle mark before Magdalena started to slow. “We’re close. I remember that rock outcropping and this big stand of black pines. For some reason the memory of dry pine needles crunching underfoot sticks out the most.” She dismounted and led them down, what appeared to be, a deer trail. After a few hundred yards, both women stopped. There, in the middle of the trees, was a carved pole, aged with weather and time.

With a shaking hand, Gabrielle touched the beautifully carved wood. It was a little over six feet tall and nearly two feet across. A multitude of animals were carved along its length. The crowning glory was the top. There, in all its glory, was the great head of a brown bear. From the top of the bear’s head sprouted a carved set of antlers. The bottom was a tortoise, which morphed into a vertical scaled fish, and then just below the bear was a bird of prey with wings spread. The entire thing looked like a long amalgamation of some scaled, winged, bear-stag hybrid. If one squinted just right, it slightly resembled the dragon on Gabrielle’s back. Green eyes stared up at it in awe. It’s amazing!

Magdalena broke the spell when she spoke. “What do we do now?”

Gabrielle seemed to shake herself, as if waking from a dream. She stepped back from the totem, and then walked over to Argo. “Well, I don’t really know for certain. All I was given was the Oracle’s prophesy. Though, I think it is more of a riddle. She said, ‘Dark water will rise in the middle of a draught’. The lyrical dragon will let the rain out. At the crossroads of change there are buried seeds of war. Mix the blood and ash of two souls for a hero to be reborn.’

“Well that’s certainly not much to go on. So what are you going to do?”

Gabrielle started untying packs and other items from Argo’s saddlebags. “Well, I’ve got some ideas.” She looked at the older woman. “I’m probably going to be a while. You can either go back by yourself, or you can stay and watch. It’s up to you.”

The historian laughed. “I’m definitely staying, and I will be recording this for the generations after to read. I am a historian, after all.”

The little Queen shrugged. “Ok, suit yourself. But no matter what happens, don’t interfere, ok?”

Magdalene looked skeptical. “No matter what?”

Green eyes leveled a serious look at her. “Do not interfere.”

She began by collecting fist size stones, and building a ringed fire. Once it was merrily crackling, she went over to Argo and strung a bow she had brought with her. Leaving the historian behind with the horses, Gabrielle went deep into the woods, looking for her stag. Her confidence that it
would not take long proved true. Her shot was well-placed through the heart. But even so, she had to track the great beast quite a ways before the pumping muscle finally gave out. She drained as much blood as possible into a leather skin. Then she quickly gutted and dressed the animal slung it across her shoulders to carry it back to the totem.

Magdalene was startled when she arrived back at the totem on silent feet. The little Queen skinned the deer, leaving the antlers still attached, and gave the rest of the meat to Magdalene to take care of. With nothing better to do, the older woman wove a drying rack with some branches, and set the meat above the fire.

Using leaves and pine needles, Gabrielle cleaned the inside of the skin and well as possible. She set it aside, until she was ready for it. Next, she poured the stag’s blood into a small wooden bowl and added a selection of herbs. Then, with hesitant hands she untied the thong around her neck and opened the vial containing Xena’s ashes. Before she could second guess herself she dumped the ashes into the bowl of blood. With ashes mixed in, she opened a square leather pouch and withdrew the Chakram. She stopped using it after Egypt, but refused to give the weapon up. With careful precision, she sliced the inside of her left forearm and let the blood drip into the bowl as well. The second the first drop hit the stag’s blood, she felt a prickling over her entire body. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Magdalene rub her arms and look around. Clearly there was something greater than the two of them at work. Gabrielle had done the ritual before, many years earlier, when she went into the spirit world to fight Alti for Xena’s child. But nothing in that ritual felt like what she was feeling sitting in front of the totem. She wrapped her arm, then wiped the Chakram clean and set it aside. She was ready.

Seated in lotus position, she lifted the bowl and drank deeply, and then set it back down. Almost immediately her body started convulsing, throwing her backwards onto the thick carpet of leafy debris and pine needles. The body was simply reacting to her soul being ripped into the spirit world. After an eternity of seconds Gabrielle opened her eyes. She was floating near the lowest branches of the trees and everything looked the same, but color was washed out. She could see Magdalene, the horses, fire, totem, and even her own body lying on the ground. The historian, despite Gabrielle’s insistence that she didn’t interfere, was next to the little Queen’s body. The blood on her own lips had already darkened to a rust color.

Gabrielle looked around and called out, “Xena!”

The totem started to glow, and Xena’s spirit seemed to come out of the wood. “Gabrielle! What are you doing in the spirit world?”

Green eyes looked up at her soul mate. “I don’t know how to do this Xena; I don’t know what to do!”

Xena embraced her. “I know you can figure it out Gabrielle, and you know you can do it. That is the most important thing, that you have faith in yourself. But you must go back, you cannot stay here. Look at your body!”

Gabrielle glanced down at her own body, and saw the trickle of blood flowing from her nose and mouth. And she knew, without her soul, her body would die. “Ok, I’ll go back. Do you have any last suggestions?”

Xena looked into her eyes. “Give me a body, give me blood, and then call my soul.”

With a single nod of her head, Gabrielle walked over to her body, then lay down into herself… and came awake with a gasp. She turned her head to look at the crying older woman. “Have no fear Magdalene, I’ve returned. Can you play a drum?”
The historian wiped her eyes. “Sorry, but I got worried about you. And yes I can, why?”

“I need a rhythm, and I need something to help me call Xena back. There is a small hand-drum in my saddlebag, go ahead and grab it.” She then stood, and started walking a path around the totem. After a few circuits she called Magdalene and asked her to start playing the beat of spring planting. Once the drumming started, Gabrielle grabbed the bowl, and dipped fingers into it. Then with closed eyes, she started walking the circle counterclockwise. Slowly making her way around the totem, flicking blood to her left, onto the large carved monument. Her chant started quiet, but grew with each repeat of the words.

“You are the dark water, I am the dragon, Let this blood release you with the rain. You are the dark water, I am the dragon, Let this blood release you with the rain. You are the dark water, I am the dragon, Let this blood release you with the rain…”

On and on she continued, even as the sky covered in purple-black clouds and turned dark. Gabrielle could feel the heat in her back and knew the tattoo would be glowing. The pressure inside her was growing with each flick of blood. Round and round she continued, until she started to get dizzy. The wind was picking up, and still she continued her chant.

“You are the dark water, I am the dragon, Let this blood release you with the rain. You are the dark water, I am the dragon, Let this blood release you with the rain…”

The historian sat wide-eyed by the fire, witness to something not likely to be seen again by a living soul. Through it all, she never faltered or missed a beat. Then the rain started, large fat drops falling on both their heads. It sizzled in the fire and on the strips of drying venison. All at once, the sky opened up, and it felt like a river coming down. The fire went out almost immediately. But the thing the older woman noticed first was that Gabrielle had stopped in front of the totem, and was facing it while chanting. Looking at the symbol of Terreis’ memory, Magdalene could see the blood running down the aged wood in rivulets, soaking into the earth below.

When the last of the blood was washed clean, the rain stopped. It didn’t lighten up, or continue to sprinkle across the expanse of forest, it just stopped. Gabrielle stopped chanting with the rain, and opened her eyes. Then, very deliberately, she placed her unbloodied hand on the totem pole, right in the center of the hawk’s breast. With a shock like lightening, her body went completely rigid. The horses whinnied, drawing Magdalene’s attention away for just a second. But it was quickly drawing back when she heard a great cracking sound. The Queen’s hand was no longer stuck to the pole. Instead, she had the chakram in her right hand, and the weapon was imbedded deeply into the wood, exactly in the center. At first, the historian was angry, thinking about all the work and love they put into its creation. But she continued to watch, unsure of what was going to happen, and she could see the crack was growing along the entire length of the wood. When the split grew wide enough, the chakram fell to the ground. The lost Queen put her fingers into the crack and pulled the wood apart with all her might. From that very crack, there emanated a bright light, pulsing in time to the glowing dragon on her back. Then with a guttural yell, Gabrielle ripped open the now hollow totem, and caught her soul mate as she fell forward toward the ground. The weight of the other woman took her to her knees. “Xena…”

Magdalene was in shock. The forest was silent, other than the sound of one weeping queen. The dark head lifted wearily, and blue eyes looked at the historian. In a voice, rough and low, Xena said “Thank you.” Then she looked down at the woman whose arms she was tangled in. “Shhh… Gabrielle, it’s ok. You did it, I’m here now.”

Looking up, still in shock, Gabrielle met her eyes. “Xena? I really did it, didn’t I?”
Suddenly, there was a double flash of light, and both Ares and Aphrodite appeared. Ares’ mouth was hanging open, not quite believing what he was seeing. Aphrodite, much more unrestrained, clapped her hands together in delight. “Like, no way! It totally worked; my bard babe and warrior babe are back together again!”

Xena looked annoyed at the presence of the War God and Love Goddess, but her eyes softened when she looked at Aphrodite’s smiling face. “Aphrodite, we need some space. Just for a while, ok? We’ll call you and catch up after…” She broke off, and looked down at the blonde that was wrapped around her. Looking back up, she just said “Later, ok?”

She gave the women a dimpled grin. “Sure thing Xena but let me help out a bit first.” With the wave of her hand, the muddied and bloody women were clean and dry. The stag pelt was even cleaned and cured, getting a disgusted look from the Goddess of Love. She saw Magdalene staring at her in awe and gave the older woman a saucy wink. Then with one last wave, she popped out.

That left Ares, standing awkwardly, a few feet away. He cleared his throat, receiving a blue-eyed glare. Clearing his throat again he spoke to no one in particular. “Um… well, it seems a shame to leave such a nice totem broken like that. I’ll just… you know… fix it for you.” With the snap of his finger, the broken halves of the totem rose up from the ground, and sealed themselves back together. Then with another snap, it was firmly planted back in the ground. He held up his hand one last time, and then paused. “For what it’s worth Xena, I’m really glad to have you back. For no other reason than Gabrielle needed you. Later.” With his last word, he disappeared.

Once he was gone, Xena and Gabrielle slowly pulled themselves upright. Magdalene rushed over to help. “By the gods! I have such a scroll to write, and I don’t think anyone is going to believe it!”

Gabrielle looked around, then at the other two women, and started laughing. It was a combination of relieved and hysterical laughter that you just couldn’t stop. And it only took a few seconds for the other two to join her. Once they got control of themselves, Gabrielle bent down to pick up the chakram. Handing it to Xena, she quietly said “I believe this is yours.”

Xena took her by the hand. “I have everything I need, right here.” Then she looked down at her newly born and very nude body and added “Except maybe some clothes.”

Gabrielle giggled. “I think I can help you with that.”

Once the Warrior Princess was dressed with an old set her leathers, found in Argo’s saddlebags, they went to work packing up the rest of the things. Aphrodite had cleaned up a lot, and even finished drying the venison. Magdalene wanted to save the stag skin and antlers, so she wrapped that and tied it onto Tilly’s saddle. Eventually, all that was left to do was head back.

There wasn’t much talking on the return trip, the trail was dark and they trusted the horses to pick their way safely. Gabrielle and Xena rode double, exactly like the days of old, so the pace was a bit slower. The weary women didn’t stop at the waterfall, nor did they even stop to eat. Magdalene was beyond tired, but strangely energized by all that she had seen and heard. She knew that sleep would be a long time in coming when she got back to her hut. The best time to write about an event was right after it happened, and she definitely wanted a history of this. She just wanted one night, to get the story down before she started losing bits of it from sleep and time passed.

Xena and Gabrielle were both world weary and heart-full. They were hoping to make it back into the city unseen, not wishing to face the chaos and celebration of Xena’s return. They just wanted just one night, a night to sleep and reconnect with each other. Just one night, to rub their souls against each other, like the great cats of the Africaan plains. After that, they would worry about the rest of the world.
And as luck would have it, or maybe it was the fates, but they got their one night. They made it back to their huts with the moon high in the sky. The shimmering light reflected off a blonde and a brunette head, before those heads disappeared through the door of Gabrielle’s hut.

Just one night.
Chapter 19

The sun shining through the slats of her hut told the little queen it was late morning. Surprisingly, Xena was still asleep beside her. She smiled; Xena was beside her. No one had come to bother them, simply because no one realized Gabrielle had returned. She knew she should get up; she had duties and reports to give. She had to tell everyone that her quest to bring Xena back was a success. Her stomach growled. ‘And I need to eat, gods, we both do!’ But something, some all-encompassing feeling of warmth and comfort, kept her in place. She squeezed the taller woman, wanting to crawl inside her and bath in their love, then her stomach growled again. Stupid traitorous body!

One sleepy blue eye popped open. “Why are you growling at me? And why do you look mad?”

Gabrielle jumped, slightly startled. “Eeep!” Then she relaxed and explained. “I’m not mad, and I’m not growling at you. I’m hungry, and my stomach is growling at you.” She cocked her head to the side, adopting a listening pose. “It says it wants nut bread.”

Xena raised an eyebrow at her. “Oh, it says that does it? In a sudden move that ended with the Warrior Princess leaning over the little Queen, she grinned. “Well I want you! So what can we do to appease our two wants?”

Gabrielle smiled. “Well if you kiss me like you mean it, I’ll take care of both our needs…” Then she winked at her.

The kiss was full of passion that neither woman had felt in many years, maybe even ever. There was a loving tenderness overlaid by an urgency to re-connect that left them both breathless. Gabrielle traced a finger over the dark-haired woman’s smooth shoulder, and down her arm. “It’s been so long…”

“It has.”

The little Queen sighed. “Let me up now, and I promise we can have the day together.”

Blue eyes twinkled. “Deal!”

Going to the door, wrapped in nothing but a tiny blanket from the bed, got someone willing to run some errands in record time. Everyone was happy to serve the legendary Queen, but it was an even better bonus when she was so precariously covered. The first task was to have food enough for two brought to her hut, including nut bread. The second task was to take a message to Varia and Cyane letting them know that Gabrielle succeeded, was back in the city, and did not wish to be disturbed until she emerged. The Amazon grinned broadly and took off at a fast jog.

Xena raised an eyebrow when her soul mate stepped back inside the hut. Noticing that the little blanket had slipped considerably downward, she remarked “That’s how you get people to leave you alone?”

The blonde flushed lightly, and scratched just below her ear. “Weellll, I may have made a few new friends.” The looked at each other for a few seconds, then both burst out laughing.
The taller woman threw an arm over her face, once the laughter subsided. “Oh gods, I’ve missed you.” She sat up and looked at Gabrielle, then reached out to rub her hand over the covers of the bed. She moved the same hand over her opposite arm, and pinched the skin. “I’ve missed this… being real.”

Gabrielle walked over to the bed and sat on the edge of it. Taking Xena’s hand in her own, she turned it over and traced the palm with her index finger. She curiously noted a gap in her lifeline, and quietly said “We lost years, Xena.” She looked into the blue eyes of her soul mate. “We lost years we can never get back… and I refuse to be torn apart again.”

Xena gazed back at her, and realization kicked in. The woman sitting in front of her had changed. She really wasn’t that sweet bard from Potidaea. This was a woman, who in some ways had become jaded. There was another more frightening though that crept into the cracks of her mind. ‘She has more power than I could ever hope to have. If she fell like I did, no one could stop her…’

The dark-haired woman lightly cleared her throat. “You don’t have to worry about that Gabrielle; I will never leave you again. You are my greater good. No matter what army we have to fight, no matter who needs us, you will always come first.”

Gabrielle paled a bit, realizing that with Xena absent so much over the past few weeks, she missed out on some important news. “Um… about that… you know, armies and such…”

Xena looked at her. “Yeeesss?”

“Well, you see… I have an army now… and a town… and I declared hate on Rome.”

Shocked, and confused, Xena said “Excuse me?”

The blonde scratched over her right eye. “Yeah, you see, while you were gone…” she blew a sigh of relief when she was interrupted by a knock on the door. Smiling at her confused warrior, she hopped up from the bed. “Gotta go get that, I’ll tell you later!”

The runner at the door was loaded down with food and messages. There was a message from the council, congratulating her and looking forward to seeing Xena again. There were messages from both Varia and Cyane telling them to take as long as they wanted to get reacquainted with each other. The runner smirked and passed on a little gossip. “Varia and Cyane haven’t left each other’s sides since you came back from Preveza. All the amazons are taking bets that there will be a joining ceremony next spring!” Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other and smiled, happy for their friends. The little Queen knew she’d have to sit down with the two of them, and Xena, and have a long talk. But until then, there was nut bread to be had.

While they were eating, Gabrielle conceded to fill Xena in about all the activities of the past few weeks. She told her about the Queen’s Army, the newly named town of Queensford, and her contracts with various towns and cities across Epirus for protection.

When she finished, Xena set down the piece of flat bread she had been eating. Concerned, Gabrielle asked “Is everything alright Xena?”

The Warrior Princess gave her a sad smile. “You are everything I wanted to be when I was younger, instead I became the Conqueror. How did I ever get it so wrong?”

Gabrielle stood, and walked around behind her, and hugged her. Letting her chin rest on the top of Xena’s head, she answered. “You were young, lonely, and in pain. And you hadn’t met the other half of your soul. Anyone would have an off couple of years under those circumstances. It’s time to just chill about all that.”
Xena couldn’t help her reaction, she snorted and started laughing. “You’ve been spending too much time with Aphrodite!”

Turning Xena’s head, Gabrielle gave her a searching and intimate kiss. After breaking it, she grabbed the taller woman’s hands and pulled her to her feet. “Most definitely! And if you’ll follow me, I can show you what else I learned!”

Laughing, the other woman allowed herself to be pulled along. Once they were near the bed, Xena resisted the tugging, and pulled Gabrielle to a stop. Drawing the shorter woman into her arms, she kissed her as thoroughly as the years of absence warranted. When they finally parted, both were short of breath.

Gabrielle was unable to wait any more; she started tugging at the shirt Xena had pulled on when the food arrived. “Off!” While the taller woman was busy removing clothes, Gabrielle simply untied the blanket she had grabbed earlier. Nude, her skin shown golden. When her soul mate stopped to stare, she added “Not bad for fifty something winters, huh?”

“It could be a hundred winters and I wouldn’t care. Come here.” When Gabrielle stepped forward, Xena leaned down and picked the other woman up. The blonde Queen’s legs wrapped around her waist, for the trip over to their bed. Laying the smaller woman across the covers, Xena crawled up with her. “Now… I believe we have some catching up to do?” Gabrielle froze and looked up at her, a flicker of fear crossing her face. “Gabrielle? What is it?”

The little Queen looked away, and whispered, “I’m afraid, Xena.”

Shocked blue eyes looked back at her. “What!”

She started to move off the woman below her, but was stopped when Gabrielle wouldn’t let go. “Wait, please?”

Xena sighed. “Ok.”

The blonde continued. “It’s been a long time for us. And… well we can both do casual very well. But if we do this, right here, right now, I don’t think I can ever go back to the way we were. Those years after we were together, watching you with other men and women… they were hard Xena. But the years after you were gone all together, those were even harder.” A single tear fell when she met sad blue eyes. “What I’m trying to say is that if you think we are going to end up apart again emotionally, I’d rather not do this. Because I’d rather have you with me, as just my friend, than not have you at all.”

Her soul mate smiled and wiped the tear away. “Well if that is all you’re worried about, I think I can assure you that you have me for as long as you want. After we stopped being intimate, it was like a little light went out. I think that was part of why I did sacrifice myself in Jappa. I wanted to right a wrong from long ago. I thought I had lost part of you, and figured it was only a matter of time before I lost the rest. I never wanted to hurt you Gabrielle, and I never wanted to lose you!”

“Xena… our communication skills suck olive pits!”

The brunette laughed. “Hey, you’re the bard, not me!”

Gabrielle looked sad. “Not any more…”

Hopefully blue eyes looked at her. “Maybe someday again?”

Tender green eyes smiled back. “Maybe someday.”
Xena leaned down and kissed her, then kissed her again. Moving lips down the smaller woman’s neck, to her collarbone, she whispered “I want to worship my Queen…”

Panting Gabrielle tangled her fingers in Xena’s hair. Then suddenly tightening her fist, she pulled Xena’s head back. It was only a little bit rough, but Xena’s eyes widened in surprise. “You forget my blood Xena. I’m not your Queen; I’m your Goddess now!” Then she pulled the other woman to her for another blistering kiss. For Xena, the hut seemed to warm considerably, especially when Gabrielle bucked her off, and straddled the taller woman.

“Whoa! Gabrielle!”

The blonde smirked. “Shhhh, your goddess says no talking! And don’t move; I’ll be right back.”

“Bu…”

Gabrielle leaned over and silenced her with a kiss, then hopped off the bed. She didn’t go far, only a few feet away, but when she returned with her staff, Xena was confused. Confusion soon turned to understanding when Gabrielle laid the wooden weapon across the bed above Xena’s head, and instructed the woman to hold it there. “Don’t let go, don’t bring it below your head, and for the gods sake… don’t break my staff!” Surprised blue eyes looked back at her with arousal. Gabrielle then climbed back on top of the warrior, straddling the area just above her womanhood. “Now where was I?”

Gabrielle placed delicate kisses across the other woman’s forehead, on her cheeks, and around her mouth. Instead of giving in and tasting the sweet lips below her, the little Queen moved down to the taller woman’s neck and upper chest. She could hear the brunettes breathing grow heavy and faster.

Long fingers twitched around the staff, muscles in the warrior’s arms straining with not grabbing the torturous woman above her. “Gabrielle…”

The blonde moved back up and placed a finger lightly against Xena’s lips. “Remember, no talking.” She moved her mouth back to the chest of the woman below her. Her lips wrapped around a waiting nipple, rolling the hardened flesh with her tongue. The body below her bucked like wild pony, but Gabrielle held on. Eventually, after lavishing a dizzying amount of attention to both breasts, the little Queen moved lower. Gabrielle slid down her body and rested a flushed cheek against the taller woman’s sex. The warrior’s breath caught in her throat, in anticipation of the first taste. When delicate lips and tongue finally made contact, Xena cried out. It had been too long for her; too many years without real human touch. She knew she would peak in record time.

Gabrielle began stroking the sides of her clit with each thumb, while she plunged her tongue inside as far as it would go. Better than the finest wine, or the sweetest ambrosia, Gabrielle savored her lover for the first time in years. It was a heady experience. She enjoyed herself so much that she almost missed the first signs of Xena’s impending release.

“Gabrielle… please…”

Xena’s words brought her back to the present. When Gabrielle looked up the bed toward her soul mate, beseeching blue eyes met her own. Giving in, she removed her tongue, and replaced it with three fingers. It took less than a minute of moving in and out for the taller woman’s body to start shaking. When she took the dark-haired woman’s hard clit into her mouth, Xena cried out. Gabrielle was truly surprised that the taller woman didn’t snap the staff in half with the force of her release. She rested her cheek on her lover’s thigh, and simply enjoyed the feeling of muscles gripping her fingers.
Xena released the staff, letting it slide off the bed and to the floor. She threw an arm across her eyes and just kept repeating the same words. “Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods…”

Gabrielle’s chuckle was muffled slightly by the brunette’s leg. “Well… demigoddess actually…” When Xena lifted her arm and looked down at the smirking Queen, Gabrielle added, “But that will do.”

The thoroughly pleased woman held out a hand. “Come here.” Gabrielle crawled up her body, but froze when a long thigh slid between her own. Her breath caught, and Xena could feel the little Queen’s arm tremble against her side. “Ahh… well I believe my demigoddess requires a little worship of her own.”

Xena lifted her leg a little higher. Feeling the exquisite pressure she had been craving, Gabrielle bit her bottom lip, and then began riding her lover’s muscled leg. She felt frantic with the need to release, afraid that it was all a twisted dream and she would wake alone. When Xena’s hands grabbed her by the hips, and pulled her tighter, the blonde Queen cried out. Knowing her lover only had seconds left, Xena whispered “Come for me Gabrielle, right here, for every day until eternity…”

Right at that moment, what felt like a lifetime of loneliness broke free from the emotional dam Gabrielle had built. She froze as wave after wave crashed through her. And the end, she could only fall forward across Xena’s chest, entire body shaking with her release. Xena rubbed her back, and comforted as best as she was able. “Shh, it’s ok. I’m right here Gabrielle, I’m not going anywhere…”

Brokenly, the blonde whispered “Xena…”

Teary green eyes looked up into loving blue ones. Xena reassured her. “I’m never leaving you again.” She cradled Gabrielle’s cheek in the palm of her hand. “I told you, you are my greater good now!”

“I love you Xena.”

“I love you too Gabrielle.”

The two lovers lay there for a while, reveling the feel of the other’s body. Enjoying being alive and being together. There were no words, only gently exploring fingertips, and soft sighs. Eventually, Gabrielle’s head found its way to the Warrior Princess’ shoulder; the little Queen was slowly rubbing circles on the other woman’s belly. “Xena?”

The brunette roused from a half slumber. “Yes?”

“Do you think…” She paused, and sighed.

A little concerned that her soul mate was having trouble processing everything, Xena prompted, “What is it Gabrielle?”

The little Queen started again. “Do you think… they would bring me some more nut bread?”

Long fingers dug into the blonde’s sides, eliciting a spate of laughter. When Gabrielle was wheezing with it Xena took pity on her and withdrew the torturous digits. Then she sat up, taking the other woman with her. “Come on, we may as well get dressed and face the music. We can eat a little more, and then decide who to speak with first.”
Both women got dressed and wandered back to the table on the other side of Gabrielle’s hut. After digging into the bag that was brought by the Amazon runner, the little Queen gave out a triumphant cry and pulled out another loaf of nut bread. “Aha! They gave me a second loaf!” Xena shook her head at the other woman’s antics, and then popped an olive in her mouth.

After swallowing a bite of her favorite bread, Gabrielle poured them both some water from a pitcher. She took a few swallows and then looked thoughtful for a minute. “We really should talk to Aphrodite first.” Xena scowled, and Gabrielle reached out to take the taller woman’s hand. “Listen, she’s been there for me, you know that. Aphrodite has never played the other God’s games, she’s our friend.”

Xena’s look softened. “I know Gabrielle, and that’s fine. I agree with you, we should talk to her and get it out of the way before we deal with the Amazon menagerie.”

This time it was the Amazon Queen’s turn to sigh. “It is going to be like a Roman circus, isn’t it?”

“Yup.”

“Hmm… we could always go south... to the land of the Pharaohs. I heard they need a girl with a chakram”

“Nope.”

“Hades!”

Chapter 20

Once they cleared away the debris of their meal, Gabrielle called out “Aphrodite! Stop spying and get down here.”

A few seconds later there was a popping sound and what looked like an explosion of sparkling parchment hearts. Aphrodite pouted, “I wasn’t, like, spying! But, yay! I’m so happy that my favorite bard and warrior are back together!” She then hugged both women with enough exuberance to nearly knock them over. When she hugged Xena, she quietly said, “I’m so glad you’re back.”

The brunette smiled down at her. “I’m glad too. And… thank you for all that you’ve done for Gabrielle.”

The Love Goddess gave her a dimpled grin. “Hey, we kick ass babes need to stick together!” Then she shrugged off the emotional moment and cocked her head at the other two women. “So, when are you two hitting the road again? Where will you go now Xena? And Gabrielle, I’m assuming you’re going where she leads…”

Gabrielle started to speak, but Xena interrupted her. “I’m not leading us anywhere, and Gabrielle isn’t following me.” Her soul mate looked surprised, and a little dismayed at Xena’s words, so she rushed to reassure her. “I told you, the only Greater Good I have is you. Wherever you lead, I will follow. If you support a cause, so will I. If you find yourself in control of a ragtag army… well, then I’ll assist you in any way I can.” She cocked her head. “Hmm… first consort maybe?”

A smile of relief washed across the little Queen’s face, and she threw herself into her lover’s arms.
“I love you Xena! And I would absolutely make you my first consort!”

The Goddess of love crossed her arms. “Like wait, what’s this about an army? I thought you weren’t going along with my brother’s plan.”

Gabrielle gave her a serious look. “I’m not. But it’s… well, it’s complicated. Because of Ares, I found myself in control of a small army. And due to events of the last few weeks, I seem to have taken on the mantle of protector for this part of Greece, and acquired a city.”

Aphrodite’s eyebrow hiked up. “And this is how you two plan a low key retirement?”

Her words were met with confused looks. “A what?”

The Love Goddess waved her hand through the air dismissively. “Like, never mind. You two would never be the sit home in rocking chairs type anyway. So… this city… do you need a temple to the Goddess of Love?”

Xena and Gabrielle laughed, and Gabrielle said “Perhaps.”

There was a sudden blue flash of light, and Ares was standing in the room. “What about me, do you have room for a temple for your dear old dad?”

Faster than even he could react, Xena pinned him to the wall with an eating knife at his throat. “You weren’t invited!”

Ares lifted his hands in pleading. “Hey, whoa! I heard my name so I popped in to say hi.”

Fierce blue eyes glared at the War God. “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t take you apart right now… you almost got her killed with your little stunt!”

“Hey, she was in no danger of getting killed! I had full faith in her skills as a warrior, and a negotiator, unlike you!”

The tall, dark, and angry, woman pressed a little harder. “I don’t think you’re in any position to criticize me, do you?”

Ares swallowed, and gave a slight nod. “Xena, I’m just saying that I wasn’t worried.” He gave her a little smile that was part wistful and part pride. “She’s as good as you, maybe a little better.”

After a few more tense seconds, Xena sighed, then removed the knife and stepped back. “You’re right.”

Watching green eyes widened in shock. “What? No I’m not, what are you talking about Xena? He did almost get me killed!”

The brunette looked down, then sighed and turned toward her soul mate. “Gabrielle… he’s right. You were never in any greater danger than normal. You had more than the skills needed to beat both Bartos and Tiberius.”

Gabrielle looked confused, and in a low voice said, “But you told me you were scared for me.”

The taller woman walked over and placed her hands on Gabrielle’s shoulders. “I did say that, but I was never worried for you, the person you are now. I was worried for who you used to be. With ever new warlord, every new battle, skirmish, and war… you draw further and further away from that fresh faced Potidaean girl, further from the bard and perpetually curious wanderer.” She
cupped the blonde’s cheeks in the palms of her hands. “I didn’t want you to become jaded and angry, especially if I wasn’t able to come back to you. But I never lost faith in your skills, Gabrielle. And I agree with Ares.” She flicked a brief glance at the silent God of War. “Your skills are equal to mine in their own way; there are things you can do now that I’d never dreamed. And you have power… real power.”

Ares broke the silence. “That is what I was trying to say. And my intention was never for either of you to lead an army in my name, despite what you thought Xena. I simply wanted Gabrielle to take full control of her birthright. She has the potential to be one of the greatest warriors of this age, a real hero.” He sneered, “Better than that mule driver, Hercules! I would like to leave a good legacy with this world, before the gods are all gone for good.”

Gabrielle sighed and stepped back from Xena, and the taller woman let her arms drop to her sides. She looked at Xena, Ares and Aphrodite with resolute green eyes. “I can only be what I have been, and what I will become. I will be their Queen and commander; I will be an Amazon, a lover, and even the savior of Greece if they ask. I will live up or down to my own expectations. But know this… I will be good because I choose to be. I will fight for those in need, I will fight for the greater good, but I will not lay down my life or Xena’s life for a past debt. I will not spend the rest of my life, as Xena spent hers, striving to atone for past wrongs. We have cleared our debts.”

Clear blue eyes looked at the little Queen with love and respect. “I now live my life for you, as you did so many years for me.”

“No Xena, we live our lives for each other. And no one…” She looked at the two gods in the hut. “No one will tear us apart again!”

Xena whispered, “No one.”

Then, with a sudden change of mood, Gabrielle grabbed Xena’s hand, and started toward the door of the hut. “Now, if you will excuse us, we need to let everyone know that Xena is back.” She stopped at the door and glanced up at her soul mate. “I hear the Amazons throw a good party.”

Xena smirked. “That sounds scary. You know, we should probably get some of those Amazon weapons you were telling me about… you know, to protect ourselves later…” And laughter floated with them out the door.

Once the door was shut, Ares shook his head in confusion, and disappeared in a blue flash. The Goddess of Love simply gave the room a dimpled smile, and also popped out. But not before leaving a little gift for the two lovers, in a carved box on the bed.

‘Amazon ‘weapons’ indeed.’

Fin.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!