Sleeping With the Enemy
by frogfarm

Summary

Post-"Ten Little Warlords", Xena's still in Callisto's body. What happens next?

Note: Non-con limited to three dream sequences; non-con/underage limited to one flashback/hallucination.

Notes

October 2018: "Remastered", i.e., went through and fixed all the old typos. Strictly misspellings and punctuation, though the occasional missed word may have slipped through. Did not even try to tackle the bloated rambling plot, rampant fanservice, run-on sentences and crudely forced messaging. This story was my training wheels, although it ballooned into a helicarrier and very nearly fell of its own weight. Re-reading it for the umpteenth time lo these many years later, I note that quite often, the best part is what I don't say -- a skill that among others, I did eventually acquire to some degree.

Spoils nearly the entire series, but the following are considered essential background if you want the most bang for your buck:

XWP S1: Dreamworker, Hooves and Harlots, Warrior...Princess, Callisto, Is There A Doctor In The House?
XWP S2: Orphan Of War, Return Of Callisto, Warrior...Princess...Tramp, Intimate Stranger, Ten Little Warlords, A Necessary Evil
XWP S3: The Furies, The Debt, Warrior...Priestess...Tramp, Maternal Instincts, Sacrifice
XWP S4: Adventures In the Sin Trade, Key To the Kingdom, Paradise Found, Between the Lines, The Ides of March
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Share, and enjoy.

"We would like to reassure the reader that the non-sequiturs, the surprising tangents, the unannounced shifts in content, mood or direction which you will discover in this book had a compelling logic of their own in the original context. If these otherwise peculiar sequences of communication were restored to their original context, that logic would quickly emerge. Therefore, the challenge: Is the reader astute enough to reconstruct that context, or shall [s]he simply enjoy the exchange and arrive at a useful unconscious understanding of a more personal nature?"

Bandler and Grinder, *Frogs Into Princes*

"It's still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it's the truth even if it didn't happen."

Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

- Inspired by [To Know Thine Enemy, You Must Become Thine Enemy](https://www.pinkrabbitproductions.com) by Pink Rabbit Productions
For every story there is a beginning: some event or series of events, however inconsequential, from which the rest springs as did Athena from the skull of her immortal father. As all stories are true, so are they all the same: An infinite variety of interwoven threads and subtle facets that may never be fully revealed, and so on back to the first events which spawned myth and legend in those present to witness.

This beginning has its place here, in this vast, near-featureless expanse of land. Shrouded in cold, grey fog; devoid of all but the faintest sounds of any living thing in copse of trees, few and far between for many days amongst ancient forests vast enough to swallow armies. Over gentle, rolling hills as morning sun breaks through hanging clouds, chill mist all around as hill turns to valley, and to rushing river.

Slowly we approach, given silent flight by dream; until the lone figure at the water's edge can be seen clearly...

For Shuang An-Tai, the morning had begun like a growing number before it, the chill that insistently crept into his meager bedclothes awakening him long before a boot connected with his ribs. The usual snarl of greeting was made even uglier by the leader's face, and he had rolled to his feet with a smile, backing away and fervently nodding with the proper and required obsequiousness that ensured his continued survival. Today was a good day; he had received a grunt for his trouble rather than a fist.

The challenges presented by interacting with the hirsute barbarians that had captured him some weeks ago had dwindled to a mere annoyance over time, and on auspicious days, a minor amusement. Nonetheless he concealed his high spirits as he made his way toward the river, collecting empty waterskins from tribesmen who hardly gave him a second glance. He had become a familiar figure among them, a positive sign if he hoped to catch them off guard and make good his escape -- but to what end? He could never hope to return home, and in any direction there was nothing but vast wilderness all around, with barely enough hardy plant life to sustain their horses and the few other animals in this strange land.

He had known it would be difficult at best to live out the rest of his days far from all he knew, and such a momentous decision had not been made lightly. But *don't be a crane in a flock of chickens*, as his father had said: standing out only drew attention to oneself, usually unwanted. His beloved bride had taken her own life rather than allow the Emperor to claim her; his children banished to the deepest pits for daring to protest against this outrage, and still he kept his grief hidden, or so he thought. Little thought he gave to death, knowing his spirit would return as often as necessary before finding release. But the Emperor's lust to conquer was a fire that could not be quenched by one man, or even a thousand. To remain would mean dying like the others, flayed open and screaming as the executioner sought to prolong his agony. An-Tai refused to disgrace their memory, and so he chose the lesser shame, fleeing before the order to apprehend him could be given voice.

Escaping the borders was simpler than anticipated, due to the increasing attentions being directed toward the barbarian lands along the border. It was rumored that the Emperor had been kidnapped as a child by a half-demon, a woman from the south who had taken him to her side, taught him his evil craft; that this had resulted in his dream of the day they would again meet, and he would take her power. An-Tai found it easier than he had dared dream to slip away, under cover of night, in
the least expected direction: North toward the frozen plains, where nomads drank the blood of their horses for warmth and the visions it bestowed. Few would be shrewd enough to guess his intent, fewer still brave enough to follow; a warrior of the shadows would indeed be wasted on a man of his humble stature.

He avoided the packs of horsemen for a time by traveling only at night, a feat in itself given the lack of cover in his barren surroundings. But his luck ran out in barely a handful of days, and he quickly determined that surrender was the only option against a contingent of foul-smelling warriors, all bristling with axe, spear and arrow aimed directly at him. They had beaten him, not too badly, then amused themselves by fighting over his meager possessions until their leader returned to camp and ended their fun by asserting his claim to them, along with An-Tai. Now he nearly thought himself adjusted to serving his new owner, who for all his atrocious table manners and homicidal rages appeared a safer master than the Emperor.

He shook his head, kneeling to resume his labors and hoping they would not come looking for him. It was doubtful that lingering to enjoy the sun rising over the pale, shallow hills would be an acceptable excuse, and it could not compare to the memories of his homeland. But it was a breathtaking sight, even if its alien beauty made him yearn all the more for what he had lost: the colorful glint of frost on the earth, reflecting in icy water rushing over the stones.

The air was so cold it hurt deep in his chest, and he pulled the undignified fur cap tight around his ears with a shiver as he threw the sloshing bags over his shoulders. Perhaps if they were sufficiently distracted this evening he might find a private moment to exercise his increasingly aching body. A proper workout would be a rare opportunity; spending half a moon in shackles would be no problem, but the close watch they kept was enough deterrent after the vicious beating that followed his first attempts. To walk about was enough for now, but he yearned for the freedom to really stretch properly, to cleanse and join body and spirit no matter what the cost in painful memories.

At first the distant rumble was so faint he thought he imagined it, but his senses told him otherwise. His steps quickened as he approached the ragged line of tents, the sudden reactions of those around evoking a surge of hope and terror from within; the sound had already grown to the thunder of hooves, a gust of wind nipping at his skin and carrying with it the growing cries now being echoed by his captors. They were grabbing up their weapons with yells of exultant anticipation, the fire of war in their eyes. An-Tai never allowed his pace to slacken as he altered course, heading toward the rim of the valley as the screaming mob boiled around him.

A shout of discovery behind lent fresh wings to his feet, eyes fixed on his goal as he sprinted forward. Two men came from either side and he hurled himself into the air, avoiding the blades by the narrowest margin, rolling over his startled attackers and planting his feet in their backs, sending them flying and propelling him at still greater speed. Another ran toward him, swinging a spiked club whose end was larger than An-Tai's head; ducking under the blow with a sweeping kick, bringing his already off-balance opponent crashing to the ground with his own club embedded in his face.

Scattered shouts greeted him as he rose, barely ducking another sword, and a part of his soul cringed at the familiar lust coursing through his veins. The cold penetrating his bones forgotten, desperation lending additional speed as he fought to stay alive and reach safety; rolling aside when possible, striking only when unavoidable. The sounds rising around of men and horses coming together and dying, joined by the sight of his new master going through a dozen men with his bare hands, battling with a dragon's fury before being cut nearly in half by a mounted swordsman, ruined mouth uttering terrible screams. The rider had no time to take pleasure in his triumph as his slain rival managed a final stroke as he fell, body and blade caught in the maw of furiously
pumping legs. Animal screams joined human as the rider was thrown from his seat, twisting in the
air to avoid a sword as he impaled its wielder with his own.

The victor turned with a snarl, and An-Tai froze at the sight of blazing eyes behind the grotesque
mask of wood and metal, pinning him to the spot. Dimly, he realized that their attackers had swept
down upon them from two points; the river to one side so fast and deep to be certain death for any
who entered.

He backed away with open hands, nervously nodding and smiling; his heart sinking, as the man
rushed at him with a roar.

Avoiding the stroke by a perilously small margin, he launched himself upward, landing three solid
kicks to his attacker's belly, chest and head; quickly glancing about to find death on all sides, the
snow stained with crimson flowers. He turned as he fell back to earth, shouting reflexively in his
own language, fervently shaking his head and hands. The other had already shrugged off the blows
--

His mind went blank as calm descended, slowing the battle to a crawl, back foot planted firm. The
opponent outweighed him by nearly double, made it easy to slide and turn to avoid, two-hand
downstroke cleaving air; the blade sank into the earth as the barbarian went over his other leg with
a roar, upper body meeting him from behind and sending the bellowing man in an arc that ended
flat on the ground, in a rictus of pain. Before the thought had fully expressed itself An-Tai fluidly
bent down, pulled the sword out and spun, once, hurling it.

The blade sprouted from the man's unprotected neck as if by magic, pinning him to the ground in a
fountain of blood. His legs twitched once, twice, and then lay still.

An-Tai slowly relaxed his trembling post as he took in the gruesome scene. The shock of what he
had done was flooding his being, old regret and recrimination nearly overpowering his instinct for
survival; the hot blood scent that filled the air running its fingers through him, chuckling its
seductive song of darkness. It was too much, he thought as he sank to the ground, enough to make
him weep for the dead: For the family he had lost; the father he had never truly forgiven.

And it was while kneeling there that he thought he heard the faint cry: A young girl, in pain, and
afraid.

He grieved only a moment before rising from stiffened knees, the arctic wind whipping mercilessly
through his loose clothing. Whoever it was sounded much like his younger sister, and he could
never refuse her.

The voice had fallen silent, but his senses led him unerringly toward its last known direction. He
stumbled drunken or dream-addled through puddles of blood, around the fallen bodies of man and
beast, doing his best not to look. One of the horses was struggling to rise on a pair of shattered
forelimbs, terrible sounds issuing from its throat; An-Tai knelt to stroke its muzzle with a calming
hand, the other finding a pressure point, and the beast's head sank into his lap with a look of
profound relief.

He set the burden gently aside and rose once more, breathing heavily until the dizziness passed and
straining to catch even the slightest sound. Surveying the carnage-strewn landscape, he found
another horse moving, much more weakly than the first, and made his way over to ascertain the
extent of its injuries. Like the rest, it was protected from the elements by a thick coat, and wore a
number of additional layers added by its owner, taken from a variety of other animals.

He found the seam and peeled back blood-soaked fur, bracing himself for whatever horrible
wound might lie beneath. As he did so he realized the beast was already dead, and carrying some
great burden which was itself the motion...

The final layer fell away, and he was no longer alone.
Standing On a Beach

Chapter Summary

The real ending to "Ten Little Warlords". Taking stock of a sticky situation, setting forth on our journey.

["Alternative fan fiction"] cliches...include bathtub scenes, cave sex, 'first time' occurring after a trauma, perpetual virginity on Gabrielle's part, and yenta-ing by friends who know they belong together even before they do.

Xena Altfic Cheese Machine

http://www.dyxploitation.nu/back-issue/xcheese.html

For those who like that sort of thing, this is the sort of thing they'll like.

Abraham Lincoln (sometimes attributed to Samuel Goldwyn)

"You can't be serious!"

Joxer swallowed, feet shifting nervously in the sand as he tried to keep it from filling his boots. He was trying to be thankful, and doing a worse job than usual, that Gabrielle's anger was not directed at him. Naturally she was stunning as ever, even in rage; one hand on her hip, the other clutching her Amazon war staff, looking as though she wanted nothing more than to put it down her adversary's gullet.

"Look, my little blonde bard." Ares' sigh lacked his usual contempt, and the habitual smirk was likewise conspicuously absent. While his body bore no sign of his recent mortal mishaps -- wounds healed, muscled arms folded across an equally impressive chest, fairly rippling with power in the afternoon sun -- Joxer thought the smug fire in the war god's eyes somewhat diminished. Of course, he had no desire to get close enough to confirm this.

"How many times does it take to get it through your head? Gods don't lie. Mislead, withhold, even twist. But lie?" The tortured wince spoke of punishments beyond mortal comprehension. "It's the one rule Zeus has I don't break. Believe it or not, I don't care. I'm done with this argument." The glint in Ares' eyes warned that his mortal enemy had better be done, as well.

"Believe him."

Gabrielle swallowed involuntarily at the steel wrapped inside the softness as the speaker stepped forward, brown eyes full of quiet certainty. That calm gaze never left Ares, but the words came to the bard's ears as though they were meant for her alone.

"If Ares says my body's gone, it's true. After all, he promised he'd restore it. And since we all know gods can't lie --" A sarcastic chuckle. "Must be awfully frustrating, knowing there's something you can't do."
The war god's snort lacked conviction. "All right. I couldn't keep my promise, and I owe you, so we leave it at that and get on with our lives. Right?" He sounded almost petulant, eager to be done and away.

Gabrielle's knuckles were white from clutching her staff. "What about Callisto?"

Ares blinked, somehow managing to appear innocent. "What about her? I figured you'd be having the victory dance right about now." His eyes widened, mouth making a graceful O of sarcastic surprise as he covered it with one dainty, massive hand. "Oops -- forgot. You don't celebrate death, do you? Even your worst enemy..."

"It won't work, Ares," the bard snapped. "You're not going to make me lose control any more than I already have. Now where in Tartarus is she? If she could be in Xena, she could be in anyone!"

"Funny you should mention Tartarus," Ares muttered. "Speak Greek, damn you!"

"Hey, all I meant was she's not there --"

"What?" Joxer almost clapped his hand over his own mouth when the others turned to look at him, but the sheer outrage of the idea precluded any regard for safety or silence. "She's sure not in Elysia! If someone like her doesn't end up in Tartarus --" He broke off in horror at the notion before visibly brightening. "On the other hand, that lets me off the hook..."

"He's right, you know," Xena interjected nonchalantly. "As I recall, there aren't a lot of places that take in dead souls. The Olympians must be losing their touch if they can't keep track of one puny mortal, huh?"

"I didn't say --" Ares coughed, and suddenly looked even more uncomfortable. "I never said that."

"So." The bard's careful enunciation took on a distinctly threatening edge. "Do you, or any of your relatives, know where Callisto is?"

"I wish I did," came the bitter reply. "My brother's practically having a nervous breakdown. It's not a pretty sight."

Joxer shivered at the thought of any soul, let alone Callisto's, escaping the jurisdiction of Hades. Xena gazed at the God of War as if she had all the time in the world, while Gabrielle appeared somewhat abashed. Finally Ares broke the silence.

"Now if you'll excuse me, ladies..." A touch of the old war god returned, as he regarded Joxer with a contemptuous sneer. "I've got a lot of unfinished business that piled up while I was away. But you know, Xena --" He turned to her with a look of regret. "There will always be a place for you at my side."

Callisto -- Xena, the bard distractedly reminded herself -- narrowed her eyes.

"Sharing a throne with you? In your dreams. You'd be too afraid I'd claim it for my own." The warrior's voice sharpened. "And you'd be right."

Her only reply was an icy glare as Ares dissolved into nothingness, dispensing with the usual theatrics. Joxer exhaled shakily and fought to remain standing on unsteady legs, sending prayers to whatever gods might listen that his miserable existence had been once again spared.
"So that's it?" Gabrielle was surprised at how normal her voice sounded, but those dark brown eyes immediately latched onto her. She cursed inwardly; she never could hide anything from Xena. *At least that proves it's her...well, sort of.*

Xena's fingers ran distractedly through her hair. "You handled that pretty well."

The bard blinked. "I did?"

"Even if you weren't keeping the best control over your emotions...but he's good at provoking people. I'd say you've learned the first lesson of dealing with gods."

"What's that?" Gabrielle wondered where this praise was going.

"Knowing the right questions to ask." Xena's gaze fell, focusing on her boots. "Gabrielle, are you sure --"

A weak smile crossed the bard's face. "Xena, I told you I would be here for you if Ares didn't keep his word. I can't let a little thing like..." She waved vaguely in the warrior's direction. "That...stop me." She looked directly at her friend, a momentary tremor entering her voice. "Even if it does scare me. A lot."

Joxer tried to ignore the growing lump in his own throat. He had to admit, he felt the same way every time he looked at those exquisite features and waves of blonde hair: No matter how sweeping a transformation of movement, mannerism and memory she had undergone, when you saw Callisto of Cirra, if you valued it all, you ran for your life. He and Gabrielle had been caught up in raw emotion, uncontrolled in Ares' absence, moving on instinct alone; and Xena had proven herself repeatedly throughout the crisis. But in the calm light of day...

The diminutive form was still watching Gabrielle, and the bard spoke again.

"It's pretty obvious. I mean, how can I hide it -- every time I see you I want to cry. Or scream, or run, or..."

"Kill me?" Xena's tone was casual, but the brown eyes held a desperate plea. *I'm sorry? Don't leave me?*

Joxer shifted his feet again, unable to stand the tension, as a cramp come from out of nowhere to seize his calf in an iron grip. He stiffened, biting back the gasp of pain; his arms windmilled frantically, and fell flat on his back. *Then again,* he thought glumly, spitting out sand, *maybe I'll just lie here the rest of my life...*

"Come on, Joxer." Callisto's voice was gentle, with just a touch of dry wit. "Every soldier I ever trained got cramps. It's not that bad."

Gabrielle blinked back tears as she watched him sit up with a clank and a wince, rubbing the afflicted muscle. *But it's not about him, is it? How could you doubt that's her? She's always there to help...fools, peasants, children...* She swallowed hard. *...Foolish peasant children.*

"Xena, I'm with you for better or worse." She couldn't help attempting a joke. "Just tell me we don't have to call you the Warrior Queen now." Xena offered an almost shy smile, and Joxer relaxed visibly as his two companions sat on either side of him, watching waves lap gently at the shore.

Despite the easing tension, Xena's strategic instincts couldn't help ruminating on the bigger issues. What if Ares was wrong? For that matter, what if he was lying?
Everybody lies, she thought grimly. If Callisto's soul was still wandering about, the woman would certainly come after her again, if given the opportunity. It wasn't as though she had nothing else to worry about.

Gabrielle's voice interrupted her thoughts. "So what do we tell the rest of the world?"

"Let's try an easier one first," Xena interjected. "Where are we going?"

Her companions' brows furrowed, and she continued smoothly. "I say we head north up the coast, back to Treus. It's a short route -- four days by land or sea. There are closer possibilities, but --"

"Meg and Diana," Gabrielle nodded. She brightened in anticipation, trying to follow the warrior's train of thought. "Are you going to ask them to stand in for you?"

"Maybe," Xena allowed. "But also -- they're good people we can trust, and that's important. It's a small kingdom, but not too small for visitors to stand out...give us a chance to lay low until we rest up and make plans. No sense running off half-cocked." Joxer snickered at the tilt of her eyebrow before glancing guiltily in Gabrielle's direction.

"I know you'd enjoy Meg's cooking again --" Gabrielle rolled her eyes, resulting in a glare from Joxer as Xena continued smoothly. "And I wouldn't mind it myself. I never gave fiery food a chance when I was in Q'in."

"Chin..." Gabrielle echoed. The clipped sound conjured a rush of exotic images. "I haven't heard you mention it."

"That's one to wait a few years on." Xena's placid but implacable gaze left no doubt in anyone's mind that the matter was closed, and the bard settled for filing the name away for future reference.

"Okay, Treus sounds good. So now we're back to the original problem." She rose and began pacing again. Xena remained seated, hoping her superior position and freedom of movement would help Gabrielle to feel less pressured.

"As far as I'm concerned, the smartest thing is to convince the world that I'm -- that Xena is dead."

She held up one hand to forestall protest, though none seemed forthcoming. "I know it's a big lie, but Callisto has fewer enemies --" The warrior's lips quirked in amusement. "The world's lips quirked in amusement. "Live ones, anyway."

"Unless they were trying to avenge your death," Joxer nervously interjected. "Uh, Xena. I mean, Xena's death. Geez...

"Callisto never worried about improving her image, and she hasn't had the benefit of good public relations." A wry smile. "Which reminds me, next time you see Salmoneous, don't get him started again about being my agent. Trust me, you'd be bored to tears, and you're already doing..." Her voice softened. "The pay's not that great. You could use a little recognition."

Gabrielle's thoughts were drawn to the growing collection of half-finished scrolls in her saddlebag. She'd originally hoped to have something new done before the weather got too much colder, but the words had dried up again after a brief period of inspiration. The great muses said you needed conflict to build character; if anything, they were blessed with it to overabundance.

"We can try to convince the world that Callisto didn't kill me, but I don't think we have much of a chance. Maybe we could spin it so Callisto's seen the light because of my death. Trying to redeem herself..." The warrior's features momentarily twisted in disgust. "I always told you legends were bigger than life, Gabrielle. Now you get to see how they're made. Manipulation, deceit, and a big load of...manure."
Gabrielle chuckled despite the cynical tone, but Joxer's worried look spoke volumes. A pity, the bard thought wearily, that he couldn't leave it at that.

"Um...guys? Wouldn't that just make things worse? Okay, your reputation was starting to improve, but Callisto's still pretty much, well...hated and feared throughout the land?"

"On the other hand, this could be a great opportunity." Gabrielle's gaze grew thoughtful. "Think of it. The Warrior Princess sacrifices her life to save her worst enemy, even as she tries to slay her...who is then so moved, she vows to spend the rest of her life, atoning for her sins."

"Your dramatic instincts are showing," the warrior teased. "And you've got to get those she's sorted out. I don't know if that sentence made sense."

"Oh, you know us bards -- always looking for the dramatic angle." Gabrielle smiled. "Plus we polish it up for the crowds."

Joxer appeared unconvinced. "I still think the truth would hurt less. Think about your family," he urged, clambering noisily to his feet. "It's not gonna take long for those rumors to get back to Potadeia. You want them thinking Gabrielle's left her best friend to travel with the woman who killed her? Not to mention her husband!" She looked away and he turned to Xena, still sitting on the ground. "You want them to think you're dead, and she's with --"

"That's enough!" Gabrielle was shocked at her volume, but the speed at which the man's jaw snapped shut was gratifying. She wrestled to regain her composure before continuing in a more reasonable tone.

"I always said I could forgive Callisto...I couldn't imagine trying not to. No matter how much I might hate her. I mean -- it's no big deal to forgive someone you love. Right?" She tried to inject a note of optimism. "Maybe this is my chance."

"Be careful, Gabrielle." The warrior's voice held a subtle tinge of warning. "We've got to be able to keep our stories straight, especially in public. It could mean life or death." She grimaced, as if at some sour taste. "And you can remind me, if I start to forget...who I am."

The young bard shook her head, looking at the ground, the sky; anywhere except at her friend. "Well, it won't be easy. It's bad enough traveling with an ex-warrior princess. The first person that lays a hand on you, I swear I'll --" Her hands gripped her staff tighter.

"Gabrielle."

Joxer held his breath as their eyes met.

"Yes?"

"Did you sleep on a rock again?"

The tension dissolved, as an involuntary snort escaped the bard.

"Maybe." Gabrielle rubbed her temples. "Don't worry, Xena. Ares is back on the job, right? No more kicking warlord butt for me, no sir."

"You almost sound disappointed." The smile still didn't look quite right, but Gabrielle decided that Callisto's usual smile was normally one of savage glee. An honest one probably stretched a different set of muscles.
"Well, I am!" Both women turned to Joxer as if discovering his presence for the first time, as the words seemed to spill out of him. "It's all right for you. You don't need the god of war to take a vacation if you want to fight." The slump of his shoulders made his knuckles practically scrape the ground and he went on in a rush, not looking at them. "Even when Ares was mortal and everyone else was fighting, I was still just a..." He swallowed, hanging his head. "Just a big, useless idiot."

Gabrielle's heart went out despite her instinctive irritation at the depths of his self-pity. What if I was really a terrible bard, and everyone was just too polite to tell me?

"I don't want to hear that." Xena's casual tone caught him off balance and he looked up, blinking furiously. "I said you had the heart of a warrior, and I meant it. You calling me a liar?" The hint of a smile tugged at her lips as he shook his head in nervous denial.

"Good." She nodded with some satisfaction as his jaw snapped shut, continuing before he could interject. "And I think we've all forgotten that my mother actually knows the truth." She turned to Gabrielle as comprehension dawned on the bard's face. "Your parents might trust her. If you think it's worth trying, we could arrange for her to get a message to them."

The bard nodded, grinning hugely. "You know you're right? I can't believe we forgot that! Must have been all that excitement when I turned into a fierce warrior, huh?"

Joxer smiled weakly. "I thought you, uh, made a...uh...made a pretty good warrior, actually."

"Yeah?" Gabrielle turned her smile upon him, taking away what little breath Joxer had regained since the cramp had worn off. "Thanks. I guess that means a lot, coming from you."

A warm flush spread across his face, but Joxer was quickly distracted by Xena rolling her head about on her neck. Gabrielle watched with concern as a wince flickered across the blonde's features.

"You okay?" She regretted it almost as soon as she'd uttered the words, but her friend only shook her head.

"Just an achy head. Probably slept on a rock myself."

"You've been getting them a lot lately," the bard casually noted; but Xena merely shook her head again.

"I'll be fine once we get moving. You know I'm never comfortable sitting still for too long."

Gabrielle nodded understandingly. "I'm just sorry we couldn't have spent more time with your mother. It must have been a real shock to be captured by her own daughter and then rescued by a complete stranger."

Xena's pale features blanched further. "Argo!" Distress turned to annoyance and she suppressed the urge to stamp her foot, settling for a verbal outburst. "Dammit, I forgot about Argo! I have to go back for her --" The image of her steed trying to fit into the small boat with them was too much, and Xena broke into a fit of giggling, that only subsided when she saw the somewhat horrified expressions on her companions' faces.

"Oh, boy." Joxer's brief chuckle was so unlike his usual high-pitched laughter that Gabrielle's astonishment shifted from Xena to him. He swallowed nervously under her scrutiny. "This is gonna be interesting."

A smile tugged Xena's mouth. "They've got a saying about that in Chin, too." She stood and
stretched lazily in the sun, cracking something inside her neck. This time it was Gabrielle who winced, while Joxer's eyes lit up with childish curiosity.

"No big deal," the warrior shrugged. "There's another boat on the far beach with a hole that's not too big. Shouldn't take long to patch, and if I have to I can swim for it. You head north up the coast, and I'll catch up after I get Argo. I know how easy you get seasick, but you'll be close to shore and it should be easier than trying to ride with me at that speed." She turned a serious gaze on Joxer. "Can I count on you to follow her orders?"

His face crumbled before assuming a posture of righteous indignation. "Hey, I'm no landlubber! Joxer the Mighty is no stranger to the sea!"

"At least he's not whining," Gabrielle thought; his outlandish ego might get him in trouble, but sometimes it was all that kept her from throttling him. Xena just looked back at him, and Gabrielle realized she wasn't even employing the usual cold stare that brooked no argument. Joxer's glare softened and he suddenly found the sand to be of great interest, his feet moving nervously around as it gained entrance through the many holes in his armor. Finally he sighed in resignation, squarely meeting her gaze.

"Okay, Xena. You have my word."

Gabrielle let out a silent breath, suddenly aware that she had been casually handed a clear position of authority; basking in the warm glow, despite the gnawing worry that such preening was more worthy of Joxer the Mighty. After all, Xena doesn't go around boasting about her great deeds. No, I'm the one who tries to make her into the savior of the known world... And why not? A brief flicker of annoyance. Her years as a warlord blackened her name almost as much as her soul! People need to know she's not like that anymore! Despairing realization came, with more than a touch of bitterness. They say people are only really appreciated after they're dead...half of Greece will probably go into mourning for her, the hypocrites.

"All set?"

Gabrielle realized she was nearly grinding her teeth, quickly offering a reassuring smile as she straightened her shoulders. "Aye aye, cap'n!"

Xena chuckled. "You're the captain now, princess." A quirk of the mouth as the bard's eyes widened. "That's right. Don't forget, you're an Amazon princess. And don't go getting into trouble."

The warrior's smile was somewhat sour. "Last thing I need is that pack of harpies after me. Particularly in my condition."

Joxer tried not to pass out as all the blood rushed to his face, pride and shame making it impossible for him to speak. Finally he offered a weak grin.

"This is really neat. I'm taller than you now!"
Xena rolled her eyes. "You were taller than me even in my old body. Quit hunching your shoulders."

Gabrielle giggled despite herself. *Great. Next thing you know, we'll all be sitting around chanting and weaving baskets!*

A spark of anger flared within her. Something good had to come out of this; the extent of her own hero worship was suddenly alarming, even ridiculous. Despite her menacing and cruel history, the woman who now stood before her was far less physically imposing than the tall, dark figure she had walked beside for nearly a year and a half. Though well-muscled, if a bit underfed, she seemed the size of a mouse compared to the bard's memories of her best friend; her face painfully thin, her voice and demeanor disturbingly innocent.

*She used to be larger than life,* Gabrielle thought miserably. *In my mind, anyway. She looked as though she could move mountains...now, people would probably bet on me if they saw us fighting!*

"Well, let's get a move on." She spoke before anyone else could, forcing good cheer. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we can eat real food again."

"I'd rather eat your cooking than mine." Xena smiled shyly. Before the bard quite knew what was happening the warrior had walked over to her, wrapping her in a brief, fierce hug. Too surprised to do anything but respond, the strangely familiar scent flooded her senses, as overwhelming as the emotional display; part of her idly noting they were also, now, almost identical in height. *I could probably pick her up myself now,* she thought, and Gabrielle found herself almost disappointed when the other woman left her embrace before she could attempt the deed.

"I'll see you both soon." An edge came into Xena's voice, the ring of steel on stone. "Count on it."

"I know we will." Gabrielle was unable to hide the slight tremor in her own voice, and Joxer stood a little straighter, the sand threatening to completely submerge his toes.

Xena suddenly grinned. "And I'll bet I beat you both there, even cross country!" She whirled and ran, the beach resounding with her war cry, and they watched her rapidly dwindle in size until she crested the hill; briefly turning with a wave before vanishing over the ridge.

Both of them made their way to the boat in silence, Joxer boarding first with his back to the fore. A single shove set the small craft free and Gabrielle jumped in, setting her staff down within easy reach. She looked about, and Joxer wondered if she was having trouble finding the oars. He held up his own to jog her memory but she continued to search, finally sighing in exasperation.

"Can I help you find something?" Joxer ventured. She seemed about to snap at him, running a hand through her hair as she slumped dejectedly on the seat.

"I'm so used to carrying my staff, I didn't even think to get my bag from Xena's saddle. It's got all my scrolls and quills. Now I have to remember everything until I can write it down again." She frowned. ",Not that I've been doing much writing lately."

Joxer appeared about to speak, and she relieved him of the opportunity by lifting her own oars. "Cast off, Lieutenant Joxer."

He blinked. "Lieutenant?"

She smiled despite the growing ache in her head. "If you're going to serve on a ship, you have to have a title."
He blushed again, reaching for the oars.

A light breeze ruffled Gabrielle's hair as the little boat slipped out into the bay, cooling her skin but doing nothing to soothe the gnawing thoughts in her head. Across from her Joxer's oars dug smoothly into the water, matching her rhythm as her thoughts raced onward. She remembered him saying that he had always loved to fish, that it was one of the few things he showed any skill at as a child.

She moved her arms steadily, doing her best to enjoy the wind on her face, the light on the water. It was important to stay calm; maintain control over her emotions. To help people see reason.

After all, someone had to keep their wits about them.
Two strangers meet by complete and utter coincidence. A brief visit with bad guys.

To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved.

George MacDonald

Pungenday

"Fishcakes, lovely fishcakes --"

"Pay her no mind, lass! Who'd buy fish with the ocean two days away? Now I've got --"

"'Ere, you! Keep yer grubby hands off me customer!"

"Potential customer, wench!"

"Who ya callin' wench, you old weasel? Why, I've a mind ta --"

The young brown-haired girl quietly slipped away, while her assailants continued their argument. A lifetime of good manners would normally have made her politely decline, but her short time wandering the streets of this vast city-state had trained her well in the art of staring straight ahead like a blindered horse. Now at least she stood out less, but still found herself continually under assault by the eager shouting unendingly urging her to spend her dinars on their wares.

Even the buildings themselves seemed to rise all around her in a threatening fashion. Despite their mostly slapdash construction, they were still awfully impressive to a girl who had never seen a structure with more than two floors. A few appeared more permanent in nature, but so far she lacked sufficient courage or desperation to venture inside. Small wonder the merchant who'd brought her the past few leagues hadn't wanted to enter the city; if she'd known what she was in for, she might have decided the woods were a safer haven. She still felt a pang of guilt over deceiving the kindly old fellow, but only the most heartless soul would have refused to take pity on a traveling widow with winter fast approaching.

Especially one with child, she thought, blinking back bitter tears And it wasn't too far from the truth, though she wasn't pregnant as far as she knew, and gods be thanked at least for that!

She quickly wiped her face, glancing around nervously as she made her way to a nearby bench to rest her aching feet. Public display of weakness might attract the sort of robbers that sought to take her dinars the old-fashioned way, and who might actually be happier when they discovered her empty pockets.

Across the narrow dirt road, a dark-skinned vendor with an elaborate wrapping of cloth piled high atop his head was shouting good-natured imprecations at the crowd from behind a wheeled cart as he dished out oily, puffy pieces of round bread stuffed with roasted meat and vegetables. The girl's stomach rumbled in protest, and she looked away; the apple, offered unasked by the traveling
merchant, was tucked away in an inner pocket of her dress. Still, she was determined to save it as long as possible.

A dirty, short-haired boy of maybe fifteen years sauntered over to the cart, digging deep in the folds of his ragged clothing, and she sighed. **Even the beggars have more money than me!** The vendor never ceased shouting and frying, wearing a resigned look, and she was about to give in and devour the unfortunate apple when a furtive motion caught her eye.

As she watched in fascination a small girl, perhaps a year or two younger than the boy, crept stealthily up behind the cart and knelt down, reappearing scant seconds later. The boy was vigorously protesting the vendor's growing impatience, the excavation of his pockets becoming more frantic as he strove to locate a coin. The girl began to cautiously back away from the cart, making a quick gesture somewhere up and behind the bench. Her attention was focused so solidly that she didn't see the approaching guard until she'd run into him, whirling about with stark fear on her mud-smeared face.

As the guard grabbed his prey the vendor abruptly dropped the knife and began to hop about on one foot, shaking the other in a frenzied fit, uttering piercing screams. A few onlookers began to gather but most kept rushing by, quickening their pace as if anxious to avoid trouble. The boy was frozen with one arm buried in the vendor's cart to his wrist, wearing a look of supreme indecision as his accomplice struggled in the guard's grasp.

"Thought you'd outrun me, huh?" The girl kicked and punched ineffectually at her captor's belly as he held her dangling at arm's length. "You just wait'll you see what his majesty has in store f--"

A loud whir resounded, followed by a series of muffled impacts. The young woman sitting on the bench let out a piercing scream, head jerking around with a look of supreme terror.

By itself her outburst might not have caused alarm, but the vendor's food cart springing into motion like a kicked mule brought immediate results. Panic filled the air as everyone in its path dove to one side or another, and she abruptly stopped screaming, remembering where she was. The boy's arm was still embedded in the cart, and as he tried in vain to extricate himself his body slammed into the side of a nearby building, falling away from the cart as it sped away.

A pair of small horses could now be seen running down the road at full gallop, the laughing teenagers who piloted them garnering yells of infamous recognition. Another pair of youngsters with bows strapped to their backs dropped out of an upper window to land on the cart as it sped by, waving at the outraged citizens. As the sound of hooves faded into the distance, the vendor staggered over to the fountain and immersed his injured foot in the icy water, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Somebody grab that boy!" the guard barked, twisting the girl's arms behind her back and grabbing her wrists in one hand. When no one obliged, he stamped over and hauled the unresisting boy off of the ground.

"Little pile of dung," he snarled, shaking hard enough to rattle teeth. "Looks like yer pals left you 'n yer sister in the ditch! Where's yer smart mouth now?"

"You better let me go before Princess Diana shows up!" The boy's defiance was somewhat ruined by his attempts to protect his arm from further damage. "I was there when she told you 'n your gang to get out 'n stay out!"

The guard's boisterous laugh was almost lost in the resuming noise and bustle of the crowd. "Can't hide behind her skirts f'rever, boy. And it don't look ta me like anyone else gonna be cryin' in their
sleep over ya. Whatsa matter? Ya rob too many already?" He smirked as the boy's face fell. "But don't you worry 'bout that nasty dungeon, now. It's straight to the mines for you!"

Before either child could cry out, the guard felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Oi! What now --" He broke off, taken aback at the sight of the shy peasant beauty standing before him.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid this is all a terrible misunderstanding. You see, that's my brother."
The young woman crossed her fingers under her voluminous skirt, respectfully lowering her eyes.

The guard's own gaze narrowed, suspicions rekindled. "He ain't your brother. He's 'ers." He held up the girl, who had left off squirming to stare up at their would-be rescuer. "And there ain't no misunderstandin'. He's an accomplice to this here crime and wanted for a dozen more by King Mineus."

"No king of mine!" spat the boy. "Said I was his slave. 'S why I came here. And I ain't goin' back!"

"And this isn't Liberium!" someone shouted. A nervous titter ran through the small crowd that was still present, but no one else stepped forward.

"I'm sure we can clear this all up," the young woman interjected with growing desperation. "If you'll just let me take him home, I swear to you this will never happen again --"

"I'm here on official business," the guard emphasized, ignoring the few remaining onlookers. "This kid ain't goin' nowhere 'cept where he belongs, and it ain't with you. So take your pretty little self on home, 'fore I decide ta haul you in --"

He broke off in a howl, throwing the children away, grabbing at his leg, and a loud sizzle and the stench of burnt leather filled the air. The young woman staggered back under the sudden weight of the boy, his sister tumbling away to the right.

As she landed painfully on her backside she glimpsed an older boy with long, blonde hair and wearing a brown leather tunic and breeches as he rose up from the ground with a smoking pair of tongs in his hand. The guard screeched and bellowed as his leg threatened to come off at the hip in its convulsions, hands batting ineffectually at his ankle.

A larger man wearing a thick black apron ran forth from the shop behind them, skidding to a halt as he took in the chaotic tableau; swinging a trembling finger at the long-haired boy as he snatched away the tongs. "You clear out now, understand? I won't have any troublemakers working here!" He glanced fearfully at the still-hopping guard, and retreated back into his shop. "And don't come back!" he shouted, slamming the door.

The children stared at the guard, apparently torn as to whether to run as his eyes fell on their rescuer, and despite the obvious pain the man was in he lunged forward with outstretched hands. The younger boy was suddenly beneath his feet, taking a painful blow to the ribs from a rapidly moving boot but sending the guard stumbling forward into the second boy. The guard howled in outrage, wrapping both arms around the interloper and lifting him clear of the ground, squeezing the breath from his lungs.

The young woman ran forward and kicked the guard as hard as she could in the leg; swinging both fists into his ears as he turned his furious gaze upon her, his thin leather helmet providing little protection. He shook his head wildly, but before he could regain his senses her hand had shot out and latched onto his face. He uttered a scream so loud and painful it galvanized passersby into
walking even faster, and which only increased in volume and intensity as she bore down harder, driving her fingernails deep into her victim's nose.

"GO!" she shouted, waving at the others. The guard's arm lashed out, catching her in the belly. The older boy ran forward to grab at her hand, pulling her out of reach; the young girl darting up to throw a handful of dirt in their attacker's face, resulting in further incoherent bellows.

"Come on!" the older boy shouted in desperation. The other children looked back and forth between her and the guard, the boy still holding his arm at an unnatural angle, and finally broke away, running in opposite directions. Behind them the guard was holding his nose with both hands, limping toward the fountain, falling in with a gurgling moan.

She turned and ran, picking up her skirts and cursing their length for what seemed the thousandth time; barely holding onto the smaller hand in her own as she concentrated alternately on avoiding obstacles and drawing breath.

"I think we should go that way --"

She stumbled, the boy nearly running into her as she whirled to face him with a panicked expression. "What do you mean?"

"Know someone -- that way," he panted, gesturing frantically. "Border's under guard --"

"I don't need your help," she snapped breathlessly, realizing she towered almost a foot over him. "I was doing just fine until you butted in!"

"You think so?" He glared balefully at her, pulling even harder. "I guess he didn't want to listen. Why didn't you hit him sooner?"

She yanked her arm free, returning his glare with equal ferocity. "I'll hit you in a minute, if you don't let go. And I'll bet I'm at least ten years older than you!"

"I say five," he countered, nervously looking about. "Now can we please go somewhere else? Somewhere safe?"

She grudgingly allowed him to lead the way, feigning only moderate reluctance as they plunged through the thickening crowds. They were heading out of the main concourse and into a more sparsely populated area which more closely resembled her old village, the buildings a mixture of rude huts and hastily erected tents that stretched out a good distance in front of them before a steep incline which rose up the hill to an ancient, enormous castle. Even in its current somewhat dilapidated state it was an impressive structure in its own right, and the small-town girl felt very humbled indeed.

"Hey."

She glanced back and saw amazingly blue eyes peering shyly from behind the hair that spilled over the boy's headband.

"Sorry I yelled. I've...only been here a couple of days. I guess I forgot what it was like."

"Really?" Her suspicions flared anew. "How do you know your way around so well?"

He shrugged offhandedly. "I've been in cities before. Just never one this big. Doesn't take long to figure out where everything is, but until you do --" She was still gazing at him with some trepidation, and he moved to further reassure her. "Trust me. In a week, you'll know this place
better than I do."

"I don't know if I'll be staying," she mumbled. "I don't have any money..."

"Neither do I." He slapped at the ground in disgust. "I only applied for the job because I've been shoeing for a year, and I thought experience would count for something." A bitter chuckle at his foolishness. "I didn't even take any food, I was in such a hurry to leave home..."

Her interest rose a little; shoeing and blacksmithing she could understand. "Why did you leave?"

He offered an unreadable, sidelong glance. "There are some people I need to find. You know...make sure they're okay."

She sensed this was a tender topic, and sought to turn the conversation back to more familiar areas.

"What kind of horses did you work with? I've never even ridden one, but I used to love feeding our neighbor's stallion. He was so pretty..."

His gaze lowered. "Centaurs."

"Centaurs?" She kept her eyes from getting too big, but her voice still came out as a hushed whisper. "You...shoe them?"

"Someone's got to do it," he shrugged. "I grew up with them. I thought I'd always be there." He frowned, wiping his hands on his pants and ignoring the reaction he knew would come. It was always the same, he thought wearily; they were only friendly until they found out you were a centaur-lover.

"That's amazing," she breathed, and he turned to look at her again. The tone in her voice sounded far from disgust. "You don't look like a centaur!"

He laughed aloud, the unexpected awe bringing a pang of joy through him as he drank in the sight. Girls were so much fun to look at, he thought, especially when they were happy.

"I don't feel like one." He sobered as he remembered. "My father died before I was born, and my mother...they said she died, giving birth to me. The centaurs raised me."

"That's it?" She gaped in amazement. "You say that like it's nothing! I can't believe I'm hearing it!"

Her face fell as she bit her lip. "Sometimes I can barely believe I'm here. Wherever 'here' is."

The boy's voice was quiet with compassion. "Are your parents dead, too?" She swallowed, and he lay a hand on her arm. "It's okay. If you don't..."

"No," She angrily wiped tears away. The boy looked about for a resting place, leading them to the side of the trail, and they sat there for some time while she collected herself.

"I...it was about a week ago, I think. I was out feeding the hens, and...our village was attacked by the warlord Draco." Her lip curled into a sneer as she spoke the name.

The boy said nothing, gently squeezing her arm.

"I...it was about a week ago, I think. I was out feeding the hens, and...our village was attacked by the warlord Draco." Her lip curled into a sneer as she spoke the name.

"We've been attacked before, but we've always been lucky. This time it was just us...no time to run, or organize a defense. They started fires all around, and came at us..."

She swallowed hard. "My mother was...getting water from the well. I think my father pushed her in when he saw the fire coming." She rocked back and forth as she relived the moment. "He always
kept his swords over the fireplace...he must have been running inside. I ran out of the barn, and I saw him..." She gave a stifled moan of horror. "They filled him full of arrows before he could get through the door. He was...crawling through it..."

He remained silent but squeezed a little more firmly, and she returned the grip as she struggled to regain sufficient control to speak.

"I don't remember anything else until I woke up the next day. Some men from Polumia...that's just south of...where our village used to be. They came to see if there were any survivors. My mother was still alive when they pulled her out of the well, but...they said she died of grief when she saw my father's body."

The boy bowed his head, and she remained silent for a long moment, staring at the ground.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice cracking slightly. "I -- I know I already said it. I never even knew my parents." He swallowed. "You must really miss them."

"Yeah," she whispered. "Sometimes...when I was little, I wished they would die...and then I could leave home and have adventures, and see the world. But I never meant it, I swear..."

She uttered a shaky laugh. "I was so jealous of my sister when she left...I thought she was crazy, and at the same time I wanted to go with her. I think that was half the reason I left Polumia. I had nothing left but the clothes on my back, and I thought, why not? Why can't I do what she did, and decide what I want?" The spark of resentment died as she hung her head. "And I guess I thought...if I could find her, that would...prove I was just as good as her. Or I was just looking for her because she's the only family I've got left." She swallowed, looking miserable. "I guess I'm as crazy as her."

He squeezed her arm again. "No crazier than me when I left home. If it was that important to you -- hey." She raised her head, seeing his eyes light up. "If she's here? I bet I know how to find her."

"How can you find anyone in all this?" she breathed, too afraid to hope.

"Easy!" She couldn't help returning his infectious smile. "I met someone in the philosopher's camp yesterday. He said that since most of the people who know how to read and write are there, they set up this thing where you give them your name, where you're staying and anyone you're looking for. And if that person shows up, they send a messenger to find you. Neat, huh?"

She allowed him to help her up, noting the crimson in his cheeks as she rearranged the laces of her bodice. "That sounds good. I can't thank you enough for helping me --"

"We helped each other, didn't we?" He wiped away some of the dust and grime from his face, the blush standing out even more as a result.

"We sure did," she smiled shyly. The years of proper upbringing were too strong to ignore, and she pulled the somewhat bruised apple from her pocket, tentatively offering it for inspection.

"Want to share?"

"So...ya goin' ta the bear pits tonight?"

Narif maintained both his posture and readied spear as he rolled his eyes and returned his gaze to the wall which, despite its lack of adornment, was a good deal less risky than getting caught up in Oraces' mindless chatter again. All it took was a moment of leaning to ease the burden on one's feet, or casually adjusting one's manhood, and someone in charge was bound to appear out of
nowhere and demand that his commander impose extra discipline, since he was obviously in short supply.

He stood a little straighter as he resisted the urge to glance around, knowing any punishment would be more severe if whoever caught him suspected that he might be trying to escape it. The fact that Oraces was still guarding the king's chambers after all this time meant that he was either incredibly lucky or a spy planted by the king himself, and Narif had no intention of allowing his head to join the collection rumored to be kept in a hidden chamber, only removed by the king for 'discussions' when the stars were properly aligned.

"Aw, yer no fun." Despite his forward gaze he could still see Oraces' finger dug halfway up his nostril, or at least see enough of it from the corner of his gaze to easily visualize the rest. He continued to stare ahead, wondering why the gods had seen fit to curse him with such a vivid imagination. "I hear next week th'll be throwin' babies in thar..."

Narif's head jerked sideways only to see Oraces doubled over with laughter. "Har! Knew that'd get ya. Ol' softy like you don't belong in this man's army!" He flicked the contents of his latest excavation onto the far wall, and Narif suppressed a shudder as his sharp eyes noticed that the missile failed to fall to the ground.

The lout continued, oblivious to his companion's revulsion. "Now you take a right mean bastard like Charakus. Why, that ol' warhorse'd slit his own mum's throat fer the right price." He sighed heavily. "Don't see much o' that kinda dedication no more. Kids today, I'm tellin' ya..."

Narif grit his teeth, wondering if the man was still joking and realizing that he probably wasn't. If he'd known what he was getting into when he abandoned his post as a lieutenant in Callisto's army, he would have taken his chances with the known quantity of the Warrior Queen's insanity over the unknown dread that had recently begun to plague both his sleep and waking hours. Mineus had offered excellent pay for trained soldiers, and his first few weeks had been as rewarding as it was challenging. Whipping an entire city full of people into shape was never an easy task, but he'd discovered to his initial delight that resistance lessened considerably when the law was on your side.

He had no idea what had first made him uneasy. It wasn't simply the gradual trickling away of skilled artisans and honest merchants, nor the reinstatement of slavery well camouflaged by words specifically suited to the purpose. Most of the peasantry were happy to take up their chains again, and in fact made a great clamor about how much better off they were here than in Treus. For his part Narif had been content to remain in the middle of the pecking order, never setting his ambitions too high for fear of being swallowed by those craftier or more ruthless than himself. Now he wished more every day that he'd never set foot in this kingdom, and less hope that he would ever escape it. As if the native population weren't enough to deal with, lately there had been a sudden influx of strange, yellow-skinned foreigners; outcasts from their own land, or perhaps slaves as part of some secret trading arrangement...

The door between them slammed outward and Mineus himself stormed out, a snarl barely visible on his face as he swept past the two guards. Narif resolutely stared at the wall, and Oraces tossed off a casual salute.

"Evenin', majesty. Beggin' yer pardon, but our squad sure took a lickin' from those kiddies over in Treus today, erm?"

Mineus froze in his tracks, turning around slowly with an odd look of dismayed confusion before his brow unfolded. "Ah, Oraces, you never disappoint me. Had I wanted those brats captured, I would have simply overrun the entire kingdom. But I suppose a little detail like that escapes your
astonishing intellect, doesn't it?" He strolled up to the amiably grinning Oraces, hands clasped casually behind his back as Narif strove to hold his breath for just a few moments longer. "It never would have occurred to you, for example, that your men might have been serving purely as a diversionary tactic? That the real aim of today's expedition was to gather information, and that in that we succeeded beyond our wildest expectations?"

Oraces shrugged, still bearing a faint grin as he stared resolutely at the spot on the wall. "I's just a simple soldier, yer majesty. I fights when I'm paid and leaves the decisions up to them what's paid to decide."

Narif's throat constricted a little further as Mineus glanced briefly aside at him, but the king returned his attention to Oraces almost immediately, with no apparent further interest in his hapless junior. "And that's precisely why I like you, Oraces. You do as you're told." Something in his voice made Narif's skin prickle as though an army of ants had invaded his uniform. "That's an increasingly rare quality in a soldier these days. But I have good news for you!" he exclaimed, whirling about and fixing his gaze on Narif, who was too stunned to do anything but stare back like a fool with his mouth ajar.

"Go on, my boy," smiled Mineus. "I know you're curious. Ask me a question. Anything you want! I'm feeling magnanimous today."

Before he could even think on whether he was being led into a trap, Narif blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. "What information was acquired, sir? And why is it so important?"

The king beamed benevolently, looking as though he wanted to pat Narif on the head for his perceptiveness. "Two questions in one, Oraces! We might have to promote this lad yet." His expression hardened. "And because I'm feeling so magnanimous today, I'll not only answer those questions, but I'll refrain from having you flogged for your insolence. Did you know that I was once engaged to be married? No, of course not," he muttered, impatiently waving away the possibility as he began to pace back and forth in front of the increasingly perspiring Narif. The king's history was common knowledge, if rarely spoken aloud; surely the man had to be toying with him...or else the king's sanity was beginning to unravel as well.

"You see, the woman in question was royalty, and marrying her would have meant the end of slavery in our kingdom. My advisors naturally all warned against an alliance, but I was ready to pay the price. After all, what does it matter if you can't call them slaves? I was sure it would all work out in the end." He gave a heavy sigh.

"But the woman in question bore more than a passing resemblance to Xena, the Warrior Princess we hear so much of in songs and tales. And little did I know that my traitorous brother was in love with her. Don't you find that a bit cruel, that the man I trusted to take care of arranging the marriage now lies every night with a woman who should by all right be mine?" A cruel, vulpine gleam shone from under hooded eyes as he stared at his captive audience. When no reply seemed forthcoming, he resumed his narrative and pacing.

"The real Xena ended up getting involved...how, I have no idea. The details aren't really important anymore, and you can understand why I'm reluctant to discuss them. The important thing..." His eyes burned into Narif's as if daring the soldier to say something, and he continued with some seeming reluctance when the soldier failed to take the bait. "The important thing is that we've finally confirmed what I've suspected for some time. You see, after I discovered just how deep my brother's treachery ran...when I realized how they'd played me for a fool, I was ready to slaughter every last one of their so-called 'royal family.'"

Narif swallowed, wishing he could turn back time and un-ask his question. The king had to have
his own reasons for saying this much in front of a couple of common guards. How much of what
he was saying was even true? I don't want to know these things, he realized with sudden fervor: he
didn't want to be here, let alone receive whatever promotion the king had in mind; didn't want to
feel so incredibly alone. And despite his trembling knees and churning bowels, his interest was
nonetheless kindled. Did the king truly know how curious he was; of his dogged nature that
practically forced him to learn more than was good and safe for him, the keen intelligence and
analytical mind that frightened him like the threats of no man or god could with its wild,
uncontrolled leaps of intuition and insight?

"But the more I thought about it, the more I realized they'd done me a favor." Mineus was
regarding Oraces, who still bore a faint grin on his face, but the monarch's words were still directed
at Narif. "After all, who am I to abolish a long-standing and profitable enterprise? Why bother
risking undue attention, whether it's nosy Athenians, boy-loving Spartans or those filthy Persians?"
Narif stiffened almost invisibly, but Mineus appeared not to notice.

"Get rid of slavery and you become a sinkhole for every worthless peasant in the land. A fat target
for invasion, not to mention every busybody reformer and outside investigator...oh no, we'll not
have such disorder here. Not while I'm still on the throne..." Mineus trailed off in forgetfulness,
only emerging from his reverie when Oraces emitted a belch of astounding tenor and volume. He
shook his head in momentary confusion.

"I finally managed to get some spies inside Treus after some months. Given Xena's reputation I
was quite careful to move slowly, and things became even harder after Diana got rid of nearly her
entire palace staff." He shook his head again, this time in amazement. "Damned silly woman was
driving me mad trying to figure out what she was up to, and all my informants said Xena was still
hanging around the palace, working in disguise as a common whore! But between those reports and
the latest word from my man abroad, do you know what we've determined? Do you?" His eyes
shone with rapture, voice ecstatic with glee, and Narif shook his head mutely.

"It's been confirmed by sources most reliable --" Mineus giggled suddenly, unable to contain his
enjoyment. "Not to mention too numerous to deny, that Xena is dead! The scouts spotted her twice
and confirmed her identity, and the next thing they knew some other woman warrior had sliced and
gutted her and left her for the crows...and the whole time, both the princess and this other woman
were known to still be in Treus! And this woman my men have been skulking around, afraid to get
too close for fear the Warrior Princess would spot them immediately, really is nothing but a
common whore!" He laughed aloud, clapping his hands together as he looked back and forth
between the two astonished guards.

"So I'll still have my revenge. Of course it'd be far sweeter to see that bitch Xena hang along with
her friends, but we'll take what we can get." He elbowed Oraces gently in the ribs. "Eh, boys?"

Oraces rolled his eyes. "You just tells me where to point m'sword, majesty, an' I'll swing it 'til they
cuts me arms off."

Narif let out an involuntary chuckle that sounded strangely bitter to his ears. Mineus only smiled
approvingly, the smile suddenly turning to a frown.

"By the gods, Oraces. You're a disgrace to that uniform!" The soldier made a half-hearted attempt
at polishing his smudged breastplate and Mineus shook his head. "You'd better get looking smart,
soldier. We've got important visitors arriving soon. Don't want to look like a bunch of barbarians."

He turned away with a chuckle, walking down the hall with a quiet swishing of robes against
stone.
By all the gods, Narif thought as he swayed gently back and forth, his head feeling strangely light and fuzzy as Oraces cleared his throat with a hawking splatter of sound and liquid. I've got to get out of here. The man's mad as the Bacchae... Maybe he could sneak out this evening after dark; not even bother with provisions or arms, just take the clothes on his back and flee as fast as his legs would take him, to...where?

"Man's truly gone," Oraces bluntly observed, wiping the snot from his lips and nose. Narif ordered himself to remain calm; even if the man wasn't a planted spy, it would be foolish to agree too strongly. Instead, he tossed off as neutral a reply as he could muster.

"Sure is."

He stared at his spot on the wall, heart pounding as he waited for Oraces to reply in some fashion. Finally he risked a quick look, finding the man staring straight ahead, looking as disciplined and alert as any Liberian soldier but for the finger perpetually embedded in his skull.

Narif's gaze returned to his own spot, and from afar he seemed to hear himself speaking again, his tone as bland as before. "Is your sister still for sale?"

Oraces chuckled; both men knew he had no sisters, at least living. Anything was for sale in Liberium, and human life came cheaper than most.

"Whaddya got?"
Chapter Summary

An arrival, and an awkward welcome.

Incarnation, the limitation of mind by matter, is an outrage to imagination. Equally outrageous is gender, which we have not chosen but which nature has imposed upon us.

*Camille Paglia*

*Prickle-Prickle*

The mid-afternoon air was so cold as to leave breath visible, but tempers were running in decidedly the opposite direction as Joxer and Gabrielle approached the borders. Most of the last two days had been "wasted", as she put it in a particularly mean-spirited moment, tramping through heavy forest after the boat ran aground and sprang a leak, and she had vented her frustrations upon Joxer despite the knowledge that it was merely an unhappy coincidence. She was all too aware that she was taking out her worry for Xena on an all too easy target, at every turn unable to keep from blaming him and alternately berating herself for it, and the guilt eventually caused her to retreat into sullen silence.

For his part, Joxer was determined to never again make the error of placing any woman on a pedestal. Far from being a goddess incarnate, Gabrielle slept late and snapped like a turtle no matter how gently he attempted to wake her, snored loud enough to ward off passing predators, and insisted on filling his ears with chatter every time he tried to relax and simply enjoy the pleasure of not having to share her company with others. That pleasure had palled as familiarity bred contempt, the sheer joy of being in her presence fading to a resigned acceptance: She was more like an annoying sister than the woman of his dreams, although he hadn't determined whether she was a little or a big sister since she exhibited traits of both.

To make matters worse, some of Xena's training appeared to have rubbed off, and she insisted on drilling with her staff before they set out each morning. Joxer opted out after nearly slicing off his arm on the second day, and Gabrielle had thankfully refrained from further comment. The unexpected kindness, however, only provided further opportunity for rumination as he watched her, wearing a look of deadly concentration as she went through the moves; even to his now-jaundiced eye she handled her weapon as though she'd been born to it, as effortlessly as she seemed to have mastered the quill.

*And what do I do?* he thought glumly. *Joxer the Fisherman! Joxer, the Cook! Joxer, the glint in the village idiot's eye...*

His surge of self-pity vanished -- or at least, greatly diminished -- as Gabrielle planted her staff in the ground and launched a kick which had the serendipitous side effect of revealing a flash of upper thigh. Joxer wiped away the stupid grin as she slowed to a stop, tearing his gaze from her heaving bosom with an inner curse. Any less self-control and he might end up married, owning a thousand acres of Salmoneus's swampland...or dead.
Callisto was wrong, he thought miserably, turning to break camp before Gabrielle could give the order. Love was no joke.

It was dead serious.

They were entering the forest surrounding the castle, and Gabrielle allowed their pace to slacken, knowing they still had nearly a league to go. Joxer was already sinking to the ground in exhaustion as she went to scout the perimeter, just as Xena had always stressed. Being in familiar territory lulled you into a false sense of security; made you more vulnerable. Always better to have something, and not need it, than the other way round.

She raised her eyes to the moon, fat in the sky even with the sun still visible over the horizon. Fall was glorious all around, everything at its most healthy and vibrant as it prepared for the inevitable death that winter would bring. In the past, this time of the year had inspired her creative instincts to their greatest heights. Now her mind was too full of questions, and the ever-growing realization that there was no one to answer them.

By the time she returned Joxer had actually managed to start a small fire without setting himself alight, and was even tactful enough not to mention her earlier behavior. Or maybe he thought she might rip his head off, if he dared to open his...

"Aren't we going to knock or something?"

Her cheeks puffed out in exasperation.

"The last time we came here, you'll recall I spent most of my time in the dungeon, and I'm hoping to avoid a repeat of that fiasco. Even with all these people around, I don't think we should be drawing any more attention to ourselves than we have to." Joxer nodded solemnly as the bard resumed her by now familiar pacing around the fire, unconsciously twirling her staff in slow and lazy patterns.

"You sure we're in the right place?" he asked warily, not wanting to risk a pulled nose. "That castle's a lot smaller than I remember it.

Gabrielle nodded. "That's what I thought, until I got closer. It only looks that way because the surrounding village has gotten bigger." A disbelieving note entered her voice. "A lot bigger. This place wasn't that much bigger than Potadeia last time we were here. Well, Potadeia with a castle."

He stifled a yawn, glad her annoyance seemed to have abated. "What's the big draw?"

"Hey, if I was an oracle? I could have my own temple." She mulled over the possibilities, rejecting the most immediate and preposterous notions. I think we can dispense with storming the castle walls, thank you very much, she scolded herself. Sometimes the direct approach was best.

"How about if we approach the gates after sunset and see if any of the guards remember us? If they don't, it won't kill us to sleep outside one more night." Her smile was false bravado; the mere thought of freezing in the woods when a warm and soft bed were within ten minutes' walk was...

"Joxer?"

A gentle snore met her ears, drifting over the meager fire, and she shook her head at the sight of the would-be warrior sprawled out on his bedroll. Given the astoundingly vicious kick he'd landed the other morning when she tried to shake him into wakefulness, her decision to leave him alone was an easy one; Gabrielle cringed to recall some of the more vile insults she'd hurled.
Maybe I was upset that he actually took me off guard, she thought, crouching to stir the dwindling embers. It wasn't as though Xena hadn't earned her share of bruises attempting to awaken her; more annoyingly, it seemed the only time she was able to consistently land a blow on the warrior. At least Joxer had stopped whining about blisters --

A muffled grunt and some other sounds reached her ears and Gabrielle was on her feet in an instant, grabbing for her staff.

She gaped across the fire, realized that Joxer had vanished a split second before he suddenly bounced back into view; dangling from Callisto's grasp as she hung upside down by her legs from a tree limb, one hand cupped tight over his mouth, wearing a devilish grin.

The warrior suddenly seemed to notice the bard's frozen position, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her face.

"Hey, lighten up, will ya?"

"Xena..." Gabrielle swallowed, trying for a commanding tone, unable to mask her apprehension. "What are you doing?"

"Just testing your defenses." Blonde hair fell in rivulets as brown eyes returned her stare. The leather skirt had likewise succumbed to gravity and the bard's gaze was drawn to slim, muscular legs; the brief leather thong that passed for an undergarment.

A wry note entered the other woman's voice. "And having a little fun, okay?" You know me...always looking for an opening."

Joxer's perpetually arrested sense of humor apparently conquered any hint of self-preservation, and he let out a muffled snicker.

"Would you mind coming down?" Gabrielle requested, in what she hoped was a polite manner. "My neck's getting stiff."

Joxer fell to earth, barely landing on his feet; staggering to one side as Xena let go of the branch, twisting in midair to land in a graceful crouch before straightening to her full height.

"Are you okay?" Gabrielle approached with some hesitance, staff held loosely in her left hand at a casual angle. The warrior looked somewhat guilty, seeming to notice for the first time the effect of her sudden appearance.

"Gabrielle, why do you always expect the worst?" Xena sounded confident as ever, but a nervous laugh escaped as her fingers ran through tousled hair, flicking a braid to one side. "Why can't you just assume I'm in a good mood and nothing's wrong?"

"Experience," Gabrielle muttered even as she tried to look properly abashed, mind racing to cover all possible angles. Nice! Real nice, after you worried yourself sick over her! Fortunately Xena was looking more relaxed, hands open in a gesture of peace.

"I give you my word, nothing is wrong," She allowed a slight grin. "Except I've been tracking you for about the last candlemark."

Joxer's dismay was as badly hidden as ever, whereas for Gabrielle the only thing keeping her from wiping it off his face with her staff was her own chagrin at not having noticed their surveillance. But Xena's good humor remained intact.
"Oh, no. I'm not letting you mope around just because you couldn't hear me sneaking up on you. Remember, I've had a lot more practice."

"I used to be pretty good at it," Joxer volunteered bashfully. "Kinda comes in handy when your whole family's out to get you." Gabrielle swallowed her pride as Xena's attention shifted away from her.

"Maybe you should go back to not wearing armor." the warrior smiled. Joxer managed to return the smile, and Gabrielle quickly moved to try to salvage some remnants of control.

"Apology accepted. Now -- how are we going to get inside without causing a riot?" A hint of unconscious anticipation entered her voice. "You've got some great plan you came up with as soon as you left? That you've been perfecting these past few days, until it's the product of razor-sharp instinct and years of experience?"

Xena contemplated the fire with studied nonchalance.

"Actually, I was thinking of sending Joxer." She looked up and had to smile at the expected dropped jaws. "Well, why not? As crowded as this place has gotten, I could have ridden Argo right up the main road to the palace and nobody would bat an eye. Don't tell me you didn't notice?"

"I don't know if it's quite that busy," the bard smiled nervously. "But it sure has changed since we were here last. We started running into people two days ago, and after a while we just gave up on trying to stay out of sight."

"Yeah," Joxer interjected. "It's incredible, Xena! I've never seen so many people all moving in one direction. It's like they're coming from all over Greece to be here!"

Xena nodded, frowning. "And not all of them look like refugees. Wonder what the big attraction is?"

The bard shrugged. "I'm sure Diana can tell us, but we still need to get inside first."

Xena returned the shrug. "Nobody's going to look twice at Joxer, and that's what makes him perfect for the job. All he has to do is tell the guards that he brings my final words to their king. Or something big and important like that."

"You mean Xena's final words, right?" Joxer looked morbidly hopeful, and the blonde woman smiled in confirmation.

Joxer was prepared to face Lias, a man he hardly remembered, and the shock was double when he saw what appeared to be Xena sitting on the modest throne in a luxurious purple gown, dark hair soft about her shoulders. She rose to greet him with a warm smile, and he beat himself with his own brain again. Diana! That's Diana, fool!

He glanced cautiously about the room, but there was no sign of her father, nor of any other guards. The two who had escorted him had already taken their leave, apparently having decided that the princess could adequately defend herself against any threat he might present.

"Joxer!" She stepped forward and swept him into a fierce hug. He was amazed she remembered his name, but even so realized that Xena's absurd claim had been correct; he really was taller than her. But Diana was peppering him with a barrage of questions, forcing him to hold up his hands to stem the tide.
"Hold on, hold on, I gotta do this right or they're gonna kill me...which window faces south? This one, right?" She nodded in some confusion as he strode to it, grabbing a torch from the wall. He leaned out the window and waved the torch in a circle before returning it to its place.

"They'll be up in a minute," he nodded briskly, hugging his arms to his body as he shivered and pranced back to the throne. The princess's expression had gone from being perplexed to one of growing concern, a haunted darkness he was becoming familiar with in his friends that apparently gnawed at her soul as well. Or maybe it was just lack of sleep.

"Can I get you something warmer to wear?"

"Please," he nodded breathlessly. Diana pulled a huge trunk from behind her throne, rummaging through and pulling out a thick cloak of mottled brown and white fur. It fit comfortably about his shoulders, and she shook her head.

"I'll ring for some food. You look as though you haven't eaten in a week!"

"And you look like you haven't slept in a week," he riposted, wiggling his brows; blushing deeply as he remembered who he was addressing. "Sorry, Princess."

"Don't apologize," she warned with a sly smile. "And I have a name. Di-an-a," she enunciated slowly, as if to a cretin, and he found himself grinning back. "You can use it, you know."

She yanked vigorously on the velvet rope hanging nearby, bustling him back out to the throne room. His jaw attempted to fall open, and he had to ask though he knew the answer.

"Are you sure you're not Meg?"

"Gods, no!" she laughed impishly. "Although some of her bad habits may have rubbed off." Joxer boggled as she plopped down on a bench with one leg on either side, dress pulled to her knees and grinning momentarily up at his glazed features before swiveling to a more demure position. She patted the bench beside her, looking quite chastised, and he sat, a bit further from where her hand indicated.

"I'm so glad you're here. And I know Meg will be very happy to see you as well." She leaned forward with a look of anticipation, and he was sure he knew what her next words would be.

"So where are Xena and Gabrielle?"

"I'm right here."

The princess spun toward the window, mouth opening as she took in the sight of Greece's second most famous homicidal lunatic, perched upon the narrow stone ledge outside her bedroom window. The unlikely guest toppled forward in a graceful somersault, limbs unfurling, falling to the floor in a crouch and rising in one smooth motion; movements slow and purposeful as she walked up to the speechless Diana with a sad smile, palms out to show her empty hands.

"Although I can't say I'm pleased with the accommodations."

The princess blinked and swallowed, her eyes never leaving the blonde figure before her. The figure rolled her eyes.

"Guess I'll have to get used to that." The droll, pleasant voice and rich brown eyes were without madness or guile, and Diana found herself knowing what the woman would say as the words left her lips. "It's me. Xena."
Inexplicably, the princess found her initial reaction was to believe this peculiar assertion. She nodded for the other woman to continue, a look of unwillingly growing comprehension in her own eyes.

"I'll fill you in on the details later, but for now we just need a place to rest. I give you my word, nobody's after us --" A wry note entered her voice. "Not yet. Anyway, Gabrielle's waiting in the woods for my signal. Can you make sure she gets in?" A subtle smile. "She might still have a bad reputation with the guards around here."

Diana’s eyes were brisk and alert, seemingly recovered from the sudden shock. Joxer rose a bit ungracefully but managed to keep his footing, offering the princess a hand which she solemnly accepted.

"You'd better come with me," she warned, "so the guards can get another look at you. We certainly don't want you thrown in the dungeon again, either. Meg would be absolutely furious!" He straightened his shoulders, trying for a more noble look as some decidedly ignoble thoughts clamored for his attention.

"You'd better stay here until we get back." Diana's smile disappeared as her gaze returned to Xena, her voice tinged with subtle warning. "In fact, you're lucky you caught me alone. Usually my evenings are as busy as my mornings... and my afternoons."

She gazed into the warrior's eyes again; wondering what it was that made the other woman's presence stand out through her strange new appearance.

"Who else are you going to tell?"

Xena coolly appraised the question as she formulated a response. The princess had definitely begun to grow into her royal role; cautious enough to assume they were keeping it secret.

"For now? Just Meg and your father."

A hint of anger flashed across the princess's features, and Xena wondered if she'd ever been that easy to read. Unthinkable, that Diana and her father might have had some sort of falling out; and she probed the first potential sore spot that occurred to her. "You have a problem keeping this from Philemon?"

Diana was looking not quite fearful, and Xena frowned. "I'm sorry if you're offended, and it's not that I don't trust him, but..." Running a hand through her hair, noting it needed washing, she began to pace around the bench; all too conscious of their eyes upon her.

"I'm already risking enough telling you and King Lias. I just figured maybe in a pinch, between you and Meg, we can keep people guessing --"

She abruptly stopped, looking directly at fists knotted in the fabric of an ungodly expensive gown.

"Diana." Her voice was gentle but firm. "What's happened to your father?"

The princess stepped back as if she'd been slapped, glancing hurriedly about her. "Later," she whispered hoarsely as she backed away, fumbling for the door handle. "We'll talk later...at dinner."

A chill tugged at Xena's bones, as she watched herself retreat from the room.

This couldn't be good.
"Joxy!"

Gabrielle winced at the piercing shriek of delight emanating from the form she knew and loved as it swooped down upon her hapless target, enveloping him in its voluminous skirts. She had to smile at his obvious discomfort with Meg's aggressive approach in this refined setting; Joxer was casting desperate but helpless looks at them as his face was peppered with kisses, Meg pulling at his helmet in an attempt to remove it and cover more area.

Xena leaned forward and murmured something to Gabrielle that Joxer was glad he couldn't make out, especially when it resulted in an honest peal of real laughter. Meg was standing back, blushing furiously but retaining a firm grip on his hand, while Diana's father smiled benevolently from his chair.

"Joxer, is it?" The aging monarch peered intently at him with rheumy eyes that were nonetheless alert and attentive. "So good to see you. Meg's told us all about you...well, not exactly all about you." He chuckled and elbowed Joxer gently in the ribs, causing the ex-tavern wench's blush to darken further, along with that of her beloved.

"Ah, Gabrielle!" The bard gingerly took Lias' outstretched hand, giving her best cross between a proper and an Amazon curtsey.

"No need to stand on ceremony, my dear..." The king stretched vigorously in his seat with a tremendous yawn. "Goodness! Pardon me, but we'd better be eating. Diana and I have much work ahead of us yet!"

"Are you sure?" Gabrielle anxiously inquired. "We don't want to be any trouble..."

"Nonsense, child," Lias smiled patiently. "What kind of host would I be if..."

His voice trailed away, eyes losing focus. Gabrielle glanced back and saw that he was staring at Xena, slowly walking towards him. She tensed, ready for anything; Diana had filled Meg in, on their way from the kitchen, but refused offers to prepare her father for the shock.

Lias blinked, and his gaze cleared.

"Xena!" The name came easily to his lips, and the rest of the room watched in stunned silence as the king rose from his chair, rounding the table with surprising speed to clasp the warrior's forearm. "Gods! Why wasn't I told you were here as well?"

Xena returned the embrace, impressed at the strength in those frail hands as her mind raced to reply.

"I...guess they just didn't want you to get too excited, your majesty."

The monarch frowned, releasing her arm. "So you insult me by hiding in the shadows?" His voice became a stern proclamation. "There is only one way to atone for this shameful behavior."

Xena coolly appraised him as the rest of the room held its breath. "And that would be?"

The king's eyes twinkled. "Call me Lias. And sit, and eat."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief as they moved to seat themselves at the small but lavishly appointed table. The king's head cocked to one side. "Xena?"

"Yes?"
Lias frowned absently. "You've done something with your hair, haven't you?"

Gabrielle could have sworn the warrior was blushing, but suddenly had to concentrate on not getting her staff caught between Joxer's legs. In the ensuing shuffle to be seated she ended up beside Lias at the head of the table, flanking Joxer's right while Meg squeezed protectively in on the bumbling warrior's left. Diana had located herself next to Meg and opposite her father, leaving Xena with her choice of three empty seats on the other side of the table.

The bard shot a guilty look at her friend, but Xena had already stretched out fully on the narrow wooden bench as if she owned it, looking quite relaxed as she took everyone else in. With Argo in the competent care of the stable hands and her friends safe within the castle walls, not to mention the prospect of a hot meal, she could afford a moment's relaxation.

Gabrielle took the initiative, well aware of Xena's loathing for small talk. "How old is your daughter now, Diana?"

"A year this spring," the princess replied with a brilliant smile. "I'm surprised you remembered her. Sometimes I forget myself!"

The bard carefully placed her staff on the floor by her feet, where she could get to it without risking a repeat incident of their last big fight 'before', as she'd come to think of it. Before what exactly, I don't know... Xena had arrived at the tavern over four candlemarks late, and just in time to see Gabrielle hurl a bowl of soup into a man's face as she rose from her seat, apparently trying to overturn the table into the faces of her attackers as she'd seen Xena do so many times; but no sooner had she risen more than an inch did she fall back in her seat with a startled yell, bouncing her forehead off the edge of the table only to end up on the floor underneath it, right next to her trusty staff...which her feet had rolled on during her initial attempt to stand. Combined with the experience of finding Callisto and Xena fighting and nearly killing her best friend before realizing the awful truth, it was a wonder she even still picked up a staff some days; but she had determined that her decision to refrain from killing -- now a conscious vow, rather than an unspoken principle - - would not keep her from defending herself or others.

"Sorry -- gathering wool again." The bard smiled to show her unconcern. "It'd be hard to forget your daughter, after all she went through. At least she's not the only baby Xena's tossed around who lived to tell the tale."

"Kid's not talking yet," Meg grinned as she helped pass dishes about. She was leaning heavily on Joxer, maintaining maximum physical contact while remaining more or less upright.

Diana waved off the impolitic remark with an air of long-suffering patience.

"She knows she can get away with things like that behind closed doors...but she's smart enough not to repeat it in public." Ice-blue eyes bored into her twin's, belying the casual tone. "Right, Meg?"

"Have you named her yet?" Gabrielle interjected.

Diana shook her head. "I'd hoped that Philemon and I could agree on a name by her first birthday, but..." She broke off in obvious discomfort, and Lias cleared his throat.

"Thank you, my dear, as always." The king beamed fondly at a blushing Meg. "You've provided admirably for us at this late hour."

Meg's hand crept out, holding onto Joxer's for support. "Hey, no biggie. I mean..." She glanced at Diana, who smiled warmly, and this seemed to give her the courage to continue. "It was no trouble
Gabrielle's ears perked up; Meg's diction and accent had changed, resembling more that of Diana. The cook continued more boldly, with just a trace of street toughness.

"I always had a flair for the spice, you remember? Well, the doctors got this crazy idea that it saved kingy's heart from stopping!" She lowered her eyes to her plate, fussing with a piece of meat. "That's what they said, anyway."

Diana leaned over and covered her twin's hand with her own even as Lias snorted. "Don't you dare sell yourself short," he warned, shaking a fork in her general direction and turning to Xena. "Not only my heart, but it's eased my breathing, helped my digestion and brought this talented young woman a veritable deluge of job offers! Everyone from merchant to noble pleads with her to come work for them. You should have seen the look on the last one's face when she lost all patience and dumped a bowl of soup in his lap!" His eyes sparkled with merriment.

Gabrielle felt her fear easing, as her confusion grew. Lias certainly appeared to be in good health and spirits, despite his advanced age, and his daughter's protectiveness seemed a bit excessive even to the bard's eye. The king chuckled as he took a sip from his goblet.

"Thankfully, Diana handles all the rejection letters now. I think one more day of it might undo all the good these two have done!"

The princess remained silent, carefully watching her father hold court, and something in Xena's memory fell into place. She could see Gabrielle beginning to draw similar conclusions as the bard's brow furrowed. Diana squeezed Meg's hand, obviously wishing she could reach her father's as well as the king continued his tale.

"Yes, my doctors certainly came out of that looking like fools. So I fired them all!" Gabrielle blinked and Joxer choked on a bite of lamb, but it was apparent from the faces of Meg and Diana that this was a long-established topic.

"I decided from now on, my doctors will be paid to keep me well, not mend me when I fall ill! And better tasting medicine I've never had. If everything that was good for us was this pleasant, what a fine world this would be, eh?" His guests nodding and murmuring assent, the king fell back to his meal, and the others hesitantly joined in.

Joxer cleared his throat. "Yeah, Meg, what's your secret? 'Cause you can't fool me, there's more than just exotic spices here." He rubbed his belly in happy demonstration. "I mean, you've gotta be putting some kinda magic potion in here or casting some serious spells. Because this stuff, well -- it's just too good for mortals!"

Lias chuckled as Meg's blush turned near-crimson.

"Don't fret, child. I'll take your secrets to my grave."

"Pay no attention," Diana interjected, rolling her eyes. "He spends so much time being serious in front of everyone, it's no wonder he behaves so badly among family."

The biting words were tempered by the warm smile the princess bestowed upon her father, and a lump rose in Gabrielle's throat as she thought of her own; wishing, not for the first time, that she could make him understand why she had left home. *So many reasons, I'd hardly know where to begin...*

Joxer picked up a small black dish, eagerly sniffing at the dark red contents. "This smells pretty
good," he smiled enthusiastically. "What is it?" Even as he asked his finger was dipping into the thick, chunky mixture, pulling out a generous clump and bringing it to his waiting mouth.

Meg's eyes widened, and a protest died on her lips as she realized that the hapless warrior had already swallowed the diabolical substance. Xena's lips twitched as Joxer turned a puzzled gaze to the others.

"What are you staring at?" He licked his lips with some gusto. "Tastes pretty good, kinda...uh..."

He broke off as beads of sweat sprang forth on his brow, skin rapidly growing pale.

"Jox, I forgot to warn ya --"

Joxer sprang from the table with an anguished scream, plunging out of the room in a horrendous clatter of armor and weaponry. Meg stared after him miserably, turning to face the others.

"...it takes a second to kick in," she finished with a weak smile.

Gabrielle shook her head, concealing a snicker behind her hand. Xena's own chuckle tapered off and then stopped as she frowned.

"Lias, I couldn't help noticing a great deal of the castle is under repair. Was there an attack recently?"

The king's eyebrows shot up in surprise, and his brow furrowed momentarily. "Attacked? Gods, no! Been so peaceful the past few months, why..." He trailed off, his face a momentary swamp of uncertainty. From across the table, Diana cleared her throat.

"Father, I hate to leave our guests so soon, but it's getting quite late. And we still have a great deal to attend to."

"Oh!" Lias shook off the lingering malaise, his eyes bright and confident once more. "Yes, I'm terribly sorry, but -- affairs of state, and all that rot. Please, join us again tomorrow?" The others chorused assent, and Xena's eyes were drawn to the almost imperceptible trembling of the king's hands as he rose from his chair.

"Are you sure?" Xena appeared unusually serious. "It might not be wise to strain yourself so soo-- " She faltered. "Unnecessarily."

Diana threw a sharp glance in her direction, but Lias only shook his finger.

"Young woman, the day I can't fulfill my duties is the day I step down from my throne. As a warrior, you would never allow yourself to grow soft after an injury. You'd be out training as soon as your stitches would hold."

Xena almost threw a guilty glance at Gabrielle from sheer reflex, and the bard rolled her eyes in unspoken agreement. Meg and Diana stood almost as one, quickly and efficiently stacking dishes; the princess straightened her dress, and Meg gave her a quick hug before picking the dishes up and bustling out of the room.

Gabrielle stood and stretched hugely, stifling a yawn. "Are you sure we can't help?"

The king waved away her concerns. "The only foes we must conquer this evening, my dear are the demons of bureaucracy. And with my daughter by my side, I've little to fear on that score." He smiled with quiet pride. "Would you show our guests to their rooms?"
Diana nodded. "But no later than midnight this time," she warned stiffly, and Lias merely nodded assent as he exited the room, step strong and head high. The princess turned to her companions.

"If you'll follow me?"

"If there's nothing else I can get you --"

Gabrielle forced a smile. "Really, Diana, we'll be fine. Compared to sleeping in the woods, this is the lap of luxury." She didn't have to fake a yawn, and Diana seemed mollified. "Right now, I'd be happy sleeping on the floor."

The princess regarded them with some anxiety. "Well -- if either of you are up before sunrise, stop by the kitchen. Meg will insist on fixing breakfast, so I wouldn't insult her by refusing."

Xena chuckled as she surveyed the room's contents, cataloguing entrances and potential weapons. "I'll keep that in mind." She turned to Diana; the warm gratitude on those exquisite features made Gabrielle's skin crawl, and the bard fought off a wave of disgust at her own reaction as she struggled for composure.

'Callisto' spoke again, her voice low and warm.

"Thank you again for all your help. I know things must be difficult right now, and this --" she indicated herself and Gabrielle -- "isn't helping any. If you, your family or your kingdom need any help at all, with anything -- just ask."

Diana's smile was weak but genuine. "And I'll keep that in mind." She turned to Gabrielle, offering a shy, tentative hug, and tears threatened to overwhelm the bard once more; the princess's body wasn't as firmly muscled as Xena's, and the smells weren't quite the same, but the familiarity of the physical sensation was rapidly weakening her hold over her emotions. She returned the embrace with a fierce strength, quickly releasing the other woman when she realized she was squeezing a little harder than she'd intended.

Diana stepped back looking somewhat breathless, glancing nervously at Xena. Finally her gaze returned to Gabrielle, who appeared even more uncomfortable.

"I'll see you in the morning. I, ah...I'd better go make sure Meg was able to find Joxer." Without waiting for a reply, she turned and exited in a swirl of gown. Gabrielle shut the door, drawing an unsteady breath and steeling herself for some kind of confrontation.

She turned and blinked in disbelief at the sight of Xena unrolling her pack and laying out her gear; just as though they were still in the woods.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Liquid brown eyes turned a puzzled gaze on her. "What are you talking about?"

"But I don't want to sleep on the floor!"
Xena rolled her eyes. "I meant you'll be more comfortable if I do."

"Why's that?" Gabrielle's brow furrowed as she knelt beside her friend, annoyance replaced with confusion.

A small quirk of the jaw. "Remember our first year together? Trust me, I need to be as relaxed as possible, or we're both likely to regret it." Her gaze fell, hair cascading forward to conceal her face. Gabrielle shivered even as she hesitantly reached out to take Xena's hand in her own.

The warrior spoke with new resolve, and not a little resignation.

"You know what I'm like even at my best. Being in a bed only makes it worse. Get all tangled up in those covers, and I just feel so..." She swallowed. "Trapped."

Gabrielle squeezed her hand, marveling at the strength in those delicate, birdlike bones. "I understand. It's just...Lilla and I slept together, until I was thirteen and I got my own bed. I guess sometimes I just miss having someone next to me." She smiled tentatively. "Even if she can be a pain in the ass."

Xena chuckled, even as her mind raced to think of a safe response. The bard sighed.

"I know. You're touchy enough already, and now..." A look of distress briefly passed over her face. "Now's not really a good time...Hades, when is there a good time?" She shook her head. "No, really, I understand. But will you promise me that you'll tell me, as soon as you feel...comfortable again?"

"I'm more comfortable with you than anyone else," Xena admitted, returning the squeeze. "I guess it depends on...what exactly you want."

The bard had the presence of mind to blush but didn't withdraw, and Xena finally extracted her hand.

"Now if you don't mind, we should both get some sleep. Even warrior princesses need rest."

Gabrielle gave a snort of disbelief as she pulled off her boots and stood up, tossing her staff onto the enormous bed. A quiet snicker came from the floor, and she turned with a raised eyebrow.

"Something amusing?"

Brown eyes sparkled with quiet merriment. "You that desperate to sleep with something?"

Gabrielle tried to look properly outraged. "Hey, my weapon is my best friend!" She grinned at the mock hurt and betrayal, and a small bit of warmth seemed to touch the part of her that still saw that contorted, ecstatic smile. Perdicas crying out, his face twisted in agony...

Xena pulled off her boots with a sigh, stretching out and closing her eyes; pulling the light sheet over her face like a shroud. Gabrielle ignored the ploy for attention, but the warrior's attempt at playfulness further eased her tension as she traversed the room, extinguishing candle and torch alike until they were plunged into darkness.

She found her way to the bed by memory and dove between the blankets, twisting and turning in a valiant attempt to pull them tighter about herself. Another amused chuckle drifted up from the floor.

"We're quite a pair, huh? I can't stand even the thought of all those covers, and the first thing you
do is wrap up like a mummy."

"W-what's a mummy?" Gabrielle tried to keep her teeth from chattering as she waited for the blankets to warm.

"Remember I told you about the desert people? Who preserve the bodies of their dead?"

"Yeah?"

"That's what us heathens call the body. After they've preserved it."

Gabrielle's natural curiosity asserted itself despite her fatigue and the morbid subject matter. "How do they do that?"

Another chuckle. "Go to sleep, Gabrielle. I'll tell you some other time." A subtle note of wickedness. "It makes great dinner conversation."

"As long as it doesn't make people lose their appetite." The bard's voice took on a speculative tone. "I can't believe it's still this warm. Do you think the priest in that last village was right? That the sun is going to swallow us up?"

"What difference would it make? Everything has to end sooner or later." The musical voice still held a note of humor, tinged with an enormous weariness that seemed entirely due to physical exhaustion. "Still gotta get up in the morning and milk the goats. Everybody wants to be a hero...nobody wants to help Mom with the chores."

The bard rolled onto her side, curling into a ball and wrapping the covers tighter around herself. She'd always been sensitive to the coming of winter, and the only thing Lilla loved more than walking barefoot through snow was shoving a ball of it down her sister's dress. She could dimly remember her father grimly shaking his head, remarking that a winter late in arriving would be long and brutal enough to chill the bones of Hades himself.

"Pretty philosophical stuff for a simple warrior," she teased, in an effort to distract herself. "Why don't we talk like this more often?"

A barely stifled yawn. "Because I only do it when I'm tired enough to think it's interesting?"

The bard gave an exaggerated sigh. "Okay, okay. I can take a hint."

She rolled over once more, trying to loosen the blankets that seemed to have obtained a stranglehold around her. An earlier line of thought resurfaced.

"Xena?"

A subtle amusement, as if another question had been anticipated. "Yeah?"

"What do you think has Diana so worried?" She recalled the tremor in the king's hands; his daughter's obvious concern. "Is Lias going to die?"

"Someday."

Gabrielle snorted. "That's not an answer."

"Sure it is," Xena returned easily. "Don't worry," she continued before her friend could retort. "I'm sure Diana has more than one problem, and I'm sure you can help figure them out." Another yawn, barely audible. "Tomorrow."
"Okay," the bard sighed. "Now I really get the hint."

Her eyes had shut tight in reflex from the cold, and Gabrielle managed to pry them open, finding she was now able to make out dim shapes of furniture. She could just discern the body on the floor, in the pale moonlight that streamed through the room's sole window; patch of blonde hair shockingly visible in the darkness.

"Xena?"

A gentle sigh, but the warrior's voice was still patient. "Yeah?"

"Since we saw Solan, have you thought about...telling him that you're his mother? Not since this happened," she hastily qualified. "That might be a bit much. I just mean...ever? At all?"

She crossed her fingers under the covers, the sudden silence like the ocean's roar. The reply was so quiet it barely reached her ears.

"Yes."

Gabrielle let out her breath as silently as possible; striving to remain casual. "And?"

"What do you want me to say?" The bard's eyes strained in the darkness, unable to see the expression on her friend's face and finding her instincts unsure how to react to the sound of the new voice. But some element of Xena that she couldn't begin to identify still came through. Or maybe, she thought with a twinge of cynicism, my imagination is just really good.

"It was a bad idea to keep him then, and it would be even worse to put that kind of burden on him now." The warrior sounded as though she were trying to convince herself as much as Gabrielle.

"This is an important time in a young man's life..."

"Any moment in anyone's life is important," the bard said softly.

A sharp retort sprang to Xena's lips, and she bit it back; waiting until she could respond with good humor. "I take it you wouldn't be willing to postpone this discussion indefinitely?"

"Not a chance." An overwhelming sense of relief filled her, at how well that had gone, and she decided not to push her luck. "Good night, Xena."

A barely audible exhalation. "Good night, Gabrielle."
If You Really Loved Me, You'd Know What I Mean

Chapter Summary

Mortals play soap operas, but the gods must be crazy.

Mimi: Don't men have a big wound?
Paglia: Men are mutilated beyond repair.
Mimi: By women?
Paglia: No, they're mutilated beyond repair because their identity is impossible. Masculinity is impossible -- it can only exist in a short moment when they are young and vigorous.

Mimi Freed interviews Camille Paglia, Mar/Apr 1993 _On Our Backs_

Setting Orange

Joxer awoke at the first light of dawn, purely by coincidence due to an intense call of nature; leaving the warmth of his bed with an exuberant yell that startled the birds outside his window into taking flight. He was half-dressed before remembering the chamber pot in the corner of the room, and had to strip once more, sighing and swearing under his breath.

Finishing his business as quickly as possible, he scrambled to put on his homemade armor over the meager protection beneath. Every part of his body from head to toe seemed to have its own little icicle embedded inside; he couldn't believe the sun was shining but there it was, bright and beautiful and just starting to rise above the trees. The next priority was breakfast, and the fact that a certain gorgeous woman would be providing it only made the prospect more inviting.

He donned his helmet and removed it just as quickly with a startled yelp at the touch of the chilled metal, settling for tucking it jauntily under one arm. A soft knock came at the door, and he cleared his throat.

"Yes?"

Raven tresses, blue eyes and a wide smile breezed in as the eyes lit upon him. "Morning, Xena! Oh, geez --" He smacked himself in the forehead, staggering back as he realized too late he'd used the hand that carried his helmet.

"Gotta be Diana, he thought dazedly as he felt her arms steadying him.

"And good morning to you, Joxer." The wry greeting brought a hot blush to his face as his eyes roamed over the princess's form. She'd changed from the blue gown of last night to one of a subtle, shimmering green that sang of forest and sea, with a small emerald choker completing the effect. The dark circles under her eyes were still pronounced, but she looked cheerful enough.

He tore his gaze away from the devastating cleavage revealed by her superior position, standing somewhat shakily as she dusted him off.
"Good morning, your majesty." He adjusted his armor, striving for respectful nonchalance, and she frowned. "Sorry -- Diana?"

"That's better," she nodded. "I just wanted to see if you were up. I've got a ton of things to do, but I'd still like to take you and the others out and show you the sights. If you should happen to wander down to the kitchen, I'm sure Meg would love to see you before she gets too busy."

"Yeah?" He brightened at the prospect, remembering he had been headed that way to begin with. "I mean, yeah. Okay. I'll see you later, then!"

"Count on it," she waved, turning and exiting in a swirl of fabric. He hitched up his belt and followed her out, just seeing her turn the corner as he exited his room.

He managed to locate the kitchen after only a candlemark, mostly due to the delicious aromas emanating from therein, as well as the clatter and bustle of female voices and activity. He stopped outside the door, feeling a pang of nostalgia at the familiar sounds and smells; his mother had been more or less happy to indulge him in learning his way around a kitchen, but his warlord father had put a stop to it before he was six years old. Fishing was tolerated slightly more than cooking, and although he'd never actually heard any words of praise, bringing home a big haul always put the old man in a good mood, especially if a raiding party had been unsuccessful; and at those times, he could usually count on his father to intercede if his brothers' torments grew too severe.

He took a deep, appreciative breath as he poked his head inside, basking in the outpouring of warm, moist air before entering and quickly shutting the door behind him. Casting his eye about for Meg, he saw the kitchen was as large as he'd expected but seemed even bigger with only three people in a room that had been designed to accommodate five times that number; apparently most of the servants were still abed or on holiday. Enough garlic hung on the walls to feed an army, while one of the larger tables was covered with a veritable forest of dried and drying plants.

A squeal of delight pierced his ears as Meg set down her knife and grabbed a nearby towel, giving her hands a cursory drying before enveloping him in her embrace. He returned it as best he was able, wincing a bit at the strength in her arms; she might not be Xena, but she'd definitely put on some muscle since they'd last met. Her hair was up in a bun, held with an elegant pin of black stone, and she wore a black apron over a simple but fetching shift and skirt.

She pulled back a little while still retaining her grip, gazing adoringly into his eyes and raising her voice.

"You guys, this is my friend Joxer..." She paused dramatically. "The Mighty."

He cringed inwardly, managing a weak smile and not daring to look at them as she went on. "He's a guest of the princess, and he'll be stayin' a while. So get used to seeing a lot more of him around here."

"Looks like you'll be seeing more of him than some of us," teased a petite blonde girl who was busily washing a pile of plucked chicken carcasses. Meg stuck out her tongue and grinned. "You're just jealous I'm the only one who knows how mighty he really is." Joxer blushed again, squirming a little in her grasp. She wrapped one arm around his shoulders and turned him to face the others. "The little tramp with the sewer mouth is Pegasus, but we all call her Peg --"

"Only 'cause you like the sound of it," the girl warned, shaking a knife in her direction.

"And this gorgeous creature is Teresis." She indicated the wrinkled crone who sat at a table sorting
the piles of dried spices into glass jars. The woman let out a cackle that made Joxer look to see if she was wearing a pointy hat.

"Still makin' trouble, are ya?" She grinned hugely, exposing crooked but otherwise amazingly healthy teeth. "This one won't be happy 'til she's got every young fella in the land chasin’ after me."

"Milady." Joxer stepped forward and gallantly took one veined, knobby hand in his own, bestowing a kiss on it as he gazed reverently into her eyes. Teresis let out a wicked squeal.

"Ooh, you won't have to teach this charmer nothin', will ya?" She wagged a finger of warning in his face, retrieving her hand and trying to hide a smile. Meg abruptly clapped her hands.

"Okay, you two, I want some quality alone time. Go be somewhere else."

Peg snickered. "Sounds like it'd be more interesting to stick around." She moaned dramatically, pressing the back of one hand to her forehead, the other buried to her wrist in the guts of an avian corpse. "Oh, Joxer...oh, when I feel your fiery lips squashing their way across my heaving mounds, that's when I feel that Aphrodite has taught me the true meaning of love --"

She broke off as Meg picked up a knife with a gleam in her eye. Teresis chuckled, rising stiffly from her chair.

"Not as though we're needed today. Come on girl, let's hit the town and see what mischief we can't get into."

Peg expertly skewered the remaining birds and tossed them into a huge metal tub. "You buying?"

"Don't I always?" the old woman cackled as they exited together. Her voice floated back to them. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do, now. 'Course, that don't leave ya with much!"

Their combined laughter echoed down the hall. Meg shook her head, her face nearly as red as Joxer's.

"I tell ya, Jox, I hope I can be half as happy when I'm that old." Her eyes and voice softened, as she turned back to him. "You hungry?"

He nodded, tongue suddenly tied. Meg frowned, placing a hand on his forehead, and he pulled away from the gentle touch, sinking into the chair that Teresis had vacated.

She stood over him uncertainly a moment before turning and walking to the cupboards, rummaging through them with conspicuous clatter. Joxer felt a surge of guilt at his inability to reciprocate her emotions, but the resemblance to Xena was unsettling enough without the memory of their initial encounter. He'd thought she was Xena, everything had gotten more confusing from there, and now he felt like a first-class cad for not telling her how he really felt about Gabrielle. It wasn't fair, even if his chances of winning the bard's heart were a snowball's in Tartarus.

He abruptly raised his eyes; admiring the play of muscle in Meg's calves as she stood on her toes to reach a high shelf. "Why me?"

Her brow furrowed as she turned around, regarding him with some confusion. "Why you what?"

He gestured vaguely, trying to find the words. "I mean, what is it about me? That you...like me?"

She walked over and smacked him playfully in the shoulder. "Yo'goof! Is that what's buggin' ya? What's not to like?"
Joxer lowered his gaze in embarrassment. "I don't know... I mean, I'm not much to look at, I've got no money or fancy title..." He slowed, hesitating as he remembered liquid brown eyes burning into his: I said that you had the heart of a warrior, and I meant it. Are you calling me a liar?

Meg plopped down in his lap and draped her arms about him, her tone growing serious.

"You make me feel good. And it ain't just physical. You were the first customer in years paid any attention to what I wanted." Her voice turned wistful. "You're sweet, and funny, and kind..." *And darn good in the sack,* she grinned to herself. At least after a little intensive training, and she cringed to think of her initially manipulative motivations.

"I don't know what I woulda done when you left if it hadn't been for Diana and her dad. They've been a real family to me ever since I quit the brothel biz. I still miss it sometimes, but... lotta my old girls are workin' here, and I see 'em a lot." Her face fell again. "The ones that still talk to me, anyway."

He squirmed in his seat to adjust her weight and she shifted her hips in response relieving the pressure while creating an entirely different kind of tension. The knowing hunger in her gaze took his breath away; he'd seen overt seduction from her and even outright lust, but this raw sensuality overpowered anything in his experience. She leaned in closer, and her smile spoke of both love and grief.

"Even after you found out I wasn't Xena, you still treated me like a queen. A girl doesn't forget that real easy. I just want to make you as happy as you make me." She planted a soft kiss on his nose, and he looked into her eyes, unable to respond. "Even if your heart will always belong to another."

She leaned her forehead against his, seemingly content to sit there forever, and he tentatively returned her embrace as she snuggled into his arms. They sat like that for a long moment until she reluctantly pulled away, giving his nose a gentle tweak.

"G'wan now, get outta here. I still got stuff to take care of if I'm gonna spend the day with ya." She slid off his lap, helping him to his feet.

"Yeah?" He was confused, but he didn't care. "I mean...your servant, milady." He bowed deeply, taking her hand in his and giving it a kiss to rival the one he'd planted on Teresis.

"Better adjust yourself before you go out in public," she warned with a grin, in what he'd come to think of as her 'Diana' voice. He glanced down with some embarrassment, fumbling at the front of his trousers; she laughed aloud and shoved him in the chest, and he darted from the room with a joyful yell.

Meg gazed after him affectionately, finally turning to the pantry door on the far wall, addressing it with some sarcasm.

"You c'n come out any time."

A disheveled bard emerged from the pantry, covered in dust and cobwebs, glaring resentfully as she clutched her ever-present staff.

"You didn't have to say all that." The gods must be punishing her, Gabrielle decided, for deciding to get up before sunrise. All she'd wanted was a leisurely, quiet breakfast before meeting with an invariably amazed Xena, and she'd been enjoying her conversation with the other women just fine without the perpetual presence of her admirer.

"I woulda said it anyway." Meg folded her arms across her chest and returned the glare, the
resemblance to Xena only further reinforcing the stubbornness. "Didn't have to stay in there when ya heard him."

"I just didn't want to deal with it this early," the bard groaned. "Look, stuff like that just encourages him --"

"Maybe more people oughtta be doin' it," Meg shot back. "He never woulda said nothin' to you, that's for sure."

Gabrielle threw up her hands in dismay, the end of her staff barely missing a nearby shelf of clay pots. "What does anyone expect me to do about it? Is it my fault he follows me around like a homeless puppy?"

"I shoulda known better," Meg muttered darkly, glaring at the bard. "Shoulda known better than ta -- oh, Hades. Just drop it, okay?" She threw herself into her chair, chin on one fist as she stared at the glistening marble tabletop.

Gabrielle sighed, leaving off her nervous pacing, settling into the chair across the table. "I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you --"

Meg snorted. "And I ain't mad at you. But you just -- ooh!" She balled up her fists in frustration, dropping them back to the table with a sigh. "All I did was tell him the truth. I just want him to be happy, and if he doesn't love me like he does you, well..." She shrugged, spreading her hands with a sad smile. "At least I got more'n most women'll ever get."

Gabrielle shook her head in apparent incomprehension, and Meg tried another tack. "Look, I can't stand watchin' him pantin' after you and havin' you not even noticin' he's alive. Even if he never says he loves me," she continued with some emphasis. "Even if he won't marry me...even if he doesn't wanna live with me, Gab! Haven't you ever been in love like that? Where all you wanted was to be with that person, like nothing else in the world mattered?"

The bard's eyes fell away, and Meg continued relentlessly. "Even if kingy...I mean Lias...kicks the bucket, Diana's still got a husband an' a kid. Even if Phil leaves, she's still a princess. I got nobody, Gab, and I'm nothin'! Me 'n Diana..." She looked away, and the bard saw a faint blush. "Not everyone's as understandin' as she is, y'know? And geez, listen to me..." She grinned weakly and made an obvious effort to tighten her diction. "She'd give me Hades if she heard me now, after goin' to all that trouble to get me respectable. Speech lessons, etiquette tutors, nice clothes..."

Gabrielle looked more confused than ever. "What does how you look, or how you talk, have to do with anything?"

Meg leaned back in the chair, throwing her feet onto the table with a solid thump.

"It matters 'cause I look like the princess. An' some people worry I could take over the kingdom, an' some people got nothing better to do than talk an' make trouble. If it didn't matter, Diana could just divorce Phil and be done with it --" She broke off, looking decidedly ill. "Not that she'd ever wanna do that. I mean..."

Gabrielle rose awkwardly from her seat. "How about I make sure Joxer doesn't get lost? Um...yeah, I'll just do that. Okay?" She smiled nervously, backing out of the room and catching her staff momentarily on the doorway.

Meg slumped in her chair, staring after the bard with no little apprehension.
A swath of fire tore a rift in the air, sizzling as it flung itself into the waiting throne and materialized. Ares was sure he looked as sick as he felt inside after witnessing the awful spectacle of the past few hours; every simpering expression of love and camaraderie between these petty mortals was like a knife in his back, their every weakness and hatred utterly resistant to any attempts at manipulation. There was nothing else to look forward to; why not sit on his throne and curse his bad fortune for the rest of eternity, or at least the next millennia?

"Hey, what's the big deal?"

The stridently nasal tone made the metaphysical hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Strife was sitting atop a huge wooden carving of a horse, rocking back and forth as he idly surveyed the enormous map laid out among the floor tiles.

The fledgling god continued, in a voice syrupy with sycophance.

"Discord says she wrapped everything up in Troy and Athens, just like you wanted. Those are mighty big cities, Unk."

"So?" Ares ground out from between his teeth, refusing to meet his nephew's vacant stare. Generally this would suffice, but the arrogant youth had the gall to remain complacent.

"So, I just think it's kind of silly to get all bent out of shape over one warrior. Especially when things are going so smoo--"

Ares never looked up as he blinked Strife out of Olympus.

He allowed himself a grim smile; he knew he couldn't do any permanent damage, but the thought of the hapless youth having to claw his way through a mile of solid rock before he could get his bearings was almost satisfaction enough. The sudden smell of fresh flowers and a shimmer of golden sparkles, however, marked the end of his short-lived triumph and heralded the arrival of his second-least favorite relative.

"Aw, what's the matter, big guy?"

Ares resisted the urge to bury his head in his hands in despair, knowing it would only encourage her. For once, Aphrodite's trademark smirk was absent.

"Betcha think I had something to do with this?" the goddess of Love cooed, clicking her tongue against her teeth when he offered no reply. "Hate to break it to ya, mister spear-and-magic-helmet, but not even the Fates got the future all sewn up."

He glanced over sharply as she sashayed up to his throne with a quick shimmy of hip; regarding her with narrowed eyes when she plopped her curvaceous form down on one of its enormous arms.

"You know, sis, I keep forgetting you're not as dumb as you look."

"I think that's supposed to be a compliment," a dry but melodious voice interjected.

Aphrodite gave a friendly wave to the newcomer, Ares' insult already forgotten as she watched him spin halfway around in his throne and then shrink into it. A raven-haired woman in a war tunic was striding up to them, a quiver and longbow slung across her back.

"How's it hangin', sis?" The Goddess of Love was completely unfazed. "Y'know, I've been meaning to have a talk with you about those two anyway, and it might as well be now --"
"Sorry, 'Dite," came the casual reply as Artemis glared at the war god. "Some other time. You --" she jabbed a finger in Ares' face, her voice full of quiet menace. "Stay away from my Amazons. Or I'll petition Zeus to have you stripped of your godhood...permanently."

"Who said anything about Amazons?" Ares blurted; fighting to keep his bravado intact as he shrank back in his seat. "Get serious! What would I want with that silly, ragged little bunch of yours when I've got a perfectly good warrior princess?"

"You make me sick," hissed the goddess of the Hunt. A hand shot out, grabbing hold of the thick thatch of chest hair exposed through Ares' open vest. Aphrodite giggled.

"Want me to blow in his ear, sis?"

Artemis' eyes bored into his. "I won't say this again. You do anything -- anything -- to jeopardize the safety of my Amazons, and I'll devote the rest of eternity to making you suffer. Clear?"

Ares swallowed his rage and nodded. His adversary released her grasp, wiping her hand on his vest with a look of disgust. She cast a sad glance at her sister, dissolving into a rainbow that became dust motes before fading into the air.

Aphrodite nodded sagely, as though she'd foreseen this.

"Y'know, I think she knows about the Xena thing. Can't say I blame her."

The War God froze, and she looked down at him with disdain. "Oh, puh-leeze! You thought you were getting away with something? Talk about walking in dad's footsteps! Zeus has been pullin' that trick longer'n we've been around."

Ares swallowed as she patted him on the back. "Don't take it so hard. I gotta admit, it was a good plan. Nice fallback too, having more than one. Bring 'em all up different, even the odds a little, figure at least one'll turn out right...yep, definitely coulda worked. Too bad you only got one good warrior out of the bunch." She shook her head in contemplation. "Fate's a bitch, huh?"

"I had her." Ares clenched one massive hand, and the arm of his throne groaned in protest. His voice was a harsh and broken whisper. "I had her! My perfect warrior, everything I envisioned, everything I had hoped for...she was MINE!" The echoes of his shout fell away into sudden impotence, swallowed in the vast corridors of Olympus, and his voice dropped again to a whisper. "You don't get a second chance that good."

Aphrodite sighed as she began massaging his oaken biceps. "You think you've got problems now, Tall, Dark and Furry? You think Zeus was interested in her before? Hell-lo! And he's just as clueless as we are about what happened to the lunatic goddess of blonde." His shoulders tensed further, and she continued, oblivious. "If there's one thing big daddy doesn't like, it's being kept in the dark. You're lucky he still thinks Mom's behind it all."

"You're serious?" The war god's voice was like crushing boulders.

"Hey, would I lie to my favorite brother?" Her fingers dug in harder, staying just the other side of pain.

Ares snorted, closing his eyes. "You always liked Hercules best."

"Look, hon," the goddess sighed as she kept up her gentle ministrations. "You and I may have our differences, but we're still family. I do my thing, you do yours, and we don't hold it against each other, y'know? Besides, sometimes? We make a pretty good team."
His brows knit in furious concentration. "There's something else you're not telling me. Something so obvious I'm missing it, even though it's in plain sight." His massive shoulders bunched underneath her soothing touch. "I hate it when you do that!"

"Pfeh!" she snorted. "Like you never did that to us? 'I got a see-cret, I got a see-cret.' It doesn't take a Pythagoras to figure out why Artie's wanked off." Her fingers dug deeper, evoking a groan. "If you get Xena back, her Amazons are toast and her Chosen is probably first to bite the big one!"

The groan became a growl. "That irritating blonde? Gotta admit, I won't shed any tears."

"Well, you should!" snapped the love goddess. "Because that little blonde is probably your last best hope."

"And since when are they her Amazons, anyway?" A swirl of color detached itself from the air, forming a woman in a long, flowing gown that shimmered like moonlight. Aphrodite blew a kiss to the new arrival while continuing her massage, and Ares' head sank once more into his hands with a pained moan.

"Hello? Did I leave a sign saying, 'Come right in and torment the god of war, no waiting'? Don't you have trees to plant or something?"

"Hey, babe!" the love goddess chirped in greeting. "Don't mind him, he's just brooding." She lowered her voice to a conspicuously loud whisper. "Probably a hormone thing."

Athena nodded briefly. "I'll get right to the point, Ares."

"Oh, please do," he snapped, massaging his temples and wondering what in Tartarus was happening. Ever since his little mortal adventure he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd been somehow diminished, invisibly but irrevocably marked by the experience. Xena's healing touch as she bandaged his wounds might have been the most exquisite torture of all, even without the outward form he'd grown to love...not that Callisto's appearance wasn't pleasant enough. 

*Love?* He scowled bitterly.

Athena stood before him, arms crossed. "Whenever you're ready to rejoin us here on Olympus..."

Aphrodite was still massaging his shoulders. He angrily shrugged off her gentle touch, meeting Athena's gaze with all the courage he could bring to bear.

"You and I know Xena isn't your Chosen." Never had the goddess of wisdom appeared more deserving of her title. "Not mine, or anyone's. I don't know if it's better to have her running around loose, but at least I can adjust to the idea." Her nose turned up slightly. "You, on the other hand, would rather die. Artemis, as Aphrodite so perceptively pointed out, sees Xena as the greatest potential threat to the Amazons --"

The Love Goddess preened, her eyes suddenly narrowing in suspicion. "Hey, just how long have you been listening?"

Athena's lips curled suggestively. "That would be telling."

Aphrodite let out a squeal of outraged delight. "Y'know, I'd really be upset with you for not telling me what you're up to. If I weren't looking forward to it so much."

Athena held up a hand. "Please. It appears our host isn't feeling well, and I don't want to take up any more of his valuable time than necessary."
Her voice hardened with urgency as she stared into pain-filled eyes.

"Tell Xena everything, Ares. Tell her the truth." Aphrodite's hands lay unmoving on her brother's shoulders, her mouth open in wonder as Athena continued with brutal determination. "You know I'm right. You're brute force, I'm skill, we're both War....you can see it, can't you?" She stepped closer, holding his enthralled gaze, spinning visions for him alone.

"Xena has both of those qualities, and she doesn't belong to either of us." Her eyes bore into his. "Let her go."

Then she was gone, leaving only a cool mist in the air.

"Told ya, bro," sighed the goddess of love. "Hurts when you can't let go of something, huh?"

Ares turned a shocked stare upon her. "How --"

She rolled her eyes. "You're, like -- in love with her. Duh!" She leaned forward and landed an affectionate kiss on his cheek before he could recoil away. "Work it out!"

He groaned feebly. "Okay, fine. Everyone's had their poke at me except Dad, and I'm sure he'll be along any minute now to do the big lecture." He fell back and sprawled out as though impaled, despair suffusing his voice. "Now will you please go away, and leave me to suffer in peace!"

Aphrodite ruffled his hair as she stood, giving an extra jiggle solely because he wasn't watching.

"I know you probably won't take my advice, but -- if you really want to make your warrior babe give you a second look, you might start with making up for that broken promise. I know it ain't exactly your style, but who knows? You might get to like it."

Too bad. For a little while, you weren't just mortal...you were human.

"Bingo, babycakes." He looked up abruptly as she waved, a little whirlwind shredding her form into a million flashes of gold that took flight on the breeze and were whisked away out the window. Her voice floated back to him. "Just think about everything it means!"

He stared vacantly into space as Strife emerged from a fiery gate. "Aw, Unk, that wasn't --"

Ares didn't lift a finger, his rage sending out a smoldering thought which caused the godling to fly apart with a terrified shriek and the sound of wet meat.

Truly, he thought as he listened to his nephew slide down the walls; it was the little things in life.

"Will Mother be done soon?"

Daelus cast an uneasy glance across the village toward his commander's tent, and tentatively back at the young prince with whose care he'd been entrusted. The near-constant stares of his fellow centaurs paled next to having to look into those big, innocent eyes as the voices from Kaleipus's tent grew louder, more passionate, and more insistent upon making their point through superior volume. But the boy's mother insisted they remain close by, and the only thing Daelus feared more than his leader was an enraged Amazon. He'd earned a healthy respect for the warrior women when Tyldus had been the one to lead his tribe; from the look of this one, she'd have no qualms about gelding him in a heartbeat.
"Uh...I don't think so, Xenan." From the sound of it, the Amazon was about to start her gelding with Thraxus. Only iron discipline kept Daelus from moving; he'd never been able to sit still for long, and centaur anatomy made most positions rather painful in relatively short order. "Are you hungry? We could get something to eat."

Xenan shook his head, blonde curls bouncing emphatically. "I wish she wouldn't yell at them."

"Why's that?" The serious look was out of place for the boy's age, but seemed familiar; much like the one on Solan's when Kaleipus asked if anyone had been 'bothering' him.

"We had to leave when she yelled at her sisters." Xenan fidgeted uncomfortably as he did his best not to gape at the redheaded bull. The other centaur didn't really look that much older than him but had obviously achieved full growth, being almost the same size as his chief. It was a confusing and awe-inspiring sight for a young centaur who had rarely seen males at all, and never another of his own kind.

"You mean the Amazons?" Daelus found his interest piqued despite himself. The peace treaty with the warrior women had been one of many negotiations with the outside world, and only a few centaurs had braved the inevitable ridicule or censure from their comrades by making any overt contact. Once the ink was dry on a treaty signed with non-centaurs, further interaction was generally deemed unnecessary, even potentially destructive of whatever fragile peace might have been established. "I thought boys weren't allowed to live with the tribe."

The young one's face fell, and Daelus desperately searched for some way to atone for his blunder. "I mean -- you're getting awful big there. Wouldn't be long before they were calling you a man, and you'd have to leave anyway."

Xenan looked up at him with doubtful eyes, his gaze flicking briefly behind and along his own hindquarters. He'd been called a lot of things by the other Amazons, but man definitely wasn't one of them, and his mother's answers to his questions had been more confusing than enlightening. Certainly none of her stories could have prepared him for the smelly, shouting reality that was a centaur village; one inadvertent glance between the legs of these creatures had caused his face twist like when he'd been sick, forced to drink an unbelievably vile tea. Was that what a man looked like? If so, he wasn't sure he'd welcome the change.

He looked up at Daelus, curiosity at war with ingrained shyness. "Aren't there any girl centaurs?"

"You don't ask the easy questions, do you?" Daelus suddenly looked very tired, but the boy just kept giving him that big-eyed expectant look. "Uh...I don't think so. None I ever heard of. Look, are you sure --"

He broke off as the voices from Kaleipus's tent reached a crescendo of volume.

"You're getting so desperate it's affecting your mind!" Thraxus's shout was instantly recognizable by sheer volume. "By the gods, I think you'd be willing to fuck a horse right now!"

"I'll fuck a horse any day over a dumb animal like you!" Kaleipus roared with equal fervor. Daelus cringed, trying to avoid Xenan's gaze, and he looked up as the tent's leather door was flung aside and nearly ripped in half by a fuming Thraxus.

The black-haired centaur stared murderously at them for a long moment before contemptuously flicking his tail and stalking away. Daelus breathed a quiet sigh of relief; while he might have been able to best Thraxus in a fair fight he had no desire to put it to the test, and even less trust that the battle would remain fair for long.
Kaleipus and Ephiny emerged from the tent wearing almost identical scowls, the Amazon's quickly fading as she glimpsed her son across the clearing. Xenan rose and ran to her, throwing his arms about his mother's knees in a hug that more resembled a death grip.

*Let him,* she thought, placing a hand on his head; gently stroking the damp curls. Things weren't likely to calm down any time soon, and she understood the impulse all too well.

"Is everything all right?"

"Just fine, ma'am." Daelus felt a desperate urge to scratch and resisted with all his power, knowing Kaleipus was watching. "What shall I tell the others?"

Kaleipus curled his lip, the half of his face with the missing eye twisting in a fearful rictus.

"I can tell you what I'd *like* you to tell them. But I doubt they'd take it any better from you." A bitter chuckle made its way from his throat. "I'm going to find Solan."

Daelus slowly nodded, unconsciously fingering the sword at his side. With it he'd nearly severed the arm from a young Amazon, a girl barely old enough to bleed. Kaleipus didn't need to justify the decision; in his own eyes, any child should be a leader's first concern.

"He accused you of abandoning the tribe again?"

"Tribes," the chieftain snapped. "As he also reminded me, again!" He slung a pair of waterskins over an already loaded pack and experimentally plucked the string of his enormous bow, listening to its hum before stowing the weapon away.

Daelus watched with growing unease as Ephiny stroked Xenan's hair, the gentle gesture completely at odds with the grim look on her face. Her gaze was firmly fixed upon Kaleipus.

"I'm going with you."

Annoyance and concern were etched into Kaleipus's grizzled features, and he shook his head as Daelus flinched.

"It'll take you at least two days to go around the cliffs. You let me help, we can use ropes, climb straight down and be standing at the edge of the forest before sunset." Ephiny shrugged off the growing malaise, feigning nonchalance she didn't feel; but there was no way in Hades she was letting anyone run off and stick her somewhere to wait like a good girl.

"This isn't your problem," Kaleipus growled. "Take your boy, and get out while you can."

The Amazon's lips hardened in a stubborn line, and Daelus intervened before one of them could draw steel.

"Sir, if Thraxus is going to try anything, he'll do it while you're gone. The further away these two are, the better." He glanced at her and then around the village, moving closer and lowering his voice. "No offense, ma'am. But I think your son's safer with you."

Ephiny cast a glance of relieved thanks that Daelus barely saw before the mask descended over her features again. "Besides, where am I going to go? Back to my so-called sisters?" She spat the word like a curse.

Xenan flinched, wishing again she would remember the good ones. Not everyone had disliked them, or wanted him to leave. Her teeth were bared slightly in a snarl that made all every hair on
his body stand on end, but her eyes were far worse; his mother was the center of his universe, and when that black, dead look came over her it was as though that universe were swallowing him whole.

"Right now, I just want to find my friend." A muscle twitched in her cheek. "And maybe help you along the way. The Amazon Nation can go hang, for all I care."

Xenan shuffled his hooves nervously in the dust and bit his lower lip, feeling a cold ball of sickness in his stomachs. He didn't want anything bad to happen to Solari, or Eponin, or to any of the women. Even Velasca, he supposed, though it wouldn't bode well for his mother to hear it.

Kaleipus was still scowling as he tightened his packstraps. "Let's get going, then. Sooner we're back the better."

Daelus stood a little straighter, yet again resisting that maddening urge to prance. It was so undignified.

"Begging your pardon, sir." The stubborn set of his leader's jaw hastened wits and tongue in equal measure. "If Thraxus thinks he can get away with something while you're gone, he'll certainly try. They won't risk being on their own again so soon --"

"Keep your damn voice down!" Kaleipus actually stamped his foot in frustration as he glanced around, finding more than a few eyes turned in their direction; turning back to Daelus with knotted fists and a murderous glare, and for a moment the young bull thought his commander would throttle the life from him.

"We're wasting time." Ephiny's voice was deadly calm. "Xenan and I are leaving. You two can fight it out or come with us." She turned and took her son's hand, her expression softening as she saw his fear.

"Come on, Xenan. You can help me find Solan while we look for aunt Gabrielle. Does that sound like fun?"

Xenan nodded, reaching out in silent supplication. Ephiny sighed and wrapped her arms around his body, folding him like a newborn as she lifted him with a soft grunt of effort.

"You're getting too big for this," she chuckled, turning and walking away from the silent bulls as he nestled his head on her shoulder. The muscles of her back stood out in sharp relief under the brief top, but her pace was jaunty and never wavered.

Daelus watched admiringly for a moment before noticing his commander doing the same. The two bulls shared a brief smile before Kaleipus reached out and punched him in the arm.

"Are you going to make her carry him all that way by herself?" The older centaur sounded suspiciously amused underneath the gruffness. "Go on. I'll catch up after I've dealt with Thraxus."

His smile lingered as Daelus broke into a trot after the Amazon's dwindling form. The unexpected sound of their laughter followed her on the wind; the smell of her son's soft blonde curls, the faint smell of horse filling her nostrils as she held him close.

_Boys will be boys_, she thought, and smiled. At least these two could keep their hands to themselves.
We finally get inside Xena's head to discover it's as dark as anticipated. Still, she puts on a happy face.

I hate the dead. You can't take vengeance on them.

*Xena, "Adventures in the Sin Trade"

Setting Orange

Gabrielle's near-silent exit registered in Xena's consciousness before she was fully awake, and only years of honed reflex kept her from betraying any sign of movement as the bard quietly shut the door behind her. A small tendril of warning trickled through the satisfaction of the past few days, as she wondered where her friend was going at this hour, and why; but she quashed the nascent worry before it blossomed into full-fledged paranoia. Everyone, including herself, could be excused right now for behaving a little oddly...even if Gabrielle not only awakening before dawn, but voluntarily arising, qualified as more of a minor miracle than simply 'odd'.

She slid out of the makeshift bedding with a hiss and a grimace at the room's chill. And Gabrielle wondered why she didn't like sleeping indoors? Give her a dry bed of leaves and some good furs, and she'd take her chances in a cave, or even a snowdrift. She held her bare feet in her hands a moment before hastily rolling the blankets up and stowing them under the bed. Really, she ought to get started poking around for some answers...at least, as soon as she figured out the right questions.

She pulled distastefully at the skimpy leather armor, snorting in disbelief. The entire outfit needed cleaning, almost as badly as herself. Grabbing her travel pack, she was ready to head down to the river when she stopped with her hand on the huge knob.

You're a guest of the king, for gods' sake! You can have water sent to your room..._hot_ water...

Even as she chastised chastising herself for succumbing, calling herself all kinds of old and soft, she was already pulling the servant's bellrope, impatiently fumbling at the straps of her armor. Hopefully there would be more of those little fluffy things at dinner, though it appeared the royal family might have started cutting back on luxuries.

She shook her head in amazement at some of the more impractical touches in the armor, noting more than a few overly worn portions; one way or another, this outfit would have to go. She'd have Diana take it into town, she decided, and felt a little better for having made the decision. Hah, there was the problem; that part wouldn't unfasten unless she sucked in her gut just...

An abrupt but timid knock came and she glanced up with sharp suspicion. She hesitated only a moment before leaving her dagger sheathed, walking over to the enormous door and pulling it open.

A disheveled servant woman of perhaps twenty summers stood before her, wearing a simple yet
fetching skirt of blue and yellow. She was a few inches shorter than Xena, of slight build, with finely crafted features and dark short-cropped hair that framed even darker, enormous eyes.

Xena offered her most winning smile. "Good morn--"

The woman's eyes went huge. She grabbed at her skirts, turning to flee.

"Hold it!" the warrior barked. She immediately regretted her abruptness, but it worked admirably; the woman lurched to a halt as though she'd been speared, painfully turning to face her interrogator with obvious fear.

"I'm sorry if I startled you." She held out open hands, remaining quite still; resisting the urge to smile. Even among those rare souls not familiar with Callisto by reputation, her smile seemed to have an unnerving effect at best.

"I was hoping someone might have the time to bring me some clean clothes? I've been traveling light and don't have much of my own."

The woman's brows knitted in earnest confusion as Xena held her hopefully nonthreatening position, and she seemed about to speak when another maid came bustling into view, a shorter woman with graying hair beneath a colorful scarf, who carried greater weight on a solidly rounded frame. Retired warriors generally put on weight after they hung up the sword, at least in Xena's experience; but this woman wore her bulk with the ease of many years, her comfortable movements conveying the impression of someone more lithe and graceful.

"What's the holdup, Cilla? We still need --" She broke off as she saw Xena standing in the doorway and offered a broad smile, dusting her hands on her apron, brushing back stray hairs that had escaped the scarf. "Morning, lass. Can I help you with something?"

Xena suppressed a grin at the shocked look on the younger maid's face.

"I don't want to be any bother," she murmured, demurely lowering her gaze. You're a princess, she reminded herself. The guest of one, anyway. Shy young thing. No threat to anyone...

"I'm just looking for clean clothes. Nothing fancy...in fact, if you have some men's clothes that aren't too dressy, that would be fine."

The maid nodded briskly. "Diana had us fill your closet last night. I'm sure you'll be finding something to your liking."

"Thank you." Xena had to paste the smile on, chastising herself unmercifully for not having noticed the nighttime intrusion. Gods, I must have slept like the dead! Then again, she should probably be thankful her sleep had been dreamless.

"Anything else?"

Xena shook her head. "A bath would be nice if there's hot water left, but I really don't --"

"Way ahead of you," The maid chuckled, gesturing down the hall at a pair of boys who were struggling under the weight of a huge, steaming barrel with handles on either side. She turned to her assistant with a frown and a sharp clap of her hands.

"Hop to it now, unless you changed your mind about wanting the holidays off! Oh, and I'm Briyana, milady." She smiled broadly, and Xena automatically returned the gesture. "Anything you need, you ask for me now!"
She grabbed the arm of the unmoving Cilla, leading the dazed younger woman off down the hall with a steady stream of chatter. The girl threw a fearful glance over one shoulder, and Xena was unable to look away from the frightened, confused gaze, even as grunts and splashes grew closer.

The women disappeared around the corner just as the boys, oversized for their tender years, shoved their way awkwardly past wheeling their steaming barrels. As Xena watched in silent astonishment, the troupe quickly filled the enormous tiled tub to near overflowing. She opened her mouth to thank them but they had already turned and scuttled away, casting nervous looks back at her that mirrored Cilla’s.

She shut the door more firmly than necessary, face twisting in a scowl. *Just like old times...*

She stopped, struck with sudden realization at just how much was different; turning and gazing into the tall mirror mounted on the wardrobe door, slowly walking forward until she was barely a foot from the reflection. Staring into alien eyes, she assessed the uncharted terrain that was nearly as familiar as her own skin...

"I hate them! I wish they were dead!" Tears streamed from the girl's eyes as she gripped her torn dress tight in shaking fists, her curly brown hair disheveled and mud-stained. Xena stood by helplessly, unable to think of any words that might comfort her young friend.

"Don't worry, Tirsha," she offered meekly. "If they come around again, I'll..."

"You'll what?" The young girl's eyes spat sheer rage, and Xena flinched away from the murderous intent she saw reflected there. "You'll beat them up again, oh yes, very nice!" Tirsha sobbed harder than ever, trying to choke back the tears and failing miserably.

"Look at you!" She flailed her hand at the powerfully built girl who towered over her, shoulders slumped in misery and doubt. "You never have to worry about anything! If I could do the things you can, I'd make them sorry they ever laid a hand on me!"

Strange, she mused as she returned to the present, how she might once have been angry at this inner reflection; viewed it as weakness. Rather, now she simply felt more aware of the solidity of flesh and bone, muscle and sinew. As though she were starting to...settle in.

And after all, was it so bad? Callisto had always fought her to a standstill, whether out of skill, raw emotion or both. For every weakness of her new form there was some advantage: She may have been stronger, but her nemesis was indisputably faster; she had a longer reach, but Callisto was a smaller target. Xena could intimidate through sheer size, whereas Callisto hid her strength behind a disarmingly weak appearance. Her own instincts had been honed by years of experience, but this new body seemed nearly a decade younger, even with its expected unique set of aches and pains. Her respect for her foe went up a notch, along with a groan at the thought of how many workouts it would take to reattain the physical peak she'd always strived for.

*Not to mention,* she remembered, with no small amazement, *she caught my chakram without a scratch, and with no training!* Could she have done the same at that age, if her own life had depended on it?

She stuck out an impish tongue at her reflection, giggling at the sight and quickly sobering. If she tried that with anyone else around, she'd probably be thrown in the dungeon before she could blink.
Getting back in shape would require serious discipline, and the sooner the better.

She straightened her shoulders, grimacing at the oily feel of the hair between her fingers; some of the braids had likely been in for months. As she located the hidden spots where the armor came apart, she contemplated the insanity of a soul that lusted for oblivion yet still cared about such trivia. It brought to mind a disquieting image of Callisto, sitting alone in the forest; rocking back and forth, humming tunelessly while she braided her hair.

*At least she bathed, if not very often.* A fleeting tingle of remorse came, for thinking ill of the dead.

*I thought you hated her,* said a soft voice from within. Whether it was her mother, one of the many dead from her past or her own conscience, that voice always triggered a crushing reflex of guilt and sorrow. At those moments, she felt she would pay any price to be rid of these invisible crosses she had taken up since making a conscious decision to fight for the good. Callisto was right about one thing; it was so much easier not to feel.

*If Gabrielle could forgive her, so can I.* It sounded overly defensive, even vehement. *Isn't that the point? That anyone can change?*

The figure in the mirror gazed back, armor stripped completely away, coolly surveying her from head to toe. As she'd expected, there were plenty of scars, though somewhat less than her old flesh. She'd have to remember to eat more, both for added muscle and the warmth a little extra fat would bring.

As she watched the fingers in the mirror they trailed hesitantly over her belly, and a multitude of thoughts rushed through her, attractive and repulsive in equal measure. Her nipples stiffened to brutal points in response.

*Not yet,* she thought with a rueful smile as she turned away, easing herself into the steaming tub, the unruly flesh calming as it entered the water. *I should at least get a kiss first.*

She hesitated, struck by another notion, before giving in to curiosity, spreading her legs and probing gently for any trace of maidenhead. She didn't smile when her suspicions were confirmed. *As if her virginity would have lasted five minutes after all that. A girl that pretty, lost, frightened... alone...* 

...Callisto as a thin and pale child in rags, her face bloody and tearful, mute with clenched fists as a soldier held her down and violated her. The small hand creeping unnoticed around his belt as he buried his face in the hollow of her neck, the smell of wine and the filth of his tongue licking desperately at her; the panting moans that became a high-pitched shriek, pain of penetration turning to ecstatic glee as she twisted it into his side; that terrible thickness suddenly ripped from her as she scrambled back, eyes bright and a savage grin twisting her features at the sound of his screams. Blood pouring from the huge, ragged wound, his hands flapping ineffectually in a vain attempt to to staunch the flow; she sat transfixed, watching his jaw open and twitching, his cries slowly growing fainter. She drew closer, all thought of danger overwhelmed by the burning desire to see the light leave his eyes...

Reality flew back with a shuddering snap; the water still warm, the only sound in the room her own ragged breath. Xena fought off a surge of undirected anger, submerging herself entirely, scrubbing furiously at the roots of hair in a futile attempt to unravel the braids; surfaced with a splutter, reaching over the side of the tub and grabbing the small skinning knife that sat by the piled armor, slicing off the braids on either side by feel alone. Running her hands over her head to squeeze the water out, feeling as though she might tear her brain from her skull. Hot tears running from tightly
clenched eyes that she wiped away as though they burned her skin.

She turned and stared again into the mirror, resting her chin on the edge of the in critical appraisal, wondering what she was looking for. If Callisto could change her personality, she could certainly change her hairstyle without anyone's permission!

Her gaze fell upon the discarded armor, bringing to mind the decision to have it retooled. Despite her twinge of guilt at the seeming vanity, there were plenty of practical arguments; all it took was one piece coming loose at a crucial moment, and the next thing you knew you were spilling your guts to Charon, begging him to loan you a dinar for the ride.

She rose from the waters with renewed purpose and energy, ignoring her skin's immediate response to the chill of the room. If she passed over the fancy dresses and impractical skirts, there just might be something to wear in one of those huge closets. Though she'd never admit it to Gabrielle, Xena had always enjoyed playing with "costumes"; whether childhood games, or adult ones that were deadly serious.

Clothes make the woman, she thought grimly, and strode dripping to the closet doors, flinging them wide. Let's see what we got.

Joxer looked up from his bowl at the sound of the door and very nearly inhaled his spoon, causing both Gabrielle and Diana to pause in their conversation and look up. The two women found themselves likewise entranced as Xena entered the kitchen, sniffing deeply at the delicious aromas within before noticing the rapt stares of the others, rolling her eyes and sliding into an empty chair next to the bard. Even Meg paused in her labors to let out a decidedly wolfish whistle, blushing furiously as Joxer gave her a puzzled look.

The changes were subtle but all the more arresting for their effect, with the still-damp, normally wild blonde hair tied back in a single large tail that was almost a topknot, giving her an elfin appearance; the dark and penetrating eyes seeming larger without the unruly mane flying about, gaunt cheekbones even more sharply pronounced. Her new clothing consisted of black leather pants and a casual shirt of a soft, dark green, with leather lacing at the neck; and when Gabrielle glanced under the table she found bare feet.

The toes wiggled in response, and she broke into a smile.

"You look like Autolycus's little sister, wearing his castoffs." The oversize clothes only contributed to this image, and she giggled at the thought. "Queen of Thieves?"

"What can I say?" Xena shrugged, smile seemingly unforced despite being the center of attention. "It was time for a change." Her gaze roamed over the table and brightened as she spied a tray of fluffy pastries, and she reached over to grab a handful, popping one into her mouth with a delighted hum. Meg didn't miss the casual appropriation, rolling her eyes as she returned her attention to the vast number of dishes she was simultaneously attending to.

"It's certainly less..." Diana struggled for an appropriate euphemism as the warrior explored a tall container of pickled vegetables, long fingers barely unable to reach its sole remaining inhabitant. "Intimidating."

Gabrielle chuckled, the amusing mental image and Xena's relaxed presentation putting her at ease. "Doesn't feel like you brushed it a hundred strokes."

"Not even one." Xena didn't look as she slapped away the offending hand. "Ran my fingers through
Diana shuddered in mock dismay before relaxing into a real laugh. "Gods, it seems like forever since mine got that kind of treatment. I just don't have the servants, let alone the time."

Meg thumbed her nose at the princess, who raised her hands in surrender.


The cook leaned over Joxer, purring into his ear. "And I'll brush yours too, tiger, if ya grow it long..." She danced away again as his mouth slowed and stopped, a small bit of porridge falling out before he hurriedly snapped it shut and resumed his meal.

Gabrielle grinned as she noted the rapidly dwindling plateful of pastries. "I notice you've succumbed once more to the rigorous luxuries of palace life."

The warrior leaned back with a calculating look, carefully balancing her chair on its rear legs.

"Now that I think about it, Diana, what sort of financial shape is the kingdom in? This seems like an awful lot of effort just to keep us fed." The barest upward curve of her lips. "Not that I don't appreciate the puffy things."

The princess smiled, but didn't appear particularly amused. "Don't worry. Even at the rate I've been spending it, the treasury's in no danger of running dry within my lifetime."

Xena's ears immediately perked up. *Show me the money...*

"I think I'm starting to catch on. Every time we've been here, you've gotten rid of some of the old guard...dismantled more of their legacy. So you've got a lot of folks out of work and looking for revenge, a new job or both. Getting warm?"

Diana nodded, drinking deeply from a large fired mug which contained some black and bitter-smelling brew, whose aroma permeated the entire kitchen.

"I've done my best to encourage the people to stand up and make their voices heard, but I don't want to unduly influence them. I wanted to show good faith on our part by getting rid of all the parasites and petty tyrants that kept crawling out of the woodwork." The princess shook her head in distaste. "It's rather discouraging to discover so many opportunists and thieves all in one place. I ended up getting rid of every appointee and subaltern, every minister of this and that...all but our army and a select few commanders."

Xena pursed her lips at the severity of the cuts. And where had all the bad men gone? Somehow, she doubted most of them had found honest work.

"Then Bilinus, the old Minister of Finance, actually came to me on his knees, begging to at least have his old room back. I told him it had been converted into a hospice along with most of that wing, but he was welcome to sleep in one of the cots even if he wasn't injured or sick." The princess's hand rose and rubbed distractedly at her temples. "He...attacked me."

Gabrielle and Joxer gave a start, and Xena's heart went out to the idealistic young woman. *Always hurts more when you're trying to help.*

"What happened? Were you hurt?"

Diana's lips twisted bitterly. "Not at all. I was still surrounded by guards day and night. He must
have been out of his mind...it took three men to hold him down." She swallowed. "One of the guards bore him a grudge...always said his wages were being shorted, and something about an old gambling debt. I don't know." She shook her head, as if in wonder that people did such things.

"He threatened to kill Bilinus, and I think if I hadn't been there his friends would have covered it up. I told them he would get a fair trial, and to put him in one of the beds in the hospice. The next morning, his heart had stopped." She clucked in mock outrage. "Terrible shame, but -- they do have a way of doing that with a handful of daggers in them."

Gabrielle swallowed, and Xena made a polite murmur of agreement as Joxer stared into his empty porridge bowl.

"So the next thing I know, I'm shouting at the commander of my army to get off his --" The old modesty momentarily reappeared. "Behind...and do something, since he's supposedly accountable for the behavior of his men. He just shouted right back, called me stupid or suicidal for reducing the guard, said nothing would have happened if I'd marry a proper king. Let him run things." A growl came from deep in her throat, and she forced it back.

"So I disbanded the army."

Xena gaped wordlessly and then lowered her feet, the chair's legs coming to the ground with a solid thump as she leaned forward. "You'll pardon my honesty if I say that was awfully stupid, your majesty."

More than one gasp came from the observers, but Diana only shrugged, as if to say the warrior wasn't alone in her assessment.

"You could have disciplined those responsible, or thrown them out. But this?" The brown eyes were huge with confusion. "That's asking to wake up the same way as Bilinus! There must have been an easier way, even if it wasn't as satisfying. Don't the needs of the kingdom come before your need for vengeance?"

Joxer felt Meg's reassuring hands on his shoulders, but they couldn't assuage the tiny knot of cold growing in the pit of his stomach. For her own part the bard was completely enthralled, lost in trying to unravel the many possible depths of meaning in her friend's words.

The princess rubbed her eyes as if she were still half asleep. "The kingdom's needs are the people's needs, and the people never asked to have a castle built. They certainly didn't ask to be made to pay for it. And I didn't feel comfortable just giving it away," she smiled. "Who on earth would I give it to?"

Xena frowned but remained silent, and Diana continued. "The first thing to do was reduce spending. With so much of the castle being converted to other uses we only kept a small staff, but only those we knew well. The rest found jobs in the city or went to work in the hospice."

"And the army?" The warrior's tone was casual, but her posture still appeared somewhat stiff.

"I announced that I'd interview anyone who wanted to be considered for a position. It took most of a day, and our forces are just under two hundred instead of three. I still think that's a bit much, but the council wouldn't stand for anything less."

_Council, huh?_ Xena made a polite noise of acknowledgement and leaned back in her chair, apparently satisfied for the time being. Meg left her boiling pots long enough to shove another bowl of fruit and porridge under Joxer's nose, glancing around to assure herself of her projects' integrity.
before removing her apron with a little flourish and a satisfied smile, hurling it into a corner and hurrying to the washtub to scrub up. Her clothing more closely matched Diana's today, the colors and patterns similar but not identical. Xena's eyes flicked back and forth between the two mirrors of herself as the cook slowly approached the table.

The princess took a sip from her beverage, scowling daintily at its taste or temperature.

"Meg, there's no need for you to stay in. This might be our last bit of decent weather --"

"Sh!" the cook warned, holding a finger to her lips. "I'm not done gettin' ready for tonight! You want the snow to hear you and come faster?"

Diana smiled reassuringly as Joxer's hands clapped over his mouth and he uttered a violent, muffled grunt. Gabrielle leaned over toward Xena, glaring at Joxer and pitching her voice low.

"Could you tell me why he has to do that?"

"Thanks for helping," Gabrielle whispered with another glare. Meg stifled a giggle, prompting an indulgent smile from the princess.

"You know there won't be that many guests, and you've already done enough that you gave your assistants the afternoon off. Why not do the same for yourself?" Diana clasped her twin's hand as the cook leaned over her, returning the affectionate squeeze. "I'll definitely need your help keeping an eye on _these_ two!"

"Xena..." Gabrielle muttered from one corner of her mouth, trying to smile from the other. "Are you sure you haven't been telling people to keep me out of trouble?"

"You kidding?" The warrior's innocent look almost appeared too practiced to be genuine. "After the last few times, I'm surprised she didn't throw us in the dungeon herself to avoid all the agony."

"Xena," the princess admonished. "You're my friends. I'd much rather spend the day with you than arguing myself hoarse in some smoke-filled room!"

The warrior gave a knowing nod, helping herself to cold mutton and looking about for nutless bread. "Worst part about being a leader. Only way to get a consensus is to make sure the ropes are all the same length." Her eyes twinkled with dark mischief.

"Xena!" Gabrielle choked, wiping crumbs from her mouth.

"Don't worry, Gabrielle, it's a joke." Diana smiled wearily. "Sort of." Her eyes met the warrior's, and they nodded in mutual understanding. Xena cleared her throat with some hesitation.

"Gabrielle, I need you to take my armor into town. I've written up the instructions. Anyone who can understand them should be safe enough to leave it with."

"You're sure you don't want to come along?"

"Too soon." The warrior shook her head. "Maybe in a few days. After I get settled in."

"You said you wanted to keep a low profile," Diana nodded as she stood. "So I took the liberty of arranging for one of the servants to show you around and answer any questions you might have..."
while I'm gone. Father should be awake this afternoon, but we'll try to be back sooner."

Xena's face remained impassive even as her suspicions rose, another memory bringing a flood of panicky associations. If Lias was still king, even with the increased authority his daughter appeared to be taking on, why couldn't he answer questions himself? Surely the princess couldn't be deliberately keeping her father ill; and the pain of memory threatened as she kept tight rein on her inner turmoil.

The bard risked a quick hug of her friend as she rose from her seat, and was pleasantly surprised when the gesture was returned in kind. She breathed in that exotic, unnameable scent again, releasing her grip before the casual feeling disappeared.

"So this is only a temporary look?"

"Tired of it already, huh?" The warrior grinned unexpectedly. "Don't worry. I'll probably be changing it pretty often for a while."

Gabrielle returned the smile, feeling a little weight leave her shoulders. At least Xena was feeling more relaxed.
Chapter Summary

A shopping expedition temporarily loses one member, who gains a new wardrobe.

When civil strife [began] in the cities...men changed. Frantic haste became part of a man's quality...if anyone made safety the condition for conspiracy, it was a specious pretext for evasion. The lover of violence was always trusted, and his opponent suspected...it was praiseworthy to strike first, while your opponent was meditating an injury, and to incite a man to strike who was not thinking of it.

_Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War_

Setting Orange

"Are you sure you want to wait until tomorrow?" Diana glanced behind to ensure everyone was staying together, leading the way as the small party exited the blacksmith's shop. "There are plenty of bards there, too. There are so many people I want you to meet, I hardly know where to begin!"

Gabrielle shook her head, dodging an enormous bundle of red fur encased in an outrageously adorned full-body suit of armor as it barrelled past them and into the building they had just vacated.

"I appreciate the thought, but right now I'd settle for lunch. Those big ideas will still be in the philosopher's square come tomorrow, but a good meal might not be." She waited for the inevitable expression of amazement that she sounded more like a warrior than a bard.

"Not to mention some of those bargains," Meg chimed in. Her hair still up in a bun like Diana's, she was nonetheless easily distinguished from the princess by the fact that she clung possessively and perpetually to her paramour's arm, appearing content with this meager contact even without his undivided attention. Joxer was still in a daze from the enormous display of exotic weaponry, and was quietly mumbling their names under his breath, his usual method he employed to commit a thing to memory; generally to the frustration of those around, or at least Gabrielle's.

Diana heaved an exaggerated sigh. "One bargain leaves town, another takes its place the next day. Maybe before the day is through." She shook her head, smiling fondly at her doppelganger. "Today Athens is the center of the world, yesterday it was Mycanae. Who knows where it will be tomorrow?"

"I still can't get over how easy that was," Gabrielle interjected. "Or that you found someone willing to take a custom job on such short notice. And for such a low price! Even if you are the princess..."

Diana gestured broadly to indicate the entire lengthy, narrow thoroughfare. The road teemed with rushing figures in all colors and manners of dress, swarming in every direction like an ant army with only slightly less underlying order.
"Gabrielle, I've gone to a lot of trouble to make sure I'm treated the same as any other customer. I spent too long with everyone bending over backwards to please me. As long as they're polite, I don't care!" Her laugh was carefree, her hair and dress whipping about in the chill wind that blew on despite the brightly shining sun and clear sky. "There are two other smiths within five minutes who claim to be equally skilled. Maybe they'd be too busy, and I'd have to accept his original offer--but I'm sure he didn't want to chance it. And I don't know where you've been shopping, but around here those prices are about average."

"Really?" Gabrielle grasped her staff in the crook of an elbow as she rubbed her hands together in anticipation. "This is going to be great! Xena hates haggling so much, she leaves most of the shopping to me. Except the armor and weapons stuff." Her head swiveled about as she tried to take in the entire marketplace and failed. "I could be here for days! Diana, this is downright dangerous!"

"Uh, Gab..." Joxer came out of his reverie with a worried expression, glancing furtively about. "Ix-nay on the Eena-Xay...eh?"

The bard's face fell, and Meg hastily intervened before the change in her mood could take root.

"Hey, Di. Isn't that Jet?"

"Where?" Joxer blurted, sudden fear in his eyes.

"You know it is," retorted the princess. She hailed a beefy red-haired man who was walking up the middle of the street, adroitly dodging carts, animals and people alike. "Ahoy! Jetro!"

"Eh? I'm no pirate!" The man's head swung about, and he smiled widely as he trotted over to the small group. His dress was plain but of high quality, and included a battered but rakish hat of foreign design that appeared well cared for. Gabrielle felt a small urge to try to guess at his occupation or history, and if it might be as interesting or more than her own; the man looked to be about her father's age, and she'd found that such people had usually seen and learned either quite a lot, or almost nothing at all.

"Afternoon, your majesty." Jetro bowed deeply, the skin around his eyes crinkling in an unmistakably friendly manner. "Haven't seen you this week. That fool council still keeping you busy?"

Diana sounded somewhat disapproving even as her voice betrayed a smile. "Just because you don't see any value in it, you shouldn't discourage others from participating. And I told you to call me by my name."

"Me?" the man chuckled. "I just speak my mind and live my life, and let folks figure things out from their end. And as regards your title, let's just say you won't teach an old dog new tricks...Mornin', Meg. Like the hair." He tipped his hat to Joxer's shadow, who blew him a jaunty kiss and snuggled still closer to her escort. Gabrielle frowned at the overt display of affection, wondering why she was even reacting; it certainly wasn't because she was jealous. Was it merely their sharing something that excluded her?

Diana turned to her friends. "Gabrielle, Joxer, I'd like you to meet Jetro. If it can be found, he'll find you the best quality at the lowest price...for a modest commission, of course."

Jetro smiled mournfully at Gabrielle. "When we first met, she accused me of starving widows and orphans. Now she goes to all this trouble to drum up business?" He lowered his voice to a conspiracy-laden whisper, glancing around as if to detect hidden observers. "Personally, I think she
just wants to make up for causing me so much grief."

Joxer felt Meg whisper in his ear: "He got us mixed up and made his wife mad!" He stifled a laugh at both the revelation and the tickling.

Gabrielle offered a winning smile, returning Jetro's bow. "Now that you mention it, I suppose I should pick up some warmer clothes." She heaved her shoulders in an exaggerated sigh. "Of course, that would mean admitting she was right."

"You mean Zee --" Joxer broke off in a frantic coughing fit, wiping his eyes as Gabrielle pointedly ignored him.

Jetro shook his head solemnly. "Good luck, miss. Noone knows for sure when Persephone's off to her infernal boyfriend's, and good warm clothes is first on everyone's list."

"Don't be silly, Gabrielle." The princess's interjection was quite polished and carried no hint of subterfuge. "I have an entire castle full of clothes you can wear. If you're going to buy anything while you're here, you should save your dinars for something really special."

"No way!" Meg insisted, actually releasing Joxer to drive home her point with emphatic gestures. "You want special, Gab? I've seen some of the stuff out there, and you could spend weeks just goin' through it all." She blushed and cast a sidelong glance at Diana. "Not that your wardrobe's not nice, but..."

"Just not much new or different?" Diana smiled. "I suppose you're right." She shook a warning finger at the bard. "But don't you dare spend any more without checking with me first!"

Gabrielle laughed heartily. "You know, when you say things like that, you look just like her?"

The others fell silent, Jetro's confusion only increasing as they milled uncertainly around the storefront like the restless crowds that surrounded them. Meg's hand slowly crept back into Joxer's comforting embrace, and the bard regarded her friends cautiously.

"So tell me more about this council. What exactly do they do, and how did it get started?"

"I'd ask Jetro if I were you," the princess replied with a sly smile. "As their biggest critic, you can count on him to be an objective observer. I can always clear up anything he happens to be...misinformed on." Jetro cleared his throat, looking rather uneasy, but appeared resigned to his fate as the bard twined her arm through his and turned to her friends.

"I'll catch up with you soon --"

Diana waved. "Take your time. You'll never see it all in one day." She turned to Meg and Joxer with a mischievous grin. "Come on -- let's see how long it takes her to find us!"

Meg disentangled herself with a gleeful yell and followed, both women hitching up their skirts as they ran, with passersby alternately cursing and cheering in recognition. Joxer broke into a hasty gallop, leaping clumsily over a beggar's outstretched legs and noticing in passing that one of them had been replaced by a wooden stump.

As long as I live, he thought, trying to keep his eyes on the road and the laughing, running pair of Xenas just ahead, I will never, ever understand women.

Although he'd hated shopping in the past, Joxer was deciding that a lack of dinars wasn't a big deal
if you derived your enjoyment from simply looking. In any event, it was difficult to be impressed by too many of the sights with Meg clinging to his arm like a starving leech; and with Gabrielle out of both sight and mind for the moment, he'd allowed himself to relax and enjoy the attention. The palpable good cheer emanating from his attractive companions was insidiously infectious, and he was soon being willingly pulled through the maze of stalls and buildings as the women sniffed out bargains like trained hounds, apologizing left and right as he inevitably collided with other pedestrians. Merchants took up the bulk of the space, but there were a great many whose purpose was not readily apparent, and which upon closer inspection only drove him to greater confusion; from the oracle whose eyes were deep, unending holes of black to the mad genius constructing a system of water pipes which he boasted would make the Romans' silly aqueducts crumble in shame.

The main square was also home to a number of performers, the most visible one being a brightly costumed juggler who was demonstrating his skill with a number of assorted objects as he made his way through the crowd. Meg chuckled ominously, as she pulled him out of the juggler's path.

"How about a tattoo, big guy?"

He gulped as the princess cocked a warning eyebrow, and the cook held up both hands. "Hey, it was just a thought."

Mischief twinkled in Diana's eyes. "Are you trying to corrupt this young man?"

"Hey!" Joxer puffing out his chest, letting the arm around Meg's shoulders drift down to her hip; pulling her closer with a lecherous grin. "I'll have you know I'm the most corrupt person that ever lived, why -- Hestian virgins flee in terror at the mention of my name. Temples crumble when I so much as glance in their direction!"

"That's the spirit!" Meg crowed, settling comfortably into the intimate embrace with a victorious smile. "Seriously, guy. You just gotta relax." Her tone turned quite wicked. "See anything ya wanna...see on me?"

"I'm sure that will teach him to relax," Diana dryly interjected, watching Joxer's internal pressure soar to new heights. She pointed to one stall that looked as though a number of fabric and clothing stores from every corner of the earth had been thrown together, blown apart and then hastily reassembled. "How about that purple...my, I think that's real silk. Although that trim would have to go."

"Not bad," Meg nodded, duly impressed. "But cut that neckline down a bit too, while you're at it. You look better in green anyway."

"No," Diana gently chided, reaching around Joxer's back and poking her twin in the ribs. "You look better in purple. Remember?"

Joxer looked back and forth, as befuddled as he'd ever been by conversation that seemed to contain some hidden subtext he wasn't privy to. The two women were smiling as they gazed affectionately into each other's eyes and he felt very out of place between them, the princess's lush body pressed against him nearly as intimately as...

"Hey, Jox?" Meg chucked him on the chin, waving her hand before his face. "I think we lost him..."

He shook his head, trying to regain what little poise he possessed as he summoned another lascivious grin. "Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of the, uh...bridal persuasion."
Diana cocked an eyebrow, and Joxer blinked at the memory of Xena wearing that same look on countless occasions. "Formal or honeymoon?"

Joxer licked his lips, thinking this conversation seemed more surreal by the moment. "Honeymoon. Definitely."

"Might haveta arrange a private showing." Meg shivered interestingly, lowering her voice. "Don't want me locked up for public lewdity, do ya?"

A snort of laughter from Diana. "Who's going to lock you up? It certainly won't be me!" She shook a warning finger at Meg. "And don't you dare start!"

Joxer's ears were ablaze, and he desperately cast about for some anchor in the storm, breathing a sigh of relief when he spotted Gabrielle pushing her way through the crowds. The young woman wore an annoyed expression as she elbowed people aside, occasionally resorting to the use of her staff.

"There you are," she snapped, with no little irritation. "Why didn't you tell me it would be this hard to find you?"

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle --" Diana disengaged herself from the others and stepped forward to take the bard's reluctant hand. "I keep forgetting how disorienting it can be. I really thought things would slow down with winter coming."

"It's okay." The bard appeared somewhat mollified. "But what brought them all here in the first place?"

Diana vaguely indicated the surrounding crowd. "There's no single reason, but it seems to have coincided with the abolition of slavery. You remember that was one of the conditions of my marriage?" Gabrielle nodded.

"An advisor to Mineus convinced him the treaty was only valid if my husband was already a king, so when I married Philemon instead of him, I had to go through the whole treaty all over again." A grim chuckle. "If you think he was scared when he saw Xena fighting and thought it was me, you should have been there when Philemon and I arrived. He took one look at me and nearly wet his pants. I don't know what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn't my asking for his brother's hand in marriage. I've never seen anyone say yes that quickly."

"I know the feelin'," Meg grinned. "Learned that dressin' like Xena. Nothin' spells respect like fear!"

The bard frowned. "Meg, a reputation can be as much a burden as a gift --" She winced, biting her lip at the look on the other woman's face.

Diana motioned them to one side to allow an overloaded wagon to pass, taking further advantage of their movement by changing the subject. "What else did Jetro tell you?"

"That you weren't getting a lot of sleep these days." Gabrielle gave a nonchalant shrug. "I can understand how frustrating it must have been to set up the council and see it taken over by a handful of people with more dinars than good sense. I don't think I'd be able to watch something like that, if I knew I could prevent it."

Diana waved aside the bard's concern.

"I told you, Jetro's the one who most thinks it's all a great waste of time. He's been predicting its
demise since the whole thing began, but he was one of my father's greatest supporters for many
years, before I was even born. You heard him. He's just old-fashioned...you know, terribly loyal to
tradition. But he was a great help when it came to financial advice, and before you ask, he is not a
con man or any kind of --"

Gabrielle held up both hands. "Hey, take it easy. I'm sure he's a great guy." She fumbled for some
balm, to sooth whatever wound she might have opened. "I actually know someone a lot like him."

The princess's grim smile brought fresh memories of Xena to everyone's mind. "My apologies. Too
many people lately have tried to smear his good name, and of course he's too proud to accept my
assistance. I don't think he quite knows how to treat me." Her cheeks puffed out in profound
exasperation. "It's not as though I haven't told him how I want to be treated."

"How's that?" Joxer asked curiously.

"Like me," Meg said softly, causing Joxer and Gabrielle to look at her with very startled
expressions. "I mean...just like anybody else. Right, Di?"

"Hey," Joxer quickly interjected. "Probably doesn't make it easier looking like a famous warrior,
 huh?"

"Tell me about it!" both women uttered simultaneously, breaking into a round of laughter that
while somewhat strained, allowed the others to join in without feeling awkward. Gabrielle was first
to recover, and used the easing of tension to reflect on what might be the most promising lines of
inquiry.

"Do you think Mineus found out he'd been tricked?"

The princess nodded as they resumed walking. "He must have, by now. With no restrictions on our
borders, it's impossible to keep track of everyone, much less who they might be working for. I'd
hoped it would encourage people to interact with their neighbors." She grimaced, clear a bitterness
from her mouth. "After all, it's in everyone's interests to keep the peace."

Meg scowled. "An' I'll bet that slimy bastard would love to see us all hack each other to bits, Amazons an' centaurs too. All he'd have ta do's move in and mop up the mess!"

Diana bore the outburst with an air of long-suffering patience. "And I told you he doesn't dare pass
water right now, no matter how much he wants revenge. If our reports are accurate, he can't spare
the resources to get spies into the Amazon camps or the centaurs. And I doubt either would let him
within arrow range, let alone listen to anything he had to say." She lowered her voice, a note of
urgency creeping in. "His kingdom has been on the verge of rebellion, even before the latest tax
increase. If we can just wait him out --"

Joxer felt ready to yawn despite his interest in the convoluted political web Diana was weaving,
and desperately cast around for something to focus on. Reminding himself not to wander too far, he
spotted a puppeteer's display and wandered over, watching with some interest until he realized he'd
seen this one before. He'd always preferred Gabrielle's version, but now found himself unsure if
this was due solely to his romantic feelings for the bard.

The thought of Meg brought a fresh surge of guilt, and more than a little frustration. Most men
would give their right arm for a woman who loved them so completely. Was he doomed to be
perpetually trapped between women he would never deserve?

Gabrielle's voice rose in anger, and he realized that a group of roughly dressed men had
approached the women and were circling them in a decidedly predatory fashion. As if in a dream, Joxer found himself walking up to the largest man and laying one hand calmly on a muscled and extremely hairy forearm. His stomach was screaming bloody murder, but he smiled.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?"

"Trust me, they ain't no gentlemen," Meg returned. The sass was still there but she was obviously worried, fists clenched as she looked from one man to the next. "Don't worry Jox, I got things covered --"

"Covered, nothing!" Gabrielle was flushed with equal offense and outrage. "You should have heard what he called these two --"

"Ladies, please!" A black-haired ruffian proffered a greasy smile. "All we said was --"

"Everyone heard what you said," Diana quietly interjected. The men froze in uncertainty, glancing around the square; relaxing as the crowd began to slowly disperse.

"Looks like everybody heard ‘n nobody cares, huh?" another man laughed. Diana turned a sorrowful gaze on him.

"They may not want to get involved, but they hear every word." Her voice sounded genuinely regretful. "You can do what you want to me, but they still remember that if I go, they're next. One of these days you'll push them too far." Her face was suddenly taut and cold, the ghost of Xena glaring out at them.

"Enough talk!" The first man's lip curled with contempt. "I don't care what our orders are. I want her ass!"

Gabrielle stepped forward with outstretched hands, butterflies gnawing at her innards "Now, fellows, I think it'd be in everyone's best interest if we clarified our terms. When you say that you want her ass, do you mean it in the sense --"

"GET HER!"

The bard ducked and rolled, hearing an agonized yell from Joxer, an answering screech of fury from Meg that sounded uncannily like Xena's battle cry. She swung the staff about her, praying she wouldn't lose her grip, and the men scattered with a satisfyingly healthy respect.

"No!" Diana's fear sounded all out of proportion to the threat these men presented, Gabrielle thought to herself as she spun again, keeping her attackers at bay. A bearded fellow was trying to hold onto a struggling Joxer while Meg backed away from them; his face a crimson smear, nose gushing a tribute to her upraised fist.

"It's all right, Diana!" The bard sent one man to his knees with a hit to the back of them. "We can take these guys -- whoops!" She dropped and scrambled between another man's legs, twisting her staff as she stood up, sending him sprawling.

"Yeah, Gab!" Meg gave a murderous glare at the ruffian holding Joxer, throwing punches at the air in between looking back. "You go, girl!"

"No!" Diana pleaded, grabbing the arm of the first man. "I was wrong! I'll go with you --"

He flung off her grasp with a snarl, and Diana fell back into a mountainous display of fruit, resulting in an outraged scream from the vendor. Gabrielle moved with greater desperation, trying
to bring things to a speedy conclusion, but found herself hard pressed to defend against the other pair; they were coming at her from opposite angles, forcing her to remain still and let them continue to circle while she looked for an opening.

An angry shout disrupted their concentration, and both men turned and ran as the crowd parted to reveal a pair of red-faced castle guardsmen who were striding toward them, looking quite perturbed. As Diana struggled to her feet her captor loosened his grip and turned to run, falling headlong on his face in the street as the man who had been holding Joxer ran into him.

The guards grabbed them with grim looks that promised cruel beatings in a darkened room later on, and one turned to the princess with a crestfallen air.

"Your majesty, this is intolerable." The soldier sounded highly offended. "We simply can't be held responsible for your safety if you insist on walking the streets like this --" 

"You see?" Meg swung a trembling finger at the soldier as she helped Joxer to his feet. "You see the crap we gotta put up with?" The would-be warrior shoved her away, anger clouding his face, and she stared at him in silent hurt.

The first soldier's nose wrinkled but he ignored her outburst, while the other merely shrugged, looking quite uncomfortable. Diana appeared contrite but unconvinced of their sincerity or motives, stepping in with soothing words and gestures while Meg glowered.

Gabrielle still held her staff ready, looking around suspiciously at the crowd that had been gathering. *Cowards*, she thought ungraciously, dismissing them as she scanned the area. A part of her rose up in protest, but she thrust away the distraction. *The most dangerous opponent is the one you don't see*, came Xena's stern, echoing voice; and she whirled about at the strange touch on her shoulder, nearly laying open the skull of the stranger.

He didn't even flinch, and she slowly lowered her weapon as she took in the foreign clothing and appearance. The man was a head shorter than herself, with short-cropped black hair, oddly slanted eyes and skin the color of the morning sun; carrying himself like a warrior despite his monastic appearance, the slight, compact form at odds with the powerful presence emanating from within.

"Your sister dies." His voice was quiet and urgent. "You must come!"

Meg turned to Joxer with an outstretched arm, ready to offer first aid. "You okay, Jox?"

He ignored her, breathing hoarsely and massaging his bruised windpipe. Meg felt a surge of bile rise and returned the favor, looking away in search of the blonde bard whose every movement captivated her man like the incarnation of Aphrodite. If she only knew what the attraction was, she might have a chance of diverting his attention --

"Meg?"

"Jox?"

Both stared at one another, their own hurts crowding for attention beside the rapidly growing fear as Diana turned a puzzled gaze upon them.

"Where's Gabrielle?"

It had to be destiny, An-Tai reasoned, which had sought him out in the form of that faint cry, and whether or not it was so he welcomed the opportunity to redeem himself; to heal in the hopes of
amending the grave harm he had done. He had hoped at first to return this strange girl to her native tribe, but found their progress thwarted by another pitched battle. So he had gone south and westward, angling toward the empire of the Gauls, while his patient's condition rapidly weakened, their communication improving somewhat more slowly. He had only a vague idea of what they were looking for and not the faintest idea if he was in the right place, and he had been on the verge of despair when all had become clear. It was with the caution of long and bitter experience, which had served him well so far, that he had set up camp at the edge of the woods, and after concealing his charge in the depths of the forest, dared to enter the city.

When he first saw the woman in the marketplace he thought nothing of it, but when the fighting broke out his attention had focused on little else. A woman who fought was not unusual, however; and he was on the verge of turning to leave when he saw the odd furry tuft atop the otherwise innocuous length of wood that she used to strike down her attackers. Even without the heavens opening and likewise smiting him it was plain she was the one he sought, and he had contrived to spirit her away while the other barbarians stood about and shouted at one another, a skill that seemed universal among their kind. She had accompanied him to the edge of town, peppering him with questions which he did his best to deflect, and even followed him without hesitation into the thick underbrush where he had concealed the wounded girl.

He hadn't, however, taken into account that they might not speak the same language. His patient was staring at him from under her bandages with an outraged look as if asking why he had brought this enormous, clumsy, stupid girl before her; the newcomer's face showing only confusion as they knelt by her side. She obviously expected him to offer guidance, and An-Tai realized he would have to translate for both of them. He'd learned a decent smattering of Greek, more so than the bits and pieces he had gleaned of his young charge's tongue despite their weeks together, as she spent most of this time asleep and didn't appear an experienced conversationalist even when in the best of health.

"What's happened to her?" The newcomer was obviously growing agitated as she examined the other's wounds. His charge had been repeatedly stabbed, beaten near to death, and still showed obvious signs of malnourishment despite his attempts to revive her flagging appetite. He could understand this one's fear, if she thought him the one responsible.

He knelt to offer water, hoping that it would give his charge the strength to speak. Her head rolled weakly and she licked her lips as she glared back at him with those almond-shaped eyes, so like his own; endless pools of black a man could fall into and be forever lost.

"Who is she? Where did you find her?" The urgency in the newcomer's voice was unmistakable. She glanced at him with renewed trepidation, the other woman momentarily forgotten. "Who are you?"

"Kážhdy dróchit...kak, ón hóchit!"

The tiny woman's voice was rough with blood as she glared up at them. They both stared into her angry, pain-filled eyes; An-Tai with comical dismay spreading over his features, the blonde woman with a look of confusion.

"And what was that?"

He hesitated, and her gaze softened as she took his hand.

"Please. If this woman needs my help, then I need yours. I can see that you must have cared for her, but --" Her voice caught, and she swallowed. "I'm not a healer. I mean...my best friend is a healer, one of the best I know, but I don't think even she could help her. If there's anything you can tell me
He nodded, banishing the flicker of guilt. "I think she means to stop wasting time and...get on with it? She is a very impatient person." A hot blush rose to his face; the newcomer was quite pretty, for one of the pale ones. "Her exact words were...impolite."

The injured one merely grinned through her pain, exposing teeth stained with old blood. Her breath was a ghost rattling in her chest as she reached for the girl's hand, which was accepted without hesitation, and she seemed to have forgotten him as she gazed up at the other woman.

"I am An-Tai of the Shuang family, of the kingdom of Q'in." The newcomer's face flickered briefly, but his head was lowered in respect and he did not see. "She has been near death since I met her," he stated simply, spreading his hands. "She wished to find her sister before she crossed over."

"Sister..." The blonde woman's eyes widened, and she crossed her arms, raising them above her head in a ritualized gesture. The injured one gave an emphatic nod and the newcomer gasped as she took the smaller hands once more in hers, looking to An-Tai. He spread his hands to indicate helplessness.

She stared down, taking in the piled of fur that completely enveloped the girl but for her face, which was almost half obscured by the head bandage. The stomach wound had been recently attended, but the fresh dressings were already turning faintly crimson.

She leaned closer, staring into heavily dilated eyes. "I want to help you," she murmured. "What do you --"

The small woman gasped, her face twisting as she squeezed her sister's hand with painful strength.

Gabrielle felt white heat trickle in through her eyes before a volcano erupted inside, an onslaught of bloody imagery tearing through her. All awareness of her surroundings vanished as raw sensation buffeted her fragile consciousness, drowned out by the smell of wet moss and coppery tang of fresh blood. She was

...running through treetops, the wind in her hair...

...feeling the pain of a first lover as she entered and was entered in return, the brief hurt unnoticed in that moment of fumbling ecstasy...

...smearing mud and warpaint on her face, in preparation for some great battle to rival the one fought against the Destroyer long ago...

You...big girl. Dimly, the words came to her ears in that harsh, guttural tongue even as their meaning exploded behind her eyes, bypassing language.

Send me into fire...the way I came into this world. An amused chuckle, its grimness all out of proportion to the high-pitched voice. You keep my furs. You can use some...real clothes...

She reeled back, clutching her stomach as the connection was severed. An-Tai was beside her in an instant, his calloused hand gentle on her sweating brow; somehow, she found breath and pushed back the rising nausea.

"I'm fine," she assured him in a palpable untruth. He shook his head, decorum overcoming innate curiosity.
"Your sister, she..."

"I know." She swallowed again as she sat up, staring again at the body which now seemed even smaller. An-Tai said nothing, holding her hand until she spoke again with renewed determination.

"In the name of the Amazon Nation, I thank you for what you've done. You have helped a valiant spirit find the peace she deserved, and no repayment could be enough for that." She faltered, losing the formal aspect. "Although I'd like to ask another favor."

His smile was gentle and open. "I have nothing to do except that which I choose. How may I be of service?"

The bard thought carefully, trying to calm the whirl of her thoughts.

"There's an Amazon village in the forest near the cliffs, two days' ride to the east. I need you to deliver a message to their Regent, and then..."

"Yes?"

"Another message." She found a spare parchment in her belt pouch and sketched a hasty but adequate map. "To a place called...Potadeia."
Bad luck, worse timing, the usual misunderstandings. Hesitant contact, wide eyes and heated debate.

Execute every act of thy life as though it were thy last.

*Marcus Aurelius*

**Setting Orange**

Diana and the others had left immediately after breakfast, and Xena was more grateful than might be considered proper, to the point where she didn't care whether the avoidance of drawn-out farewells had been by accident or design, for her benefit or their own. Not that she'd care to guess at the motivations of others; being around people was draining enough under normal conditions, and now every casual conversation seemed fraught with unspoken significance. Years of imposed spiritual solitude were difficult to overcome, and experience taught that the times she needed others were the times she could least abide their presence, let alone assistance.

Life on the road was so much simpler, she thought, surveying the empty kitchen; surrounded by the numerous simmering cauldrons Meg had left behind. Her few days of travel had been somewhat lonely without Gabrielle's companionship, but at least she hadn't had to constantly guard her reactions to avoid untoward incidents. Idly, she calculated how long she might be able to avoid meeting up with the guide Diana had mentioned. *Guide, chaperone...*

*Guard,* came the uncharitable reflexive response. Not that she blamed Diana; had their places been reversed she'd probably have done the same. Better to keep suspicions hidden than arouse similar mistrust in a potential adversary. Still, she just couldn't shake the nagging feeling that everyone was convinced she was Callisto and was only playing along with her until --

"Damn it," she whispered aloud; rising from her chair and walking to the sink. A few dishes were still soaking and she attacked them with a vengeful brush and critical eye, feeling a bit foolish but nonetheless better for the change in focus. Cyrene had usually punished childhood infractions with extra chores, knowing that her daughter's boundless energy made any forced confinement or restriction a powerful incentive to avoid repeat offenses. She suspected this to have been most of the reason behind her historical insistence that her men and their camps be clean and orderly: The discipline such duty encouraged and cultivated was generally sufficient to keep them in line, particularly the ones who, like her, were already as well acquainted with mop and broom as they were with sword and spear.

*If I'd had enough dishes, and Mother along to force them on me,* she thought with a twinge of amazement, a third of the known world might have been spared the wrath of her armies. How about that?

As she looked about for a towel, her eye fell upon the broom leaning in one corner, and she wondered how much choice she truly had. The reaction was as ingrained as dishwashing, and Xena
found herself humming a song from her childhood, echoing the women harvesting grain in the fields as she swept up the floor; taking her time under the numerous tables and chairs, dreading the idea of meeting her intended guide. Perhaps it was pride, sheer stubbornness or the inability to leave a thing unfinished that made her so often ignore her own better judgment; she had no idea, but her increasing self-reflection -- first since Hercules, and then Gabrielle -- seemed to point to all three.

Maybe that was the source of most of the stress in her life: all the time she spent brooding obsessively over anything from the past that she regarded as unfinished business, when so much of it seemed beyond her ability to repair; that, and the fact that for years her idea of a satisfactory conclusion to most matters had usually involved someone's death, preferably in as violent and spectacular a fashion as she could conceive.

And look what good it did, she snorted as she disposed of the dust in the most convenient manner; tossing it out the window, despite the sensation that Cyrene would suddenly emerge from the pantry and catch her in the act. On the few occasions that the fates had offered a different path, the lure of comfortable habit had won out over the terrible unknown quantity of change, and the siren call of the darkness within had grown each time she succumbed to it. The enemies she had buried would torment her forever, while those she'd left alive might one day be her death. But then, how to deal with...

"Damn it!" she exclaimed again. The echoes of her voice off the walls fell on startled ears, and a low growl of frustration escaped Xena as she realized the broom was now parallel to the floor, clenched against her body and thrust out in a defensive posture.

Come on, she thought doggedly, closing her eyes and breathing in a slow, even rhythm, steadying the broom as she relaxed her grip, searching for the balance point. It was a rare wound that couldn't be soothed by a good workout, and the past few weeks had left little time for exercise. Not that Gabrielle had shown much interest in sparring with her lately; hardly surprising given their current circumstances, and that her friend's first love had always been the power of words. Whereas she, on the other hand...

The broom spun down as her elbow moved aside, allowing the pass through into an underhanded grip. In her mind Xena heard a frustrated curse and the dull clang of a sword as it bit into wood, feel the impact of the blocked blow on her shoulder.

Resisting the instinctive impulse to launch a backward kick, she settled for widening her stance and moving toward the center of the open space she knew was to her left. The balls of her feet rotated easily on the smooth stone as a hundred faint scents and sounds passed by her in the air: fresh mown grain that should have been harvested a week ago, the call of mothers for children. Out whipped the broom, in a reversal of its previous motion, coming to a stop with half its length locked within the curve of her forearm and fingers, the other poised to block a higher attack. Lowering it as she spun, coming round in a sweep meant to force an increase in the space about her rather than disarm or injure an opponent; but now she had the leverage of improved position, and the makeshift staff's return journey was more than audible. Bringing it back, the natural motion flowing into a two-handed grip as she thrust down behind her to shatter toes, up into a chin or face and straight back in a short, vicious stomach jab. Allowing the moves to come unforced, at their own speed, she brought it about in her left hand, twirling it in a defensive pattern that was as instilled into her as drawing breath. Feeling the rush of air as the bristles swung by her head, but her grip was slipping and suddenly the broom was flying over the table, knocking over a pair of candlesticks, joining them on the floor with a resounding clatter.
The sound jarred her from her reverie as she fell into a fighting crouch, staring wildly about. Her ears began to burn from the ludicrousness of it all. Drifting off was one thing, but to bungle the simplest of drills --

Some sense of danger, only one small voice of many, and yet it triggered some dormant reflex.

Even as the internal chorus drowned out rational thought, Xena was running toward the window, grabbing onto the rough stone above and outside as she swung up and back to land on shaky feet atop a narrow strip of stone abutting a rounded ensconcement. She had no idea if she'd recalled the details of the castle's construction unconsciously, or if she'd just been lucky to avoid a nasty death by falling or impaling; and she shivered violently as she examined her surroundings. The sun brought more light than heat at this time of year, her fingers and toes already growing numb from their intimate contact with the stone.

A sudden gust of wind sent a chill through her still-damp hair, tiny strands escaping the leather that held them; whipping about her face in the breeze. Xena stared out over the countryside, ignoring the sting of scraped skin on her hands and arms as she surveyed the landscape and the tiny, doll-like figures scattered upon its surface. Her fingers itched at the thought of both sword and chakram, in her room by the bathtub.

From the room below came voices, fragmented and barely audible.

*Your ears burn, little one? That voice was definitely her mother's. That means others are speaking ill of you. Remember that next time you feel the urge. If you have a problem with someone, have the courage to say it to their face.*

"...could have sw...rd som..." That would be Cilla, the dark-haired one with frightened doe's eyes.

"...ust have just fallen over, I'm sur..." Briyana's calm, reassuring tone was readily apparent, echoing Cyrene's no-nonsense attitude. "...at are yo...bout anyway? New boyfriend givin' you trouble?"

"...old you, I don't have a boyfriend!" The girl sounded inappropriately fearful at the prospect. Briyana chuckled, as much to say, *Suit yourself.*

"So, what's got you so worked up?"

Xena cautiously inched forward, leaning forward and down to the open window. Her mother's ever-present voice raised itself in disapproval, but the internal strategist insisted she was merely gathering intelligence, and she shut her eyes to block out distractions.

"You heard the princess." Cilla's voice was shaky but insistent. "She wants me to be that woman's guide? I can't even look her in the eye, after the stories I've heard!"

"And you believe everything you hear?" Briyana sounded amused at the prospect. *Seemed nice enough to me.*

"If you'd heard some of those people in the hospice, you wouldn't be so calm about it!" Anger was beginning to creep in through the rank fear. "If you'd seen their faces when they said her name -- the things she's done --"

"I've heard 'em. Probably more times'n you." The patient tone sounded well-worn, as if this were old territory. *Heard enough nasty stories to fill me the rest of m' life, short as it might be. All start to sound the same after a while. This warlord guttin' that one, beheadin' this one..."
Xena's lips clamped shut on the inappropriate giggle as she fought to keep her grip on the ledge. A third hand would be awfully useful right about now, she mused, and she hastily shoved that thought away before it could take root. With her luck, some god with too much free time would drop by and take notes.

"I lost the first man I ever loved the day he picked up a sword, girl. He was dead to me from that moment on. Call it honor, ignorance or whatever, but he made his choice and I left him to it. Left my home, my family and all I'd ever known, said anything's got to be better than this." A brief chuckle; Xena's ponytail fell across her cheek, and she stifled a sneeze. "And 'twas indeed, but that didn't stop bad things from happenin'. Next husband? Drowned on the voyage over from Kameni. Though that was probably a better way than them what stayed behind got."

Cilla mumbled some hushed whisper about the fire of the gods, and Briyana chuckled harshly. "What do I care if it came from the gods or out of the King of Thieves' behind? Dead is dead, girl. Life's short enough without worrying it away."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. And you shouldn't believe everything you hear, from me or anyone else."

"...ow do y..." Xena nearly cursed in frustration, leaning even further down. "...ey say, that when she took her revenge on the Warrior Princess? She tore out her heart and ate it, before her very eyes!"

Xena would have clapped a hand over her mouth, if she'd had one available, but trying to maintain grip and balance was becoming increasingly difficult as she held her eavesdropping position. Now_ that's_ a good one, she thought. Even if this particular anecdote was probably too morbid for Gabrielle...

"Pick up that broom, girl," came Briyana's firm tone. "You can talk and clean at the same time!"

A hasty, mumbled apology came, along with the soft rustling of skirts. Xena felt like her ears were going to fall off, her hands ready to come apart in a jumble of numb and mashed nerves. But she couldn't tear herself away, not now --

The bristled end of the broom was thrust in front of Xena before she could blink; abruptly thrashing back and forth in the window, sending a shower of dirt, dust and loose straw into her face. Only years of trained reflexes stopped her from inhaling, and she shut her eyes and mouth tight as the storm of tiny particles assailed her; but the sneeze was building despite her efforts, and the knowledge that her eavesdropping would be discovered brought a wave of despair.

The unnameable impulse was too strong to resist. Xena reached out and yanked the broom away, barely keeping her other hand firm on the narrow arch. Glancing around wildly, she spotted the nearby ledge and let go her grasp, rolling down one side of the arch and putting all her energy into the leap as her feet came underneath her; hearing the expected volley of shrieks, as Cilla finally found her voice.

Her cheek slapped into the wall and she nearly lost her grasp on the broom; head awhirl, wondering what in Hades she was doing as she hurled the broom up to the roof above, clambering gracelessly after it in a move that would have skinned knees if they'd been exposed. Cilla's shrieks had already faded to silence, and Xena she crouched on top of the small tower to reconnoiter, wondering if Briyana had managed to calm the younger woman.

*Or maybe she fainted,* came the cynical whisper. *Then when she comes to, she'll start screaming*
"Shut up," she hissed aloud, hating her weakness. Only fools and madmen talked to themselves.

That's all right, dear. And now the voice was the same one she heard every time she opened her mouth, the playful simper nearly enough to convince her that it was real.

You can talk to me. I don't mind if you don't believe in me...and you know, talking to yourself isn't so bad. I used to do it all the time. Useful skill when you've got noone else to talk to, because they were all SLAUGHTERED and BURNED BY THE WARRIOR PRINCESS --

She opened her eyes and looked down at the fingernails deeply embedded in her palm, the trickle of blood oozing down her skin.

With a growl, she forced her wounded hand to open and grab the discarded broom, swinging it against the wall to break off the business end. Before she could stop to think or draw breath she was running to the edge of the parapet, launching into the air in a forward somersault. The roaring in her ears brought a rush of thoughts of falling, striking hard stone and finally the ground itself, but before she could truly know fear she had landed on the far parapet with an automatic tuck and roll, holding her makeshift staff in both hands. To her left a series of rounded pillars, nearly twice her height, surrounded the fountain and courtyard below; it was there that she'd helped Philemon fight off a band of attackers, surreptitiously protecting him until her composure in the face of his bloody nose had blown her cover.

She vaulted over the side of the parapet onto the narrow connecting archway, staff held in front of her for balance as she strode quickly across, never pausing or glancing down. The voices were beginning to clamor again, and Gabrielle's was loudest.

I hope you're happy with yourself, Miss high and mighty warrior princess. The scandalized refrain was perfect, right down to the self-righteous. Not even here a day, and the whole kingdom after you? You weren't even wearing shoes? What in the world were you thinking --

"I wasn't," she muttered. She sprinted along the edge of the roof, crouching low and hoping no one below happened to look up. A few workers and apprentices were in the courtyard clearing dead leaves out of the fountain, pulling up huge slabs of stone to get at its workings. Before her the north end of the castle loomed high overhead, a near-vertical wall; shouts and clash of metal from her right, the army's drills nearly drowning out the clash of hammer on stone. Light as a mountain goat she ran toward the wall and launched herself upward, springing from one precariously small window ledge to another until she had reached the highest possible point, a small guard tower nearly two hundred feet above the ground.

Below and to the right a narrow, horizontal gap about five feet wide ran the length of the wall, extending all the way down; most likely to redirect water away, since ice in the cracks between stones could cause great harm to a castle in even one winter's time. The tower had apparently been used as a guard post recently enough to have accumulated only a few cobwebs in the window, and in another heartbeat Xena was inside.

The air was definitely colder up here, and the increasing wind did nothing to improve her mood as she glanced around the small room. Barren of furnishings, the tower's only other entrance was a trapdoor in the center of the floor; depending on where it led, this location might be intended for observation or attack. She winced as she massaged the cramp from her hand.

Couldn't spare even a second to think, could you? She shook her head like a dazed, wet dog. Wait a minute...isn't that the problem? That I was fine, until I started thinking too much? Certainly it was
simpler than making assumptions about others' motives, or inventing hidden conspiracies.

She was about to survey the view when she heard a muffled bump and scrape from below. Glaring at the trapdoor, uttering a soft curse, she leapt out the window again, swinging up to the roof before nearly smiting her own forehead with a fist of exasperation; she'd dropped the broom on her way out so her hands were free to grab the sash, and its clatter sounded like a pile of barrels smashing open on a floor from great height. There was no time to retrieve it, and she held perfectly still as the door creaked open.

Only two, her senses said; but she still didn't fully trust them. The rounded curves beneath refused any reasonable grasp on their surface, and while it would be worse than pointless to curse in the silence of her mind, Xena still yearned to let curses fly from her lips with such force they would burn right through the listener's head, in one ear and out where-ever. Could her luck possibly get any worse?

"Funny you should ask."

She closed her eyes and bowed her head at the familiar pulse of power; the rich, masculine voice, heavy with sarcasm, that still sent a warm tingle throughout her being.

"You know, I've always wondered how you do that."

It'd be nice if you weren't real, she thought with some viciousness, holding still tighter onto the stone. Go away.

The deep chuckle suddenly sounded tired, worn down. "Too busy to talk to your old friend and mentor? The god who made you what you are today? I'm terribly disappointed, Xena."

And you're still the biggest ego on Olympus, she growled inside the furious clamor of her mind, refusing to open her eyes. Shut up and go away!

A hint of anger entered Ares' tone. "Why? Because I'm making it harder for you to eavesdrop? I'm surprised at you." Now the old sweetness, just enough to pique her interest. "By the way, I know I've told you this before, but I'm impressed. You're the first one with the brains to keep quiet." The overt sensuality was like a burr on the edge of a blade. "Oh, and I like the new look. But I think we both know it's just...not you."

Whatever you want, she snapped, concentrating on breathing quietly, I'm not interested. The stone was growing slippery, eluding her bare fingers and toes; or she was sweating, even in the chill afternoon air?

"You shouldn't make promises you can't keep." Despite his weariness, the god's anger was unmistakable. "For all you know I could have come to help out, maybe even repay my debt. I think you owe me at least a little common courtesy." Below the men's voices were barely audible; even without Ares to distract her it was doubtful that she would be able to discern their words.

She opened reluctant eyes to find him exactly as she'd envisioned, floating unmoving in the air before her: the old smugness and fire were still present even with the strange pain and injured air he exuded, but the old pull to the warmth and comfort he offered couldn't compare to the thought of her friends: The look in their eyes when they overcame their fear to offer support, trust; even love.

You wanna repay me? She stared him down, breathing shallowly. Don't let the door hit you in the ass. I don't want you, or any other gods, messing with my life. And that includes my friends.
"You never did listen very well, Xena." He crossed the distance between them in two steps, the muscles in his arms quivering madly. "You have no idea of the trouble that's headed your way, and it has nothing to do with any gods!"

*Good.* Her eyes bored into his as she felt her arms growing numb from the elbows on down. *Then I'll deal with it when it happens. Hopefully with my friends...without them, if I have to.*

Small tendrils of smoke rose from the War God's exposed skin; the sound of far-off crashing boulders emanating from his clenched fists.

"Just remember I gave you a chance.." His voice was thick with old bones and fresh blood. "You want me out of your life, I'm gone. But no matter what you think, I only wanted the best for you."

His eyes flicked downward to the noise of the men, back at her with new and unreadable pain.

"And even though you've been so cruel to me? I'm still gonna let you in on a little secret."

*I don't want* -- But of course he knew; that was the point. Just had to have something to gloat about, didn't he?

He grinned, drinking in her frustration and foreboding. Leaning closer until his whiskers tickled her ear.

"Atrius wasn't your real father!"

Time slowed to a crawl as Ares vanished, sardonic laugh echoing in the air, and it was almost no surprise when the bird came from nowhere across her field of vision. Xena reared back, feeling curiously outside herself; watching her fingers unsuccessfully scrabble for a hold on something, her body going limp as instinct took hold.

Like a cat startled from sleep she rolled, hearing the startled yell she'd been expecting as she came into extremely unexpected contact with another body. Two more yells joined the first; her own, and one from the unfortunate person she'd run into as they were leaning out the window, a soldier now grabbing frantically for a handhold of his own as he fell with her. His companion was yelling above, and in a hazy flash she remembered the lower roof was only a short distance, it was the rain trough you had to watch out for --

They landed in a thrashing mass, the terrified soldier flailing his limbs, swinging wildly at her. Xena was shouting something at him about calming down, and was trying so hard to keep him from rolling over the edge she never saw or heard the other guard until a sharp crack across the back of her head caught her attention. He'd actually grabbed the broom and taken the jump, following them down; now there was dedication!

"Damn it, Tunalus, fight her!"

She rolled again, leveraging her opponent on top to protect her from more staff blows, lashing out with her foot. The resulting blow landed lower than the intended knee, and the loud curse gave little satisfaction. she could feel the battle rage, or Callisto, mocking her restraint. *Too slow,* she thought through the haze; best end this fast, before someone got hurt.

She flung the younger man away, stumbling to her feet, sending the staff spinning from the other guard's hands. He straightened in time to see her aim a kick at his groin; in his haste to protect himself, failing to see her fists come out, catching his head directly between.

Agathemon fell to his knees with a howl, the pain all out of proportion to the blow as he watched his attacker turn away, warning shout reduced to a feeble gasp. In his mind he could see the crude
prison cell he'd endured for a week in her captivity, hear the jeers of her men, smell the stink of his own waste. He'd watched her for days, convinced every moment would be his last, until he'd woken up in a hospice; been informed that he and the others had been found abandoned, on the verge of death, and from that moment he had dedicated his sword in service to the kingdom that had saved him. The temple priestesses said that mad souls were touched by the gods, but the ones in Callisto's eyes were spawned in the blackest pits of Hades; she was seeking out his brother in arms, she would kill both of them, and everyone --

He heard himself cry out, seeing his outstretched hand too far away to save the panicking Tunalus, who was perilously close to the rain gutter and trying to regain his footing, gasping as one leg buckled under his weight. Callisto was approaching again, holding her staff, and Agathemon saw the fear in the boy's eyes; Tunalus lost his balance as she leapt forward, letting loose a scream as he plummeted into the crevasse.

Xena, however, had no time for theatrics. As soon as it was apparent there was no way to prevent the boy's fall she had altered her direction, sliding into the stone gap a hair's breadth ahead of him and wrapping her legs around his body as he reflexively grabbed hold. The broom was just barely long enough to cover the gap, but was creaking alarmingly under their weight.

"Hold still!" she yelled unnecessarily. The boy's hands quivered, gripping with cruel strength born of fear. "Don't worry about hurting me, just hold on --"

She looked up as a shadow fell over them. Agathemon was staring down with a look of horror, fumbling at his belt for a dagger.

"What are you doing?" Her voice nearly cracked as she realized the stupidity of the question. "You have to help us!"

"Don't listen to her, boy!" He drew back as though she were a poisonous snake; lips trembling as he held the dagger before him like a talisman, the blade gleaming in the afternoon sun. "Just -- just hang on, I'll getcha out of this --"

"What are you doing?" The boy's shriek echoed her own, and she could feel his grip slipping. "She's trying to save me!"

"It's a trick, gotta be --" Agathemon hovered near the edge of the precipice, and Xena realized that he was just as afraid of the fall as of her. Below her Tunalus was breathing in quick, short bursts, the strength in his grip sending a throbbing prickle of numbness up her legs. Her shoulders were screaming out and she fought the urge to echo that scream, willing her hands to remain tight around the slim piece of wood that felt more flimsy by the second. The boy's mutterings were clearer now, an endless stream of entreaties to Demeter to preserve his mother and father from harm.

She rocked back and forward, increasing the force until he was swinging beneath her like a pendulum. A chill breeze drifted up from the crevasse, enveloping her in its embrace. The wood creaked again, drawing a hiss from her erstwhile attacker and a piteous moan from the other, clinging to her as if she were his own mother.

"What are you doing?" Agathemon wondered why they kept repeating themselves, as he watched their arc increase; why he hadn't already raised the alarm. Callisto wasn't looking at him, her eyes shut tight, and a look of calm descended over her features as she spat out a loose lock of hair, shouting

"GRAB HIM!"
Xena used the shout to drive her legs even harder, putting every bit of power she could muster into lifting them and flinging the startled youth back onto the main roof. Endless drills took hold as Agathemon obeyed, and she hovered over the edge for only a moment before being pulled back with them into a heap of panting bodies. She rolled aside, still clutching the staff in one hand, quickly running the other over the boy, checking for injuries; ignoring her own wobbling legs that threatened to collapse.

"You're crazy!" the older man shouted, scrambling to his feet. She turned an incredulous glare upon him, which he openly returned despite the flush of shame. "Crazier'n the last time I saw you! Think you'll fool people, do you? I swear I'll --"

He froze in his approach when sharp splinters brushed his nose. Xena nodded with satisfaction as she pulled the staff back before he could blink, tucking it under one arm, turning slightly to make it harder to grab. Her fighting skills were still only adequate as far as she was concerned, and she trusted herself less in close quarters with nowhere to hide or run.

"Now you listen good, soldier." Agathemon had to admit she sounded quite sane, the threat in her voice far exceeded by the unmistakable tone of command. "I'm not here to hurt anyone. And I don't care if you believe it, as long as you act like it."

Tunalus stared up at his beautiful blonde rescuer, watching the muscles in his superior's arms twitch like frightened serpents. Plainly the man didn't believe; and Tunalus recognized that he himself was too confused to make any sort of rational judgment, not to mention scared out of his wits. Could she really be the insane butcher of legend? The woman whose name was spoken only in angry weeping or hushed whispers, ranked with the legendary Destroyer of Nations?

She went on, sounding much calmer.

"Now you've got two choices. Bring in your commanding officers, and let them deal with this...or we can do each other a favor, forget this little incident ever happened, and hope for the best." She cocked an eyebrow at the astonished Agathemon, casually bringing the staff about and leaning it over her shoulder. Gods know, I'd rather be fishing... "I think you can guess how I vote."

"This isn't a democracy!" Agathemon sputtered, feeling his control over the situation slipping further away by the moment. "Noone's voting on anything, you monster! When we get down from here, I'll put you in irons myself --"

"No!" Tunalus had jumped to his feet, but the older man never took his gaze from Callisto as he gestured emphatically at his compatriot.

"Are you as mad as she is, boy? That's --"

"The woman who saved my life." The boy's resolve was clear despite the tremor in his voice. "You need another witness on your report. It won't be me."

"It's a trick!" Agathemon howled, the color in his face moving into purple. "She's trying to win our trust!"

"One out of two ain't bad." Xena turned to the boy with a deadpan smile and an outstretched hand. "Callisto of Cirra. Pleased to meet you."

"Tunalus of Treus," the boy offered, hastily accepting the offered hand and throwing a guilty look at his elder. He glanced away from the man's fury, finding Callisto's intensely brown eyes and dropping his nervous gaze to her incongruously bare feet. The thought came that she had exquisite
toes, and he flushed as he summoned the courage to once more look her in the eye.

"Might I ask, ma'am...what exactly were you doing up there?"

"Just hanging around." She concealed a shamefaced grin; Agathemon appeared on the verge of eruption, the buckles on his armored chest straining to the snapping point. Xena felt the speed of her thoughts beginning to outpace her mouth.

"Tell you what," she offered, with a conversational air. "You guys are like all soldiers -- overworked and underpaid. Am I right?"

Tunalus shook his head with wide eyes and Agathemon snorted, catching himself when the boy glanced in his direction. Xena stifled another grin.

"So here's the deal. You pick something for me to do, and I do it." Tunalus frowned, and she continued smoothly. "Something other than, say, clapping myself in irons or cutting off my own head...or serving the 'needs' of the men." She pretended not to see Tunalus's gaping mouth, or to hear Agathemon's brief chuckle which he swallowed as quickly as possible.

"I don't care if it's mucking out stables, raising a barn, digging a well... anything that needs doing that you haven't had the time to do. See, I know what it's like...all the little chores you get saddled with, stuff you never thought a soldier would have to deal with. Just trying to do your job's hard enough without all that, right?" She almost giggled at their shock until she remembered the effect it was likely to have. Damn it, this is serious!

A fragment of one of Gabrielle's recent stories surfaced as she searched for some way to hook them. "Come on, fellas. Pretend you've got a djinn in a magic lamp." Their brows knit in mutual confusion, and she sighed inwardly. "Trust me, just pick something. So?"

Tunalus and Agathemon stared at her, then at each other; then back to her.

"What's it gonna be?"

"Callisto?"

Gabrielle peered around the courtyard as she entered, only to be greeted by a trio of castle guards holding their fingers to their lips and glaring at her. Even as she wondered what was going on they were turning back around, their attention riveted on something going on by the fountain. The bard stood on tiptoe, craning her neck in an unsuccessful attempt to see over their heads.

"Excuse me," she said in a low whisper. "I was told --"

"It's okay." Strain colored the warrior's tone. "Gimme a second..."

"Are you sure?" The youngest guard appeared genuinely concerned, and he was promptly elbowed by one of his fellows.

"As you say, no way!" The elbower sounded playful, even friendly. "The wager was for all by herself, you remember? You do not offer the help to the lady unless she is asking you, yes?"

"Shut up and let her finish," grunted the third; obviously their senior and superior.

As the others fell silent Gabrielle crept around them and stared. Xena's clothes from that morning
were now streaked with dust and sweat as she stretched out vertically on her toes, not quite leaning against a half-finished wall of stone that partially encircled the fountain. Her arms were raised high over her head, every tendon in her hands standing out in frozen relief in the late afternoon sun as she shoved a block nearly twice her size into place; turned with a cheerful smile, dusting off her palms.

"Not yet," the elbower interjected. Gabrielle stole a sideways glance at him, taking in the huge grin and dark, swarthy complexion. The soldier was about her height but built like a prize bull, friendly enough at first glance but obviously not a man to be trifled with.

He gestured at a single remaining stone even bigger than the last, smile growing larger. Xena raised her eyebrows and looked at the stone, then at the gap in the wall obviously meant to receive it.

She shrugged and squatted next to the block, measuring it with her arms. The third soldier gave a disbelieving grunt, and Gabrielle frowned. There was no way...

The nervous chuckles died away as the warrior stood up and glanced around, spotting her broken broom handle nearby. Catching it between her feet, flipping it up into her hands before any of her observers had fully absorbed the motion, she knelt and worked one end underneath the edge of the stone, propping the rest over one thigh.

In one quick heave the stone was off the ground, and Xena warrior grabbed with her left hand, tossing the staff away and pressing her advantage before it could be lost; finding a grip, shifting her balance. As the onlookers watched with bated breath, her arms locked in place and she shifted power to her legs, driving upward and straightening her knees, rising in a smooth, unstoppable arc. The stone came level with the gap and her shoulders bunched and rippled as she half-set, half-threw the block into place, using momentum to help drive it flush with its surroundings.

Xena barely saved herself from falling with an outstretched hand, pushing herself back upright and twisting around just gracefully enough to make it look deliberate. Her pale features were pink with exertion, and she appeared to be trying not to smile.

"Hah!" the youngest soldier crowed. "Pay up, Luci!"

The elbower shrugged and smiled as he counted over a handful of dinars, which were hastily stuffed into the youth's pocket before the newly rich soldier grabbed the water skin from his belt, offering it to Xena in one nervously outstretched hand.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine." Xena waved away the proffered refreshment. The smile felt like a thick mask of mud that had hardened to a crust, but she kept her now-screaming back held straight as an arrow. She saw Agathemon turn and stalk off like a wounded bear, and breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't allowed himself to join in the betting.

"I'd like you to meet my friend. Gabrielle of Potadeia, this is Tunalus and Lucios."

The bard smiled warmly, shifting the staff as she shook hands with the younger soldier. *I've got to come up with a better way to hold this thing when I'm not using it.*

Xena was still talking. "Tunalus is learning military tactics, as part of his education. And Lucios --"

The darkly handsome man swept forward and caught up the bard's hand in his own, pressing it to firm, rubbery lips with a resounding smack. Gabrielle found herself thinking of squid, and had to
sternly remind herself that first impressions were important.

"As you see, I am not from these parts. I was taken prisoner by the, how do you say...Romans? I was on a scouting expedition, you see, and they fully intended to take us back with them, for the public execution. But the ship was caught up in a...how do you say..."

"Tsunami?" Xena interjected dryly.

His face brightened. "Yes! Yes, that is the word I was looking for, yes. Off the coast of Crete we wrecked. I made my escape, I had many of the adventures, I came here, I decided to stay. Simple, no?"

The bard shook her head, as if to clear it. Xena intervened before the smooth-talking southerner's hands or gaze could roam further south.

"Gabrielle, I'm going to the stables to check on Argo. But I wanna hear about your day? I'm sure it was more interesting."

The bard nodded, offering Lucios her brightest smile as his face fell. Xena gave him a punch on the arm and a broad grin as she walked by, and his face screwed into a pitiful mask, rubbing his bicep in seeming distress.

"See you tomorrow, boys," Xena chuckled. "Don't worry. We'll have this place ship-shape before the week's out."

Tunalus appeared doubtful, but Lucios smiled and nodded vigorously.

"Until then, my lady." They all offered deep bows, and Xena rolled her eyes.

"Watch it," she growled faintly. "You don't want to see what I'd make you do if I was in charge."

Tunalus looked genuinely scared, but quickly recovered. Xena turned and linked her arm through Gabrielle's before the other woman could object, nodding politely to Luci as they made their escape. The bard was gritting her teeth.

"I can feel his eyes on my --"

"I know." Xena couldn't help a chuckle as they made their way from the yard into the palace, confronted with an intersection of hallways. It took a moment to recall which one led to their rooms, the bard continuing to follow her lead.

"So who's the unfriendly one?" Gabrielle didn't sound overly suspicious, but she was definitely in information hunting and gathering mode.

"Agathemon? He's one of the sub-commanders Diana was talking about. Also --" She glanced about, lowering her voice. "He and Callisto have some sort of history, no big surprise there --"

"I thought you were going to take care of Argo," Gabrielle interrupted.

Xena nodded, reaching up to pull out the strap of leather, hair tumbling nearly halfway down her back. Gabrielle's brow furrowed; her memory of this morning and past weeks said the hair was a good few inches shorter.

She shook it off, annoyed at her own growing obsessiveness.

"I was." Xena yawned as she stowed the strap in a pocket. "I still feel guilty for not paying
attention to her, but I'm sure she's getting only the best. Right now I just want to curl up and die for a few hours..."

"If you've been doing that all day, I can see why!" The bard's voice had that reproving note that reminded her of the Hestian virgins. Xena shrugged again, trying to hide the wince of pulled muscle.

"Just the last couple of candlemarks," she mumbled, striving for nonchalance. "I have to start building up my strength again. No point putting it off." She sought to change the subject in a productive manner. "You find out anything?"

"Anything useful, you mean?" The bard twirled her staff in one hand as they proceeded down the hall, taking care not to knock over any valuable items. "Well, things are a little worse than Diana let on."

"Oh?"

"Let's just say her popular support isn't as great as we thought." The bard grimaced, pulling up her staff just short of hitting a great round vase atop a pedestal. Xena pursed her lips, but said nothing.

"I talked to a friend of hers. She's got no shortage of enemies, and a lot of her supporters are too scared to actually, well...support her."

"What do you think?"

Gabrielle chewed on the question for a moment; pleased that her opinion was being asked, wary of jumping to conclusions.

"I think it's too early to tell. Most people seem to be angry with what she's not doing. Like, this spice merchant complained because she was letting foreigners sell here, instead of using him as a middleman." Xena nodded, and the bard continued.

"The Amazon and centaur disputes have been a sore spot for everyone for years. Treus is right in the middle, so they get caught up in any fights. It seems like most people would rather deal with the 'nasty foreigners' than their own neighbors...I think a lot of them just don't like Diana, for one reason or another, and are using it as an excuse. Even those who were faithful to Lias."

"Maybe especially those," Xena confirmed. "Breaking tradition, flouting convention...trying to do what's right, instead of what's easy? Things like that really put a kink in some people's robes." She pondered a moment, not liking the direction her thoughts were going in. "We'll need to talk with Philemon."

Gabrielle's staff continued to twirl at her side. "That's strange, too. Jetro said that most of the citizens have nothing against Philemon, but they don't want him to be king when Lias dies. But even more are uncomfortable with the idea of Diana ruling alone, since there's no precedent for it." She gave an indelicate snort. "Personally, I think it's silly. I mean, haven't any of these people heard of Cleopatra?"

"Probably just another foreign name." Xena craned her neck from side to side, producing a volley of sickeningly loud reports, biting back a groan. The bard shivered in sympathy, shaking her head as they approached the wing which housed their room.

"Well, I've had enough politics for one day. Why don't I give you a rubdown? Sounds like you could really use it."
Xena only shrugged as usual, but Gabrielle caught the subtle wince as the warrior's shoulders tensed.

"You might as well stop denying it," the bard chuckled. About twenty paces down the hall, Meg stopped in her tracks and cocked her head to one side, listening intently to the sound of the bard's voice.

"After all, you were the one that warned me so much about proper stretching. Now I'm going to the kitchen for some more hot water, and when I come back that shirt had better be off."

Xena gave an exaggerated sigh. "Oh, the pain of it all." Inside her stomach the flock of butterflies was threatening to burst forth again, and she sternly reminded herself to get a grip. *A massage is just a massage,* she thought, returning Gabrielle's smile of enthusiasm. *Now who's got the dirty mind?*

The bard's infectious grin lit up her face as she turned away and trotted down the hall. Xena stared after her for a long moment before shaking herself from her reverie, quickly entering the bedroom, firmly shutting the door.

A pair of guards wandered through the nearby intersection of hallways, briefly glancing to either side on the way; noticing nothing out of the ordinary.

Barely a half candlemark passed before a distant sloshing and clanking made itself heard, and Gabrielle appeared moments later carrying a pair of large buckets on the ends of her staff, now slung over her shoulders. Probably more than they really needed, but she'd make sure it didn't go to waste. Going to bed clean was a luxury, and it was one the bard wished she could indulge in more often.

Despite the rigors of the road, she wondered. Try as she might, she found herself unable to separate this from the issue of remaining with Xena when the two seemed to be one and the same. She'd have to talk it over with the warrior...sometime. With a resolute look, she opened the door and set the buckets down inside, retrieving her staff before entering the room.

As the heavy door slid shut, Meg's head emerged around the corner. A moment passed uneventfully as it peered from side to side, and finally the rest of the cook's body emerged, followed by an unusually reluctant Joxer.

"I don't know --" he began, only to be rendered silent by a furious glare. He'd been about to say that he didn't know if this was such a good idea; but that might only make it more attractive to a woman whose answer to all obstacles was an upraised middle finger.

She certainly had that much in common with Xena, he reflected as they stealthily crept up to the door of Xena and Gabrielle's bedchamber. That, and a stubborn streak that would put a mule to shame. *Learned your lesson yet, Joxer the Jackass?* a voice crowed within. *See what happens when you go shooting off your mouth?* But he'd laid down the gauntlet, and Meg had inevitably risen to the challenge.

The cook knelt down to the keyhole, contorting her face and neck for a few moments. Finally giving up hope on a visual inspection, she motioned impatiently at a dumbfounded Joxer to join her, raising a finger to her lips with a glare promising the most dire of consequences. Unnecessarily on her part, came the glum realization; if Gabrielle opened that door again, he'd take Meg's anger any day over the wrath of an enraged bard. In truth he'd sooner face the wrath of Xena, or even Callisto herself before --
"Listen to that!" Meg's whisper was barely audible, full of excited triumph as she pressed her ear against the thick wood hard enough to leave splinters. "Ya call that platonic?"

Joxer blushed furiously, his expression calm and studious as he knelt beside her. "Meg, I'm telling you, their relationship is a thing of purity. A love so strong, few have -- ow!" He glared at her.

"Sheee..." Joxer's heart sank into his stomach, Meg's eyes expanding to the size of dinner plates at the loud and lascivious groans issuing from inside the room. "You just keep tellin' yourself that!"

"Wow..." Gabrielle's voice was faint but distinct. "That looks painful."

"You wanna get your hands on me, you gotta let me warm up." Xena sounded as though she were straining under some great weight. "I -- ah! -- told you that when you went to get the wat-- arrg...ooaahhh..." The burden was still in place but seemed to have shifted position. "Oh gods if I'd known I was gonna live this long I wouldatakenbettercareamyself..."

"Some warrior princess." Gabrielle's tone was mocking but gentle. "You look relaxed enough. Now get up on that bed. We don't have all night."

Meg bit down on her hand, stifling a yelp as another loud groan split the air.

"Look, I can understand where you're coming from..." Joxer almost bit his own hand, trying again. "You wouldn't be the first, believe me. But I swear to ya, their friendship is a bond so powerful it transcends things like --"

"EEEE--" The gasping screech from inside broke off as abruptly as it had begun. "I told you to heat that oil up!"

"I did," came the bard's good-natured complaint. "It's getting all over the sheets."

"It'll hurt too much without it," Xena retorted. "I don't care what you say, your hands are a lot stronger than they used to be. Take it easy, huh?"

Meg's expression spoke volumes, and Joxer found his temper flaring. "Look," he hissed, fighting to keep his voice down, "I know it's natural that someone in your profession would think that everyone else is constantly thinking about these things, but I really -- think..."

Oh, Hades! he thought despairingly, as the cook's face grow cold and distant. He was the one who wasn't thinking, or he never would have said those words.

The afternoon's events and his own reactions had made him feel even guiltier around Meg, especially since she'd apparently decided to forget the worst parts and continue to treat him like a conquering hero. He'd been worse than useless in their search, following Meg and Diana through the streets with ever-growing fear and confusion until Gabrielle had appeared again, seemingly from thin air, looking pale as snow and bearing a winter outfit whose origins she was unwilling to discuss. The bard had gone off for a private discussion with Diana, leaving Meg and Joxer in an open-air cafe for nearly a candlemark while they stared at the ground, their drinks and anything but each other. Upon their return to the castle the princess had immediately gone in search of her father, while Gabrielle stowed her new clothing in her room and then left with the terse and wholly unnecessary explanation that she was going to find Xena. And when Joxer had been ready to open his wrists, Meg had broken the silence with a lewd, clownish look, just as he was gazing adoringly at her. And he'd chased her down the hall; and it didn't bother him to know that she had allowed herself to be caught.

Who are you kidding? Meg was looking at him from the corner of her eye, doubt written all over
her face as Xena's moans of pain and pleasure grew in volume and range. Probably waiting to see if he'd get mad, or go off and moon over Gabrielle.

He hugged her close, torn between reassurance and clinginess.

"I'm sorry for being such a jerk," he mumbled against her forehead. "You were just trying to help..."

Meg returned the embrace, wrapping her legs around him as well, drawing him completely to her. Her kiss on his ear was so unlike her usual voracious tongue swipes that he found himself drawing back to look her in the eye again.

"And I'm sorry for bein' a bitch." The words were quiet and sincere, the harsh implication open, unmuted. "But I had to show ya, Jox...I mean, look at 'em! You really think it matters whether they're bumpin' uglies?"

His drawn and haggard look dissolved in a fit of nervous chuckling as he wiped his pale brow, swallowing as he looked at her again. The strength of her arm was still half-supporting, half-embracing him, her head bowed as she awaited his response.

"I guess not," he said quietly. "Looks like we were both right, huh?"

Meg looked up, wiping a tear from her eye. "Guess so, huh?" Her voice trembled as she returned his gaze. "So what now?"

He rose and pulled her to her feet with a flourish; almost feeling graceful enough to walk a straight line.

"Why don't you and I have a nice, quiet dinner alone this evening...milady?"

"So are you glad you let me talk you into it?"

"Mm-hm..."

"You're not falling asleep, are you?"

"Nuh...gotta...g'out 'n...cksercise."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nuh-uh...member? We're havin' dinner with Lias again..." The warrior stifled a yawn as the grogginess began to clear from her voice. "I'll find him before we eat so we can get business out of the way. I hate politics over dinner..."

Gabrielle chuckled, sliding off the half-nude form. Her shoulders were screaming for a massage of their own as she wiped excess oil from her hands, but she relished it like a good workout; or the almost enjoyable pain of an injury, the inevitable occasional cost of helping others. It had been worth it if if she'd helped Xena forget her troubles, even for a moment.

"Then I need to exercise. In the meantime, maybe you can track down Philemon..."

Gabrielle stared at the open expanse of back and shoulder she'd been abusing for nearly two candlemarks. Now she was positive she wasn't seeing things; the muscles had visibly increased in size and definition since...yesterday? Last week? And the hair was definitely fuller; almost two inches longer in even the few short hours since this morning. If it weren't tied back, it would
almost be down to her --

*Who _cares_, damn it!*

"So does this mean you'll sleep with me tonight?" She was suddenly even more thankful Joxer wasn't around. "I mean..."

"I know what you mean." Xena sounded amused, with an undercurrent of uncertainty. "We'll see, okay?"

"Okay."

"Hey -- Gabrielle?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. That was wonderful."

"Yeah?" The bard's smile brightened the entire room. "You're welcome."
Resentments and Dialogues

Chapter Summary

Xena is thrust into the limelight and isn't the only one unhappy about it. Many emotional moments, a good deal of insight and an actual clue or two.

Reason can't defeat Emotion in an argument because in an Emotional Argument you just go around and around in rhetorical circles until you become Happy and then the argument's over.

Dave Sim, Cerebus #186 ("Reads")

Setting Orange

By coincidence or unconscious design, the seating arrangements of the previous night's dinner ended up being precisely duplicated, with the exception of one cook and one warrior. Or to be more precise, one Joxer. Xena offered a perfunctory nod as Gabrielle sat down, and the bard realized that Diana was outlining her version of their grim afternoon. The warrior had taken only a moment to wash and brush the worst of the dust off, while the princess had exchanged her formal gown for a less elaborate dress in a soft peach shade, with a matching blouse whose low cut attested to the identity of its former owner.

Gabrielle fervently hoped there wouldn't be too many questions yet. Perhaps it was rationalizing, but she did honestly feel that Xena shouldn't be troubled with what appeared to be a strictly Amazon affair. Even without their current difficulties, the warrior's constant refusal to discuss her history with the Amazons, coupled with the few tense interactions Gabrielle had witnessed, was certainly enough reason to let the subject be broached in good time. She also knew from experience that Xena only grew more stubborn the harder she was pushed. But what else could be expected, from a woman who had challenged the gods themselves?

The bard shivered, belatedly wishing she'd worn her new furs. Her shivers increased as she remembered their origin, deciding that even if they had been rightfully passed on, it was too soon to feel comfortable with the idea of wearing a dead woman's clothes. She would much rather have waited to hear from Ephiny and the others before consigning the body to the flames, and being willing to face the consequences of her hasty decision wasn't the same as being prepared for them.

Diana's husband and child were again conspicuous in their absence, and the bard realized as she glanced about that King Lias was also missing. She was sure she knew exactly where Meg and Joxer were, and tried not to think about what they might be doing.

"Diana, where's your father?"

The princess's face twisted momentarily in grief before she regained control. She stared at her plate, picking distractedly at its contents and giving her fork a dazed, uncomprehending look before; setting it down, cradling her head in her hands.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle." Her voice was muffled, but the despair in it was enough to wither any hope
within the bard's heart. She raised her head again, cupping her hands in front of her mouth and blinking back tears.

Xena sat motionless as the bard rose from her chair, walking behind Diana and rubbing the princess's shoulders until she sank back in her chair. One hand found its way to the bard's and received a reassuring squeeze, and Gabrielle found herself unable to look away from the warrior's fierce, unreadable stare.

"It's not your fault," Diana whispered. Gabrielle looked down, as if remembering the other woman's presence.

The princess took a deep, shaking breath, inadvertently revealing even more cleavage. One side of Xena's jaw gave a faint twitch.

"He...seems to fade in and out. Some days you can hardly tell anything's wrong, but sometimes he mixes up Meg and I, or calls us Xena. It might have been funny the first time, if we hadn't been in the middle of some tense negotiations." She swallowed again. "And days like today...it's better if he doesn't see anyone."

"Or if others don't see him." Xena sounded blunt but kind, leaning forward with renewed interest. "You don't want his illness to become public knowledge. And you don't want the citizens thinking their queen is a --"


"It doesn't seem to matter. Rich or poor, peasant or noble...everybody's got some problem with Meg. Even her friends." The princess laughed cynically, and the bard's hands lifted from her shoulders as Gabrielle stepped back. "She may be officially 'retired', but plenty of people would like to see her behind bars just for being...who she is. Half the mothers in the city want to kill her for debauching their sons, or luring away their daughters, and the other half just want her out. Except for the people she's helped, and they've never been very popular." The anger slowly drained away, leaving quiet frustration and resentment. "I don't blame them for trusting my father more than me."

Gabrielle returned to her seat, feeling Xena's presence beside her hot as a smith's forge; unsure if this was wholly her own imagination as Diana continued.

"Though as far as I can tell, what we do here doesn't seem to have much of an effect out there. If they could just realize the power they have, instead of looking to us to perform miracles, or solve every problem..."

The bard was lost in thought as Xena renewed her inquiry. "Diana, give it to me straight. What happened to your father, and when?"

Long fingers curved elegantly around the stem of her wineglass as Diana stared into its contents.

"Most of the kingdom wanted Meg strung up for her part, in the attempt on my father's life. So they weren't happy when he told them she was now one of his trusted palace staff, and there wasn't even going to be a trial. They found supporters...among others, those who never trusted me, solely on the basis that I look like Xena." Her chin rested in her other hand as she twirled the glass, watching the pale liquid slowly circling about. "In turn, they found common ground with the merchant class, who felt our family had ruled long enough and it was time for a change. The more we tried to make changes, no matter what we did it seemed that somebody wasn't happy with the results." She sipped from the glass with a delicate grimace.
"I did what I could to ease the burden, but between his pride and their mistrust -- not to mention all the people, every day -- there was no way we could keep up. Too many sleepless nights, too many pointless meetings and decreasing support...finally took their toll last month. He was just working up a good yell at the council when he collapsed in a fit."

"Must have put quite a scare into them," came Xena's response. Gabrielle kept her own expression neutral, remaining silent, but she could almost feel the warrior's sardonic eyebrow rise.

"He's recovered physically since then, but everyone knows he isn't quite the same. For obvious reasons, I've been reluctant to assume too much real power. So I've been acting as much as possible in a...private capacity."

Gabrielle's brow furrowed, her stomach growling in protest as its demands continued to be postponed. "And what does that mean?"

"That in many ways, her hands are tied as a princess." Xena appeared as though she were trying not to smile at her own witticism, quickly growing serious when her attention returned to Diana, who was still examining her wineglass. "She's finding out how tempting it can be to break the rules."

Ice-blue eyes glared in return as Diana carefully set her glass down. She turned to Gabrielle, leaning slightly toward the bard, pointedly ignoring Xena.

"When you last came here, my father thought he was dying. He wanted Xena to help ease the transition for me because he knew I wasn't ready to be queen then. But I don't know if I'm ready to be queen, or if I even want to be. And every day more are opposed to my claiming the throne."

"People are afraid of change." Xena's voice was flat as she leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Then you've got Amazons on one end of the valley, centaurs on the other. Throw in Mineus just the other side of the mountains, the usual bands of warlords? It's a wonder anyone bothers to plant, let alone plan for the next harvest."

Diana nodded, reaching out to take Gabrielle's hand in her own. "My father was as much a diplomat as he was a warrior. He always said you should never start a fight...but you should always finish one." She stared into the other woman's eyes. "But I can't fight this. Every day I see him dying, and it kills me a little more. I see death everywhere, Gabrielle. Wearing the faces of the ones I love...I can see him in your eyes!" she finished angrily, drawing away, slamming one fist on the table.

The bard pulled her hands back into her lap for a moment before nervously reaching out for her mug of cider, not daring to look at her friend's face.

"Everyone has to die sometime." Xena's calm as she drank from her mug seemed to mollify the princess, and Gabrielle realized what had caught her unconscious attention. Xena almost always had ale with meals, though hardly ever to the point of intoxication; yet since their arrival, she was sure the warrior hadn't had anything stronger than water.

Xena sighed. "It never gets easier, believe me."

"I'm not hiding his condition." The insistent tone left no doubt that Diana was trying to convince herself as well as her friends. "I haven't lied, just --"

" Haven't told the whole truth?"

"Xena, that's not fair --"
"But it's true, isn't it?" Xena's glare silenced the bard's protest, and she turned to the princess with an authoritative air.

"If you want people to trust you, they have to feel safe. Can't be spending all their time wondering whether some warlord's going to come over the hill and destroy everything they've worked for. Most of them don't want to fight, even if you showed them how. All their lives, they've depended on your father to protect them. And now you come along, disband the army with a wave of your hand and start inviting the world in?" A disbelieving shake of the head. "If I lived here, I'd have gotten out long ago."

"No you wouldn't." The princess swallowed the last of her wine and carefully set down her glass. "You're Xena, remember?"

A grim smile slowly crept across the warrior's lips as Diana continued. "I can't imagine you running from anything...as Meg is always reminding me whenever I get like this." Her voice became brash and sassy, her entire manner transforming as she mimicked the cook's eager tones. "'You think the warrior princess would just give up an' roll over, Di? You give 'em Hades, girl!'" Xena's smile was full-fledged now.

"So I've arranged for you to give my men some...special training."

Gabrielle's heart skipped a beat, but she remained silent.

"I don't want your officers to resent me for undermining their authority." Xena's smile had vanished. "And more than a few of your men may have fought against Callisto, or with her. I don't think --"

Diana's confident air couldn't quite mask the underlying worry. "I'd trust an army of one if that person was skilled enough. If you can teach my men to be even a fraction of the warrior you are, their numbers would be sufficient to protect this entire kingdom and a few surrounding ones."

Xena remained unconvinced. "I can only teach what someone's willing to learn. What makes you think they'll even listen?"

"I informed the men that anyone who wanted to learn was free to do so as long as it didn't interfere with their duties."

Diana sounded casual but didn't meet their gaze, and trepidation tugged at Gabrielle's innards; she'd seen this look of resolve or madness on her best friend's face too many times not to recognize that same stubbornness now.

"And that I thought it would be a shame for them not to learn something from the woman who killed the Warrior Princess."

Gabrielle stared in shock as Xena's mouth fell open, and Diana swung back to Xena, hands flat on the table.

"You said you'd help in any way you could," the princess stated, in clipped, measured tones. "I'm sorry for not letting you know before I did it, but I'm not sorry I did it. And I already know it wasn't the best idea."

Some of the tension left Xena as she took a long draught of water, staring at nothing in particular.

"Actually, that's not bad." She slowly nodded approval. "Why wait for problems to come to you...easier to go out and stir things up a little. Flush out the troublemakers, before they get to you
first." She took another drink, holding her goblet in both hands. "Not much fun being a leader, is it?"

Diana's gaze faltered. "That's one of my reasons."

"Reason for what?" Gabrielle interjected, laughing unsteadily. She swallowed a gulp of cider and slammed down her mug, spilling what little remained inside. "For making her even more of a target? Tell me, where's the 'strategic value' in that?"

Xena cast a look of sharp reproach at her friend.

"Gabrielle, something like this was bound to happen sooner or later. What's done is done. We need to deal with it now, instead of wishing it had been later."

The bard seemed unwilling to meet her gaze, staring fixedly at Diana with mistrustful eyes. The princess returned the glare with stern reserve, but her voice grew softer.

"Gabrielle, do you remember what I was like when we first met?"

Do I ever... The bard's thoughts bifurcated at the recollection of her first meeting with the warrior princess, as well as her shy lookalike.

"I was shocked when I saw the suffering that had been hidden from me for so long. And I thought it would be so easy..." Diana shook her head, as if in awe at her naivete. "Once I realized there was a problem, all I wanted was to fix it. Now I'm not even sure I know what the problems are." She gave a decidedly cynical snort much like Xena's as she refilled her wineglass.

"So, I think I've given up on saving the world. Now I'll be happy if I can just keep everything from falling apart."

"That's an awfully fatalistic attitude." Gabrielle frowned. "I don't think I could go on if I didn't think my actions made a difference. I know things can seem hopeless, but you have to have faith. It'll all work out in the end."

Diana's fingers plucked restlessly at the fabric of her gown, pulling a stray thread further from its home as she stared at her half-empty wineglass. The other women sat in awkward silence until the princess rose to her feet, her movements slow and deliberate as she gathered up the folds of her dress.

"Well, my friends..." Diana puffed out her cheeks in exasperated exhalation. "I have too many things that still need my attention this evening, including a mountain of parchments I need to forge my father's signature on. After that regrettable duty I intend to see to my father, and at that point I intend to catch up on some much needed rest." She inclined her head in a graceful gesture. "If you'll excuse me?"

Gabrielle sprang to her feet the second the door swung shut, pacing back and forth like a trapped animal as the warrior sat in patient silence; finally stalking back to the table and throwing herself into Diana's vacated chair, slapping the table with an open hand and a concerned glare.

"Are you nuts?"

"If you've got anything to add to the discussion besides attacks on my sanity, I'd love to hear it." Xena sounded more resigned than annoyed. "We're not the only ones with problems around here, you know. She's in a tough spot right now, I said I'd help her, and this is one way to do it."
"That's not the point," Gabrielle retorted. "Did you see how she just treated you? Like a..."

"Like a queen treats any of her soldiers," Xena finished smoothly, "or her subjects." Her gaze hardened. "At least for now, I'm under Diana's protection. That doesn't make me her slave, but I do owe her. I'll defend this kingdom as long as she's in charge. And with Lias in the shape he's in, she is definitely in charge."

The warrior stood, effectively ending the discussion. "Now I'm going outside to drill, and I promise --" She placed a cruel emphasis upon the word. "-- to be back soon."

"Xena?" The bard cursed the tiny, hesitant voice that came out of her mouth as her friend stopped in the doorway, sillhouetted by the flickering torchlight from the hall. "Is anything else wrong?"

Xena turned a passive expression upon her, and Gabrielle flinched. The words might be different, but they had played this scenario out too many times for her to not recognize the symptoms.

"I went with Diana to see her father." The huge brown eyes were wet with remembered pain. "He couldn't speak, let alone recognize us. She said by tomorrow he'll probably be back to normal...what's left of it. But right now, he looks like he already belongs in the grave." She chewed on the bitter silence as Gabrielle cautiously regarded her.

When she spoke again her voice was plaintive, like a child begging forgiveness. "His hands were shaking, and it...one time I had to discipline one of my men. Just a little thing, but I couldn't let anyone slide. He was just a kid... so I decided I could give him a chance without looking weak." She swallowed. "I told him I'd overlook it if he could last against me for one minute."

Gabrielle's composure was unwavering. "And?"

Xena's eyes were haggard and lost. "He wasn't doing too bad. I was just toying with him...thought about letting him get away with it, and I got so angry at myself --"

A fist slammed into the door hard enough to shake it in its frame. Gabrielle winced, but the warrior's stone mask remained impenetrable.

"So I knocked him down. Stood over him watching him beg, all the men cheering my name." She glared as though the bard were the cause of her misery. "And I hit him in the head, so hard..."

Somehow, Gabrielle found the courage to speak. "Did you kill him?"

"I wish I had!" Xena suddenly spat. Her face twisted with rage, until the ghost of Callisto was all too apparent. "Not that he'd ever know the difference, but as far as I know he's alive to this day. He woke three days later a drooling child who could barely string two words together!" A shudder wracked her body, and Gabrielle ached to hold her or offer some kind of comfort. Suddenly she straightened, looking directly at the bard. "And his hands shook the same way. Just...like...that."

Gabrielle let out a shaking breath as Xena turned on one heel and stalked out of the room. She rose from the table and almost fell over her staff again, regaining her balance as she ran for the door. "Xena, wait! I didn't mean --"

She halted in the doorway, looking back and forth down the long hallway, sighing inwardly at seeing no trace of her friend. Hardly a surprise; no force on earth could keep Xena from being found when she didn't want to be.

As she stood there in frustration, Joxer appeared at the far end of the hall, wearing his habitual
confused expression but looking surprisingly normal without his armor. He trotted toward the bard, jerking his head back over one shoulder.

"What's with her?"

"A lot of things." Gabrielle rubbed her aching forehead, as she tried and failed to avoid thinking about what he had likely been doing mere moments ago. Seeing 'Xena' falling all over him was amusing only to a point, and was growing more painful with each repetition.

"Do me a favor and keep an eye on her, okay? "I think it's time I did some investigating of my own."

Even without his usual requisite clattering of armor, staying nearly an arrow's length behind his quarry, Joxer was sure Xena could sense his presence as he stumbled through the dense underbrush. He'd been lucky enough to spot her again, sword strapped to her back, carrying her chakram at her side in a clenched fist; had followed as close behind as he dared, as she made her way downstairs and out through the main gate. The guards appeared to take no notice of their passing, but he thought he could hear low murmurs behind as he exited the courtyard.

Once outside the gates she'd taken off running, and he'd been hard pressed to keep the pace, losing sight of her more than once. As they progressed further into the forest he began to recognize the surrounding territory, and it dawned that she might be retracing their path to the castle; his suspicions confirmed on approaching the clearing, where Xena had taken them by surprise that first night.

He slowed his pace, trying to step lightly. She must have deliberately let him keep up; he'd be a fool to believe otherwise, when a sleeping deaf man could have tracked him by the crunch of fallen leaves under his feet, the snap of branches pushed aside. Not to mention chattering teeth. Even with the extra noise, Joxer would have felt more comfortable with his sword and armor, but he was thankful that he'd at least donned boots before leaving his room. Planning on an immediate return had made it no less difficult to tear himself from the comfortable nest he and Meg had made of his bed, and he would just have to hope that the cook's forgiving nature might extend a bit further. Guilt flared fresh at the thought of her patiently waiting for his return; he should have asked Gabrielle to at least pass on a message, but the bard's requests even now had the force of an order, his only thought to somehow obey.

Keep an eye on her, came the dismal reflection. As if he would be able to do anything to stop Xena. Or Callisto, or whoever...

Xena was standing in the middle of the clearing, head bowed, chakram lying by the ashes of their fire; sword drawn, hanging at her side. Joxer sank down onto a nearby log to silently observe her for however long it might take. The warrior gave no indication of having heard, her slow, silent breath the only indication she was alive.

Suddenly she crouched low, moving forward at a run; rushing up the tree in a backward flip, directing a series of brutal kicks to its trunk on the way back down. He had time to register vague amazement that her feet were still bare before she had landed, blade flashing in a dizzying pattern as she flowed around the tree. She wore a grim look of concentration that didn't bode well at all for its continued survival, and Joxer gulped, riveted to his seat. It wasn't the first time he'd been privileged to see this, but it never grew any less impressive; and unless he was mistaken she was moving even faster than before. In and out among the shadows she wove her deadly dance, sword and pale hair shining in the last glow of Apollo's chariot. The sound of her breath grew increasingly audible but her speed and strength never wavered, a silent snarl on her lips as she began to whittle
away at the tree, severing its limbs one by one, moving on to the next before the first had touched the ground. Spinning on one heel, her foot shot out low, higher, overhead; three kicks impacting against the tree hard enough to send a dull vibration through the ground and into the log he was sitting on. Swiftly completing the spin, sword whipping across the tree's midsection. The blade moved once, twice, too fast to see --

She let out a piercing scream that caused Joxer to levitate nearly a foot above his perch; dropping to one knee, raising the sword in a two-handed grip. The blade plunged earthward and she pulled the stroke short at the last second, tip hovering a hair's breadth from the grass.

Joxer didn't dare move as he sat and waited. Slowly, she lowered her arms.

"First word of advice for a warrior?" the voice came from out of the darkness. "Never...ever...ruin your blade with dirt and rocks."

Xena stared at the sword resentfully, heaving an exasperated sigh. She reached behind and undid the scabbard, tossing it on the ground next to her weapons and rising smoothly to her feet. He automatically followed her lead, and she motioned him closer until they were standing before each other. She studied his face for so long he found himself wondering if it was a test, to see how long he could keep quiet.

"You want to learn to fight?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Then we start at the beginning. Number one. If you can run, run. Number two. If you can't run, surrender, and then run. Number three. If you're outnumbered, let them fight each other, while you run. Number four --"

Joxer raised his hand with a resigned expression. "Lemme guess. More running."

Xena allowed herself a faint smile. "No. Four's where you try to talk your way out of it. And after that, if you have no other choice..."

Her fist flew out from her side, filling Joxer's field of vision with a crack of moving air. His knees threatened to buckle from shock before her hand was on his shoulder, keeping him upright.

"Ow," she remarked, casually rotating her shoulder with a wince. Joxer gaped, until he could find his voice.

"Xena..." He licked his lips, gratefully accepting the water skin. "Xena, there's...I can't do that. Not even with you for a teacher."

She frowned as she released his arm.

"I'm not asking you to be the best. Just be better."

He made no reply and she turned again to face him, the supplication in her eyes reminding him of anyone but Xena.

"Joxer, I'm still not fully adjusted to Callisto's body. It's got different reflexes, a whole new center of balance..." One hand rubbed nervously at the back of her neck. "Sure, Gabrielle can hold her own -- most of the time -- but she's still learning. I have to be able to depend on the rest of you, if anything goes wrong. I --" She took a deep breath. "We can't afford it. Gabrielle learned to defend herself, and so can you."
"What --" Joxer swallowed the lump in his throat, as the bitter sweetness of her words washed over him. "What do you want me to do?"

A light shrug. "Watch. Listen...ask questions, if you have to. Same way I learned, hopefully without as many mistakes. Don't worry, I'll be learning it with ya all over again." She approached him slowly until she was standing across from him again, arms held slightly out from her body. A spark of anger flared briefly in her eyes. "Gotta get used to teaching again sometime, I suppose. You ready?"

He nodded dumbly.

"That's the spirit." She closed her eyes for a moment, breathing deeply, then opened them to meet his uncertain gaze.

"You can't learn to run until you know how to walk. And you can't fight until you can stay on your feet. That's why balance is the key. You with me so far?"

"Balance," he repeated, nodding uncertainly.

"And breathing."

"Breathing," came the obedient response, with a slight crease of his forehead to show the extent of his effort.

"Think for yourself," she prompted with that subtle grin.

"Think for myself."

"Don't blindly repeat the words of others."

"Don't --" The corners of her mouth quirked, and Joxer felt his ears turn red.

"You're right." She held her hands open before him. "I can't make you a hero. Maybe I can't even teach you how to fight worth a damn. But there's no way to lose a fight that never starts."

He blinked. "Isn't that, uh...kind of obvious?"

"Not to most folks," she sighed, sinking to the ground and crossing her legs. He stood over her for an awkward moment.

"I thought we were gonna spar?"

"That's enough lessons for today." She suddenly sounded quite tired as she stared into space, running a finger over the glittering edge of her chakram. He was trying to figure out what to say when she spoke again.

"It's just a fact of the world that no matter where you go, there are bullies, and there are victims. I learned that much before I was old enough to grow teats."

Joxer swallowed, amazingly feeling no urge to laugh.

"I was big and strong, and that kept me from being a victim. And the bullies learned to stay away after I'd thumped a few heads. Of course, some heads needed more thumping than others." A brief, fond smile. "Toris and I had to stuff one guy in a barrel of manure. And if Lyceus couldn't outfight them, he could always outrun them."
Her brow darkened. "But the other children in the village suffered when they decided to take out their frustration on everyone else." A twist of the lip. "So much like the gods. Fear and control, and they'll move the heavens and the earth before they give up either." She carefully measured her words before continuing.

"So I'd see them playing their little games with the others, and I'd...step in." Again came the sad smile, tinged with pride at the depths of her cunning and skill. "They got lucky a few times...but I just sat back and waited and planned. And when the moment was right, I struck back. I beat 'em all the way, and when they figured out I wasn't going to stop, they ran straight to their parents."

Her smile held no humor now. "I thought I had nothing to worry about. It was obvious I was in the right. I didn't have any idea how..." She chose her words carefully. "Complex...life really was. Some parents were drunkards or worse, couldn't care less what the kids did. Most were decent people...bitter, or angry, that their children hadn't lived up to their expectations. My mother tried to stand up for me, but it just turned into a shouting match. So they went to the magistrate."

Xena was gently rocking back and forth, elbows resting on her knees, hands clasped in front of her. Joxer was utterly caught up in her narrative, but she almost seemed unaware of his presence.

"He wasn't really a bad guy, but he was more interested in keeping things quiet than solving the problem. It wouldn't have taken much effort on his part to keep the troublemakers in line...people like that only respect superior force, but it took me a while to learn that one. The only thing it did was make everyone angrier and more resentful. The parents were angry because their lives were being disrupted. The bullies were angry, because their toys had been taken away. My brother couldn't help being a little angry at me for making our family the center of attention again...and my mother was just plain tired. Barely making a profit at the inn...working extra hours so she wouldn't have to pay more people, and trying to take care," she finished with an ironic smile at the obvious difficulty involved in the task, "of me."

A flash of anger, which quickly passed. "There were times I felt maybe none of it was really happening...or at least I felt so miserable that I wished it wasn't. Or I'd start thinking that maybe they -- everyone else -- really was right, and I was wrong." She exhaled quietly. "That was worse. It still meant it wasn't real, but it also meant I deserved what was happening...that I was really guilty of everything people were saying about me."

Joxer let it all sink in. "So what happened?"

A weary look of resignation. "Nothing. Until Amphipolis was raided." Another weary chuckle as she stared up through leafless trees at the moon, hanging low and pale. "By that time, I was so on edge, it didn't take much to push me over. I didn't see the face of a single man I killed that day." She was lost in reflection, fingers tracing patterns in the dirt at her feet. "It almost made me feel better...until..."

He bowed his head, and she let out another sigh.

"It's not your fault, and I'm not trying to make excuses. But I know how easy it is to do the right thing for the wrong reasons." A sharp, barking laugh. "Not that the other way's any better...Hades," she muttered shamefacedly. "Never was good at lectures. All I can do is...what I think needs to be done. Face the consequences."

Joxer frowned in puzzlement. "Isn't that all anyone can do?"

She gazed up at the stars, grown painfully clear and numerous with the onset of darkness. The lights from the castle had dimmed to a dull glow. Gabrielle...
"Me and you both. I'm no goddess, Joxer. Even I learn something new every day."

*And who are you?* The voice echoed its silky, taunting refrain. She pounced on it, wrestled it down, her face taut and impassive.

*I know who I am,* came the voice she had lost. Deeper, more confident; a silky-soft burn that struck terror into the hearts of listeners. She shifted uncomfortably in her strange new skin. *The one who sent half of Greece to their graves. Who beats back entire armies singlehanded. The Woman who Fights, the Destroyer of Nations. Name's Xena, and I'm gonna send you back to your mamas...boys.*

Gleeful rage flickered in her belly, familiar as a lover's touch. Callisto had always insisted they were more alike than not, and of course it was true, even if she would have died rather than admit it to her enemy. But she refused to let harm come to her friends, ever again. Why spread the pain around?

"Uh, Xena..." For once, Joxer's timidity was a welcome interruption. "I didn't have time to tell Meg where I was going, and...I kinda ran out on her. You think I could --"

She held out her hand and they rose together, brushing off the dirt.

"Get going," she nodded indulgently. "Just don't wear yourself out. Tomorrow we do some real sparring. Okay?"

His grin was still bashful, but the growing confidence brought an honest warmth to her heart she hadn't been expecting. He nodded, returning the traditional warrior's forearm clasp, and turned to stride away, crashing into a wall of foliage.

He spit out a mouthful of leaves, deciding it might be better to keep his eyes on the path. Then again, there wasn't much path; it was a lot darker now, and --

His hands reflexively flew up and smacked into his forehead, and he whirled about. "Xena? I was supposed to --"

Joxer stared helplessly around the clearing, heart sinking into his boots as he saw that both the warrior and her weapons had vanished without a trace. "Great," he mumbled, quietly and then yelling. "Just great! Hope you enjoyed making me look like an idiot again, Xena!"

He turned around and began the long, slow trudge back to the light and warmth of the castle. At least Gabrielle ought to get a laugh out of it.

Once she was done killing him.

---

"Joxypoo?"

Raven tresses poked out from under the sheet, surrounding blinking, azure eyes. Gradually the rest of Meg appeared, sliding out from underneath the sheet, dragging it along. The cook stood on rubbery limbs, stretching her tall frame with an enormous sleepy yawn and a vigorous scratch of her head.

*Musta dozed off there...* She grinned in fond recollection at the sight of the skirt flung haphazardly over the back of a chair, her undergarments in a heap on the floor. With almost an entire wing between their suite and the one Xena and Gabrielle were staying in, she'd felt free to voice her pleasure at great length; as often as possible and until her throat gave out, despite Joxer's gallant efforts to protect her reputation. It had taken time and effort, but eventually she'd convinced him
there were better uses for one's tongue than talking, encouraging him to match and even surpass her enthusiasm.

She swayed on her feet, inhaling deeply as she pulled the sheets tighter. The strength of her feelings for the gangly young man actually hurt, an open wound more painful than any monthly cycle or physical illness, bleeding fresh every time she looked in his eyes. Maybe she couldn't protect him from thugs or warlords, disease and death in its many forms, and with each passing day it seemed more certain she would never bear his children. But if she could hold him to her and protect him from the world, for even that fragile moment, her sleep was as dreamless as that of Morpheus himself. For such peace, there was no sacrifice too great.

Meg winced as she put both hands in the small of her back and shoved, bowing ungracefully in half. Maybe she should ask Gab for one of those massages. Or use a few more positions... A prickly, squirming heat went through her at the thought and she let out a growl, stamping her foot in frustration. No time for fooling around if Joxer wasn't coming back; and the odds of that looked better all the time. She sighed, wearily falling onto the bed and bouncing twice before it allowed her sizable body to come to rest. The smell of their coupling drifted up from the sheets, enveloping her in its bittersweet miasma.

A quiet knock came from the door, and she was already standing before wondering why Joxer would bother. She grabbed the sheets around her ample bosom as part of her raised its voice in protest. Better silly than sorry, she retorted as she pressed her back to the wall and slid toward the door, tucking the sheet into place to free up her hands. All the royal family's good wishes couldn't erase bad intent, and despite being given explicit free rein of the castle, Meg only felt truly safe in her own kitchen.

She reached out as the door swung open, and lunged forward with a yell before seeing something coming at her face. Somehow she dodged the blow, losing her balance and falling back backward. The already loose sheet flew completely free of its moorings as she hit the stone floor, throwing her hands to either side in an ungainly struggle as her disheveled hair tumbled about her face and shoulders.

She bit her lip as she grinned up at Gabrielle, who was standing over her with her staff raised. "Uh...hi?" Meg hesitantly reacquired the ends of her makeshift garment, rising unsteadily and pulling it around her as the bard lowered her weapon with a look of exhaustion; staring at her until the cook began to squirm slightly under the other woman's gaze.

"So, uh...how's tricks?" She cursed the pitifully weak, defensive tone creeping into her voice. Remember, she thought doggedly as she proudly returned the smaller woman's stare. Might be an Amazon princess, but she stinks when she don't wash. Same as everyone else. She stood straighter and brushed back her hair, feeling bigger and more awkward than ever.

Gabrielle appeared to reconsider the first reply that came to mind, returning her staff to its duty as walking stick.

"I'd like to see Philemon and the baby."

Meg seemed to deflate as she turned away, the bard's eyes following the sway of her hips as she walked back to the bed and sat down. "Can't do it, Gab."

"Why not?" The bard didn't sound hostile, merely curious. Meg looked up with fresh suspicion.
"Aren't you gonna ask, can't or won't?"

Gabrielle implacably returned the frank gaze. "I don't want to argue. I just want to know why."

"Oh, no ya don't..." Meg shook her head as she looked away again, a bitter chuckle rising from her throat. "You ain't gonna play them touchy-feely games with me, sister. I'm just a cook, y'hear? I don't know nothin' about any of that politickin' crap Di's tangled up with. An' if I did, I'd be smart enough to keep my mouth shut."

Gabrielle sighed as she approached the bed and set her staff on the floor, sitting next to the reluctant cook and reaching out to take her hand.

"I know we didn't start out on the best of terms, but you trusted me once before. Lias and Diana trust you, and I -- " The bard did her utmost to sound reassuring. "Xena and I will help. I promise."

"That's what I'm afraid of," the cook muttered. Before the bard could retort Meg had risen from the bed, grabbing her skirt from the chair and throwing the sheet from her body. Gabrielle's eyes widened as the skirt was raised overhead and found herself unable to look away from the pleasantly muscled back and shoulders; Meg slithered into the garment as it fell around her, and the bard sucked in a silent breath as she glimpsed angry red blotches peppering the woman's flanks and hindquarters.

The cook turned with a guilty but somehow satisfied look. "Where's Di?"

"She's with her father. Why?"

Meg appeared disgusted at the bard's naivete. "What about Jox an' Xena?"

"They're outside." The bard was growing irritated again. "What does --"

"Follow me."

Gabrielle sprang to her feet as the other woman opened the door, breaking into a trot to keep up.

"You know, you might be taking this Xena impersonation thing too far?" Her staff thumped a bit harder on the floor as they made their way the length of the hall, through the main intersection, into a more opulent and lavish wing.

"What're you babblin' about over there?" Meg was nervously looking about as they approached an ornate set of double doors, and the bard pitched her voice lower.

"Aren't there guards in the royal chambers?"

"That comes later." Meg carefully opened the doors and peered in, beckoning urgently for the bard to follow.

Gabrielle obeyed, her unease reaching new proportions as she contemplated all the various ways she could potentially be getting into trouble. As the doors swung to she took in the sizable room, as richly furnished as before but with more attention to quality than quantity, its grand scale even more evident with the increased amount of open space. Meg strode to the great walk-in closet and flung the door wide, briefly surveying and diving into its contents, sifting through row upon row of dresses. Quickly selecting one, she tossed it over one arm before disappearing within the confines of the closet.

"Grab a brush from that nightstand," came the cook's muffled voice, joined by a resounding chorus
of rustling. The bard did so, leaning her staff up against the mirror and staring at her reflection as she numbly held the brush like an awkward dagger.

As she gazed into the mirror she saw Meg emerge from the closet wearing the new dress, a long, flowing piece of modest cut and a rich, creamy off-white fabric decorated sparingly with small pearls. Her hair was still in wild disarray, and as Gabrielle watched she walked up to the chair in front of the nightstand, settling into it with a sigh.

"Hope you know what to do with that?"

Gabrielle put the brush down and looked again into the mirror, staring at the dual reflections. "I think I know what you want me to do." She returned the obstinate look, grateful she didn't have to directly look into those eyes. "Is this the first time?"

"No, but if you keep stallin' it'll be the last." Fingers drummed restlessly on the arm of the chair, until Gabrielle slowly retrieved the brush.

"Don't worry about makin' it perfect." Meg pulled open a drawer, removing a tastefully understated choker studded with even tinier pearls and fixing it about her neck as Gabrielle held the hair away from the clasp. The bard began to hesitantly remove the worst of the snarls, and the cook sighed in frustration.

"What'd I just say?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath, wanting to yank the woman's head back by the hair she held in one fist; feeling almost physically ill at the strength of the violent, gleeful desire. What's _wrong_ with me?

"Sorry." The brush trembled in her grip, and she slowly resumed her labors. "It's just...I don't know if you're doing it on purpose, but you're almost acting more like Xena than Xena." She laughed nervously. "Note the 'almost.'"

"Had a lotta practice -- ow!" Meg flinched, glaring into the mirror. "Hey, fast don't mean rough, okay?"

"I said I was sorry," Gabrielle snapped. The cook seemed chastened by her vehemence, refraining from further commentary even when a particularly bad knot yielded under the fine bristles. The bard slowed again as the last of the troublesome tangles came undone, adding a few unnecessary strokes until Meg fussily retrieved the hair and began to arrange it.

Gabrielle exchanged the brush for her staff, relishing the worn feel of the wood. The fact that she now didn't feel entirely comfortable without a weapon in her hand might be heartening to someone like Ephiny, whose undisguised contempt when she'd been proclaimed Queen had contributed a great deal to the bard's motivation to improve her skills. But the extent of her dependence on its presence for security in stressful situations was starting to alarm her.

Meg finished setting her hair and stood, gathering the dress up and fixing Gabrielle with a grim stare as if daring the bard to comment, finally dropping her gaze. "I still oughtta have my head examined," the cook muttered, taking a deep breath. Her features softened as she straightened her posture; when she spoke her diction was clear as a bell, all the rough edges smoothed and just a little higher pitched.

"If you'll just come with me, Gabrielle, I'll take you to see Philemon. I'm sorry you had to wait this long."
The bard blinked several times before recovering, vigorously shaking her head. "If we're going to be sneaking around like a couple of criminals, I think I'm entitled to an explanation."

Meg closed her eyes, flinging her hands to the ceiling in supplication. "I'm tryin' to get in character and you're distractin' me. You don't wanna talk to Phil, just keep it up." She turned and swept toward the door, repeating her cautious inspection before allowing them to slip outside.

The cook set a brisk pace as they moved down the corridor, nodding to a passing guard, who offered a salute. Gabrielle smiled awkwardly, returning the gesture, and the guard's steps slowly faded.

Their circuitous route left her wondering if the cook was intentionally trying to confuse her, and she was ready to break the silence when they emerged from the narrow hallway in front of another set of double doors; identical to Diana's except for the pair of guards. The men straightened on spotting Meg, one of them breaking into a smile.

"Evening, majesty. How can we serve you?"

Meg smiled, with just a trace of sadness. "You can tell me if my husband's in any mood to receive visitors."

The other guard bristled, but his companion gave a friendly nod.

"I'd say he's pretty fair right now, ma'am. Been playin' with the little one."

"I'm glad to hear that," Meg murmured. The soldiers stepped aside to open the door as the two woman entered the room.

Gabrielle relaxed as the massive slab of wood and metal shut behind them with hardly a sound, but Meg's guard didn't waver, even when she let go the bard's hand.

"Philemon?"

"Who's that?" An infant wearing a miniature war helmet popped up over the edge of the bed, vaguely waving its arms. "Is that Mummy? Eh? Can you show Mummy how you hold the sword?"

Gabrielle laughed in sudden relief as an unshaven Philemon rose up holding the now giggling infant.

"Prob'ly not the one you were hopin' for," Meg said quietly. She folded her arms over the exposed cleavage, avoiding his gaze. "Got someone here wants to talk to you pretty bad."

Philemon gathered his daughter to his chest, looking between the two women with dawning recognition. The bard could see his eyes were bloodshot and haggard, the hair on his head as untrimmed as his chin.

"Gabrielle?" He cradled the infant closer as he stared at them. "What's wrong? Where's Xena?"

The bard swallowed, and Meg cleared her throat.

"I better get this stuff back to Di's room," the cook murmured, gathering up her dress again. "I'll see ya later. Phil..." She swallowed. "You know I'd say sorry. If it'd do any good."

"I know." Philemon didn't return her gaze, and Meg finally turned away, never glancing back as she shut the door behind her.
Gabrielle felt weak in the knees, but managed to return the man's frank appraisal. Finally he sighed, motioning to an empty chair.

"I'm sorry. Please, sit down." His voice sounded rough, from illness or lack of sleep. "I imagine you've got a lot of questions."

"Thanks, but I'd rather stand." She paced slowly around the bed, trying not to look like she was leaning too heavily on her staff. Philemon sat carefully on the bed, the child on his lap, frowning in thought.

"Gabrielle...you and I don't really know each other that well. You and Xena saved this kingdom...what is it, twice now? And each time, I wish I'd gotten to know you better, although I don't think it would make this any easier. At least then you'd...you might understand why I'm asking these questions."

Gabrielle frowned. "You haven't asked any questions yet."

"Can you honestly say that you trust Callisto?"

"Of course I --" Gabrielle broke off, suspicion and realization meeting. "You knew Xena was dead."

"Diana told me everything when you arrived. I'm sorry for deceiving you like that," he continued quietly. "You were one of the few she called friend. I regret that I didn't know her better myself." He looked down at his daughter, who had rolled out of his lap and onto her belly, making her way toward the head of the bed.

"Before I met Xena, I believed every story about her. Then you told me they were true -- and you said it didn't matter, because she had changed. I admit I was sceptical, but the two of you showed me I was wrong." He watched the infant detour around a pillow, scooping her up before she could fall off the edge of the bed.

"Gabrielle looking away, not trusting herself to speak as Philemon continued. "You and Xena showed me I was wrong...not just about her, but about Diana. About my brother...and about myself." He sounded vaguely amused at himself. "I thought the woman I loved was a helpless flower that I'd have to protect for the rest of my life. But I was willing to do it until Xena showed me that if I tried, I'd destroy her...that I'd end up hating her."

"Do you?"

A bitter chuckle issued from his throat. "No. But it seems I hardly know her anymore. I don't entirely trust her, but that's all right. The feeling is more than mutual." He indicated the sword at his side. "They still let me carry a weapon, but I haven't been out of this room in three weeks."

Gabrielle gave up her pacing and settled into the chair. "Why? Are you a prisoner?"

Philemon snorted, and his child echoed the outburst with a wet sneeze. "Might as well be, for all they say it's in my best interest. My daughter and I have many enemies." This last comment dripped with sarcasm as he gently wiped the child's nose with a pocket rag.

"Why don't you tell me what's really bothering you?"

His face fell and he turned away, watching his daughter resume her uneven trail around the landscape of the bed. "We'd be here 'till next winter if I told you everything." He stared miserably at the wall. "Where should I start? That my brother resented my marriage to Diana enough to
disown me? That he vowed to kill me when he found out how Xena tricked him? That he's trying to reinstate slavery in his kingdom -- and I suspect will happily send an army against us, once he's demoralized our citizens so badly they welcome his return?"

Gabrielle shook her head as she tried to absorb it all, but her host didn't lose momentum. "That he's bought off every petty warlord in Greece with the exception of Draco, who I understand has been recently spotted in the area, no doubt here to join his cohorts on the side that looks to have the best chance of survival and profit --" He snapped his mouth shut and swallowed hard. "And that even with all this, my brother is the furthest thing from my mind? That my daughter is taking her first steps before she even has a name of her own, and the woman I thought I loved seems to have..." He shook his head. "Grown beyond me. And I can't tell if I miss her, or what she used to be...or what I thought she was."

Gabrielle badly wanted to offer him some physical comfort, but his misery seemed tightly clenched like a cocoon that defied any efforts at approach. Inwardly she chastised herself for jumping to the worst possible conclusion; surely the truth was bad enough without the additional products of her own fevered imagination.

"Philemon, you're a good man. Maybe not perfect, but not even the gods --"

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle." His voice was drained of its previous anger. "None of this is your fault...if there's anyone to blame here, it's me."

"What could you possibly have done?"

"Where can I begin?" Philemon laughed humorlessly, meeting her gaze with eyes that were broken and lost. "I let my brother talk sweet to me...felt sorry enough to keep visiting him. Told myself I'd figure out his game, and now Diana thinks I've gone over to his side. She doesn't come out and say anything, but why shouldn't she have her suspicions? Gods, the last time we saw each other -- the things I said --" He wiped his eyes and Gabrielle nervously shifted her gaze, unsure if acknowledging his tears would make him angrier.

He went on, voice harsh with grief. "Lias would hate me if enough of his mind were left, but by all the gods! How long can he survive like this? At what cost to his daughter?" He stared at the ceiling as if looking through it to the night sky outside. "I feel like a stranger in my own home. Only it's not my home, it's her castle. And one day she'll be queen, and I'll never be king, and there are too many people upset by that. And I don't even know any more, if I'm one of them. And now you come here..."

The bard's head was spinning, and she grasped at the first straw within reach.

"Have you talked to Diana about any of this?"

"Perhaps I wasn't able to find the right words." Philemon's brow darkened. "Or didn't say them well enough."

Gabrielle tried for a lighthearted smile. "Seems like you did a pretty good job just now." She approached slowly, sitting on the edge of the bed, leaving a comfortable distance between them.

"If you can't tell the woman you love, who can you tell? I don't know if it'll solve all your problems, but if you don't..." She took a deep breath. "That might be all it takes to convince her you really don't care anymore. Is that what you want?"

Philemon stared out the window; his daughter busily engaged herself in sucking on the bard's
kneecap with an earnest, wide-eyed look that rivaled the snootiest of wine tasters.

"If half the stories I've heard of Callisto are true, you're in more danger than I am."

Gabrielle reached out and stroked the child's contented features as she continued to nurse. "A lot of people said that about Xena."

Philemon nodded, as though his suspicions were confirmed.

"And you're hoping history will repeat itself." The weariness was streaked with quiet urgency. "Gabrielle, I admire your faith, but you're not going to get lucky a second time. That woman will eat you alive!"

"Not if your daughter beats her to it." Gabrielle's sly tone dissolved to a giggle, as Philemon's gaze descended to the child and his laugh suddenly joined hers, a real, honest peal that rose to the ceiling. The noise caused the child to release her dinner and sit up, staring back and forth as she struggled to keep her head upright.

A hasty double knock came at the door. Philemon and Gabrielle swung round with guilty expressions as it opened to reveal Meg, still wearing the white dress.

"I'm afraid visiting hours are over." The cook beckoned with some urgency, and the bard rose from the bed, looking around for her staff before finding it on the floor by the chair. She curtseyed to the baby, who was still staring at her with a hanging mouth that threatened to flow over, and then to Philemon.

"Thank you for the audience, your majesty."

Philemon frowned, though his voice was gentle. "I told you, Gabrielle. I'm no king."

The bard gave him her most reassuring smile. "Why don't you let me decide that for myself?"

Philemon exhaled as they made their exit; returning his attention to his daughter, whose culinary ambitions had grown to encompass the priceless silken sheets adorning the bed.

"What do you think, my dear?" Philemon thought fleetingly that his insanity was complete, his torture in excess of any even a Bacchae might devise. He gazed fondly at his daughter, hoping tomorrow would be sunny.

"Should we trust someone who only tastes a little better than your blanket?"
If It Saves Just One Child

Chapter Summary

Xena's nightmares return; worse yet, they're vaguely pornographic and not very pleasant. Many meetings result in much merriment.

Chapter Notes

Finally up to some of that graphic sex and violence, as well as increasing emotional and mental cruelty. Continue at your own risk.

[Theocritus] invented the pastoral poem in the 3rd century B.C. [and] like many of us who went to college in a cute place...had fond memories of amusing locals, of young love in wholesale quantities, of long, gabbing looks in the woods with friends, and of how idyllic everything looks when you're supposed to be in chem lab.

P.J. O'Rourke, _All the Trouble in the World_

_Sweetmorn_

Xena froze, pressing against the door; Straining to make out distant noises, as heavy breathing reverberated within the confines of the castle walls. A loud moan of pain or pleasure drifted to her ears and her breath caught in her throat, every reflex screaming in recognition.

Shifting her grip on the sword, she grabbed the door with her free hand, pushing with all her might. The ancient metal shifted ponderously on rusty hinges but remained stubbornly in place. She grit her teeth and shoved harder, fighting to keep the advantage, quickly squeezing through as it slid open with a tortured shriek.

The cavern's entrance was lit with dozens of lamps and torches, its walls uncarved stone apart for intricate sculptures jutting from the surface. All depicted female forms in various states of undress, embracing one another in an even greater variety of positions. From the far wall hung a set of iron rings and dangling chains, gleaming in the torchlight.

As she slowly advanced into the room, her senses shouted an alert. Xena whirled about to discover two heavily armed women blocking her path. From the darting movements of their eyes and the soft rustling sounds, there were at least four more.

She rapidly scanned the rest of the room, tracking the positions of the unseen ones by sound and feel; suddenly freezing at the horrific sight before her: Callisto standing on a raised platform, covered in animal skins; Gabrielle naked on the skins, her hands stretched overhead, bound tightly with straps of leather.

Callisto looked up with a wicked smile, hand resting possessively on the bard's quivering stomach.
"Nice of you to join us." Callisto trailed her fingers across Gabrielle's naked skin, cupping the hint of roundness still visible behind firm abdominal muscles. Gabrielle closed her eyes, remaining silent as she tried unsuccessfully to move away.

Xena stepped forward and Callisto sadly shook her head, hand sliding up to a nipple and giving a cruel twist. Gabrielle uttered a strangled cry that stopped the warrior in her tracks.

"Thought that'd get your attention." The playful rejoinder burned her ears as Callisto's grip tightened further. Gabrielle was hyperventilating, tears of pain flowing freely down her cheeks, and Xena's own fingers tightened around the hilt of her sword.

"Oh, no!" Callisto let out a peal of girlish laughter. "I know what you're thinking. You'd rather tear me apart than allow me to lay a hand on your little friend." Her tone grew syrupy, teasing. "Is it because you'd rather keep her to yourself?"

She giggled as she released her grip, running the tip of her tongue over her lips with a maniacal stare. Xena fought back the urge to rush the dais, an almost blinding streak of pain lancing through the middle of her skull.

"Callisto..." She hardly recognized her own voice, and Gabrielle's eyes grew wider at the almost inhuman growl. "You're gonna die."

The blonde's eyes grew even bigger and rounder, practically sparkling with delight. "But of course I am, silly! We all have to die someday, now don't we?" One finger descended into her mouth, and she pulled it from her pouting lips with a seductive, diabolical smile.

"But somehow...I don't think it's my time just yet."

One of the women stepped forward and brought her sword down. Xena felt her own blade fall from nerveless fingers as pain fled, and then all awareness...

"Xena?" The bard's voice was raised in irritation, rather then blind fear, but was fast approaching that. "Xena, stop it!"

She struggled to sit up, chest heaving, limbs thrashing; pushing the tangling blanket aside with a cough. Gabrielle's hand was at her back, steadying her.

"Were you dreaming?"

Her lungs relaxed enough for her to draw breath, and she gave a reluctant nod.

"Was it..." The bard hesitated. "Was it about Callisto?"

"Yeah." Xena rubbed fiercely at watering eyes, managing nonchalance. "She was dressed like a court jester...and she wouldn't stop singing."

Gabrielle chuckled as the awkwardness passed.

"Hope you're not coming down with anything. I know you're eager to build your strength up, but you can't push it too fast. I must have fallen asleep waiting for you." She still sounded concerned, but Xena noted the casual, deliberate avoidance of probing. "Want me to get you some tea?"

"Please," the warrior muttered. Gabrielle patted her shoulder and stood, grabbing her staff from its
position by the door and taking her leave.

Xena waited for the door to shut before falling back with a groan, closing her eyes against the excruciatingly cheerful morning sunlight. Every muscle was complaining, and the nagging ache between her shoulders that had been eased by Gabrielle's massage was back with a vengeance. At least Joxer apparently hadn't filled the bard's ears with any wild tales, which was certainly for the best. She cringed to think how easily she'd run her mouth off, and the thought that she'd filled his ear only in Gabrielle's absence wasn't a pleasant one.

*He's a good guy,* she sternly reminded herself. Talking to Joxer had improved her mood, and considerably. Why couldn't she talk like that to her best friend?

Taking off without a word hadn't been the smartest idea either, but there were times when you just had to go with the moment. The most difficult part was doing it without a sound, the time-tested Amazon method of traveling by treetop at dizzying speed; always a discomforting experience, evoking the joy of dreams of flight, and memories too painful to contemplate. For hours she'd run a midnight gauntlet, circling the castle grounds like a wraith as she noted the guards' positions and patterns, mapping out every last hill and valley and using that discipline to quell the urge to drop everything and run.

She groaned again as she rolled onto her side, trying to work out the myriad kinks. Plainly she should have been up hours ago, but the sun's heat was an enormous boulder pinning her down. A yawn threatened to dislocate her jaw; she couldn't even remember the last time she'd stayed this long abed, but the world could survive a little longer without her.

A shiver, as she pulled the sun-drenched blanket over still-bare feet. Dreams didn't necessarily mean anything, but her practical nature kept returning to the same infernal ruminations. Callisto wasn't a virgin, so it was more than conceivable that she might have borne a child; that in turn made her think of Solan, which sent her thoughts spinning off in countless directions. Damn Gabrielle anyway, for conjuring up ghosts that were better off buried...

Oh? she scolded herself. *So it's her fault you're as nervous as a virgin in prison? You better quit playing around and get focused, before someone gets hurt!* At least it was an improvement over her warlord days, when her first instinct might have been to have every child within a hundred leagues put to the sword.

Another shiver. If she'd had half the imagination then that she did now...

...her gaunt, bruised form wracked with pain as she huddled against the cold stone wall of the cave, biting down on her hand until the blood ran freely. The rain pouring outside could not mask the clash of the bandits' weapons, their faint curses as they scoured the area for their erstwhile captives; she wasn't the only one to have taken advantage of the storm to make good her escape, but if she made a sound she'd be the first to be recaptured. Again came the pain, a great, throbbing wave that drowned out the faint sensations of her head thrashing from side to side, slamming against the stone; reaching its peak, and ebbing away.

She stared unblinking at the bloody mass that lay twitching on the cave floor, its tiny hands clutching the air, a pitiful, feeble mewling issuing from its slash of a mouth. Somehow it had come from inside of her; crying, as she had not dared.

A roll of thunder crashed nearby, blending with the growing yells of her pursuers. Her fingers grazed over the rough floor, coming to rest on a rock three times the size of her fist, as the obscene sight blurred with tears. Hands trembling, as she slowly raised the
The warrior's head jerked around as she took in Gabrielle, kneeling beside her, carrying a steaming mug. She stared at the other woman, fighting a sudden wave of nausea; not daring to speak.

The bard handed her the mug, their fingers brushing for the barest instant.

"Briana said there's some really big event planned for tomorrow." The casual tone was at odds with her concern, but Gabrielle sounded perfectly normal as she stood, thighs smoothly flexing under the short skirt. "If you're up for it."

"Maybe," the warrior mumbled into her mug, draining the foul mixture to the dregs in a single gulp. A grimace flitted across her face; she recognized the combination of herbs, and didn't want to give Gabrielle the satisfaction of voicing displeasure, after all the times she'd had to practically force medicine down the younger woman's throat.

She stood and stretched, her spine realigning itself from where Gabrielle's ministrations had forced it into; finally finding the courage to meet her friend's gaze. "Sorry I ran off --"

"Don't worry about it. We could both stand to relax a little." Gabrielle's dismissal seemed a trifle forced, but the forgiveness was unmistakable. "Any plans for today?"

"Mm." Xena continued to shake the kinks from her limbs, starting to feel almost normal. "Well, I was going to help the boys with some more chores...but if I'm gonna be training that lot the next few weeks, I think I deserve a day off first. Wanna grab some breakfast and hit the philosopher's camp?"

"Um." The bard did a double take, stalling for time. "And your reason for going there would be..."

"Figured you'd jump at the chance," Xena frowned as she found the leather strap in her pocket, pulling her hair back and tying a quick knot. "Diana said you never made it there yesterday. If you don't want to --"

"No," Gabrielle said quickly, forcing a smile. She'd planned on confronting the princess regarding Philemon, before the day's royal business served as an excuse to postpone any discussion. But her frustrated creative instincts were clamoring for attention, and this unexpected consideration seemed proof the opportunity shouldn't be squandered.

She risked a smile. "Sure you won't be too bored?"

Xena blinked innocently. "Surrounded by people trying to convince me nothing really exists? You know how long it's been since I've had that kind of fun?" The corner of her lip twitched. "Better have Meg pack a lunch."

Gabrielle returned the warrior's smile as her heart lightened. Things were definitely starting to look up.

"Meanwhile, in the Lower City..."

Attalos suppressed a chuckle as he waited his turn in the line in front of the baker's shop, noting the suspiciously empty cap that sat on the ground like a hungry mouth. Edmun appeared fast approaching his third decade, an age when most would-be bards either turned to another trade or
took up teaching. He hadn't missed too many meals -- it was hard to really starve in Treus -- but his clothes were definitely beginning to hang, and an unhealthy pallor was beginning to show in his skin.

He'd tried his own hand at weaving tales, for a time; but while it had been enjoyable and his skill evident, Attalos had never managed to ignite that spark of attention in his audience. He still loved a good story, though he preferred true ones, long a bone of contention among his fellows. Edmun's style, however, had changed daily for nearly a moon, the current delivery being received as well as its forebears, with neither money nor rotting vegetables being thrown his way.

He paid for his fresh loaf and glanced again at the hapless bard, feeling a surge of pity. His own situation was neither stable, secure or even very comfortable, yet he supposed he was happy to be alive; lucky to be young and uncrippled, if not too strong, and grateful for a few good friends. He'd been stabbed in the back -- metaphorically speaking, of course -- too many times to count, yet found it impossible to be as consistently nasty to the world as it seemed determined to be to him. It might be a weakness, but he succumbed to it gladly.

Tearing off a piece of bread, still steaming from the ovens, he tossed it into the bard's lap. Edmun broke off his diatribe, grabbing at the morsel and eagerly stuffing it into his mouth, and Attalos moved hastily to intervene.

"Easy, friend!" He pulled the stopper from the jug of olive oil at his belt, giving the bread a liberal sprinkling. "That'll go down easier, eh?"

"Godf you on you, fir!" Edmun seemed to return to his senses, blowing on his remaining treasure to cool it. Attalos glanced around for any sign of his young companions, but the line stretching downhill from the information booth didn't appear to have moved an inch from the time he'd joined the queue at the baker's. He wondered if the lines at the temples would ever be as long as those in front of the brothels, and if such an unlikely event would silence the priests who continually bemoaned the increasing lack of attendance.

"You're sure you don't want to take me up on that offer? There's plenty of room in our camp."

Edmun laughed aloud through his mouthful.

"My son --" Attalos took no umbrage at the diminutive form of address, though the bard was only a year or two older than himself. "How many times have I told you. Truth and Art don't mix!"

"And I agree with that sentiment," Attalos hastily returned. "But I assure you, not all philosophers are concerned with truth. You've only to meet some of my fellows to set that concern to rest!" He chuckled, shaking his head. "There are just as many bards in our group, and many who are neither. Why don't you join us for dinner tonight?"

Edmun shook his head, a morose look crossing his unshaven features. "Much as I appreciate the gesture, I won't accept charity. If I can't support myself with my art, I deserve to starve."

Attalos thought rapidly. "Sir, you insult me! You would be a most welcome change of pace for our aspiring bards." He lowered his voice to a more conspiratorial level, glancing around the crowded area. "You may find this difficult to believe, but many of them have never received proper instruction from reputable masters."

This seemed to penetrate Edmun's melancholy.

"You must be joking! Why, I myself --" He broke off, face turning slightly red. "That is to say -- I
can't believe the Academy would allow such a potential blot on the reputation of bards everywhere!" He cleared his throat with a great fanfare and stood, nodding hastily and grabbing his cap, trying not to sound overly excited.

"Yes, my son, I'd be honored to accept your invitation. I look forward to sharing my humble skills with a more...receptive audience."

Attalos smiled broadly, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Excellent! You know the way?" Edmun nodded, and he abruptly spied a familiar short form moving through the crowds, now a bit thinner due to the approaching lunch hour. "Well, I'll let it be a surprise to the others, so they don't go to any great fanfare. To avoid embarrassing an...artist of your stature."

"Ah? Uhmm! Yes, good idea," Edmun harrumphed as he caught on. "Wouldn't want them overwhelmed by my presence, would we?" He nodded sagely, lost in thought. "Now which tale to tell? Certainly wrong to choose anything less than the best. But it would be the height of arrogance to upstage everyone..."

Attalos quietly slipped away, leaving Edmun to weave his fantasies in peace, and wondering how best to avoid being lynched by his fellows. Solan was wandering toward him through the crowd, the dejected look on the boy's face telling at least half the story.

He held out half of the remaining bread in consolation. "I take it Lilla's still waiting?"

Solan nodded, silently accepting the offering as they made their way down the narrow street. The numerous cafes were practically deserted; most in Treus closed during lunch, remaining open at night being more profitable and less stressful for their owners. Only the rich and idle could afford to have their every meal prepared for them, and while the rich were holding steady the idle were in a fast decline.

"Let's wait by the booth so she won't miss us. You know," he quietly continued, "I might be able to help find these friends of yours, if you told me a little more about them. I realize we've not known each other long, but I hope you'll trust me with something more to go on, if not their names."

Solan shook his head. "You've been a lot of help already, Attalos. You don't have to --"

"But I want to," Attalos countered. "And so does the rest of the camp." He considered briefly. "Well, everyone who isn't holed up in a cave somewhere."

The boy smiled involuntarily, and he pressed the advantage. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, Solan. In fact, it might be better if you didn't tell me. What about the ruler of Treus herself?"

Solan's eyebrows furrowed. "I thought King Lias was still alive."

"Mmm, yes." Attalos refrained from coughing only by supreme effort. "I take it you haven't heard the rest of the story."

The boy shrugged. "Too many people talk and don't have any idea what they're talking about."

"Well, trust me, Diana's the queen. Unless a miracle restores her father's health."

Solan frowned. "Or unless something happens to her."
"Not a pleasant thought," Attalos observed, wondering what had put the boy's mind on such a morbid path. "If she goes, I believe the entire kingdom won't be far behind. She's done much to bring peace to this land." He forced a smile. "If anyone can find your friends, I'm sure it'll be her. And you and Lilla are welcome to stay for as long as you like."

Solan looked up at the taller man, still easily matching his longer strides as they approached the queue, now about half its length of earlier this morning.

"Thanks, Attalos. I appreciate it."

Attalos raised one eyebrow at the undercurrent in the boy's voice. Not quite a boy, he corrected himself; perhaps his suspicions weren't as far off the mark as he'd thought. Solan's drive to find his friends seemed as powerful as if he were in search of actual family, and was still as strong as when they'd first met less than a moon ago, but sometimes there were bonds even stronger. Since bringing Lilla to the camp some days ago, the boy had been courteous to a fault; grudgingly at first, deferring to her advanced years, and then in an all too casual manner that had half the camp whispering and giggling behind their hands. Attalos had silenced overt gossip and even the most harmless of teasing, but the speculation only grew more intense for being driven underground. The young woman had allowed herself to be drawn out more than her young companion, and on more than one occasion Attalos had seen the boy protectively watching over her from a distance. He winced, recalling the disastrous course of his own first great love.

"There she is!" Solan's voice penetrated his reverie, and Attalos turned to see Lilla sitting with her back against the wall of the booth, knees drawn up to her chest. For a moment he feared she'd been assaulted or worse, but as they hurried towards her she looked up, offering a weary smile of recognition.

"Are you all right?" the boy asked anxiously as he knelt by her. His face fell. "No luck, huh?"

Lilla shook her head. "It's okay. I wasn't really expecting anything, but I had to check. You know?"

Attalos cleared his throat as they stared awkwardly at the ground.

"So, who's up for lunch?"

As he'd hoped, Lilla smiled despite herself.

"I don't think your friends like me very much." Actually, a great many seemed rather lazy and ignorant to the hard-working peasant girl. However, she tactfully refrained from putting it that strongly, and the few exceptions were more than enough to make up for their fellows' lack of charm.

"His sister likes you," Solan volunteered. "Especially after you told off that one guy...what was his name?"

Lilla snorted, but couldn't repress a grin. "I don't want to remember his name, thank you. And all I said was that my sister was proof his theories were a bunch of manure, because she could read and write better, and probably argue him into the ground without running out of breath!"

"No doubt," Attalos smiled. "Though I'd put you in that category as well. And I wouldn't take it personally. He's told me for years there must be something wrong with Attalan because she spends all her time learning, instead of finding a husband and settling down." He drew himself up sharply, looking down his nose with a stern expression that provoked another bout of laughter. "After all," he continued, "just because he lives his life the same way doesn't mean anything."
Lilla rubbed her stomach forlornly. "I still feel like I'm taking advantage of your kindness. You're barely making ends meet as it is --"

"Absolutely not," Attalos interjected. "You two have been a great help, even in the few days you've been here, so don't sell yourselves short. And it isn't just what you've been doing," he stressed. "You're setting a great example for the others. If you hadn't shamed them into chipping in, we might still be arguing about what to do. And you reminded them of a very important lesson that too many of them forgot, or never learned."

"What's that?" asked Solan as they approached the outskirts of the camp.

Attalos grinned. "That all the truth and art in the world won't put food on the table. And speaking of food, unless there's something else you'd like to do, why don't we get something in our bellies? I need more than bread if I'm to live to see another day!"

Solan found his thoughts drifting, remembering the host of woodcraft lessons that Kaleipus had attempted to instill in him. The most often-repeated was that those who knew where to look need never starve, even if unwilling or unable to hunt. Apparently some centaurs forswore the eating of all flesh, as a gesture of respect for their animal heritage. He was sure Xena could teach him all sort of tricks Kaleipus had never gotten around to, maybe some he'd never heard of...

He blinked, suddenly realizing that the sun had fled behind a bank of clouds. Lilla was looking at him strangely, and even Attalos had a questioning look on his face.

"Solan," Lilla continued hesitantly, "I think we should ask Princess Diana for help. If Attalos says we can trust her, that's good enough for me." Her eyes silently pleaded with him to support her decision, and he found himself wanting to acquiesce with barely a thought.

"You really think she'll have time to talk to a couple of peasants?" he asked doubtfully. The tents were thinning as they approached the camp's perimeter, the gently sloping hill beyond leading to the castle far above.

"Who do you think said we could stay on her land?" Attalos asked rhetorically, with a twinkle in his eye. He sobered up a little. "But there's more than one reason we're this close to the castle. We've been declared personal guests of the royal family, and that's a real thorn in the side for some."

"Those merchants you were talking about?" Lilla hazarded.

"Among others," he nodded grimly, mood suddenly brightening. "Come on, it won't take even a candlemark. And if she's too busy to see us right away, she'll make the time as soon as she can. She's that kind of person."

"Gabrielle..." Xena tempered the worst of her impatience, twirling her chakram on one finger.

"Yes, Xena," came an irritated reply, from behind the bush. "I said I went before we left. Can I help it if my body's smaller than yours?"

"Can't use that excuse any more." Even though her friend couldn't see her face, she was able to keep from smirking overly much. The smile was more than audible, however, and she moved quickly to assuage the younger woman's temper, which of late had been showing signs of wear.

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."
"You don't know how relieved I am to hear it."

Xena rolled her eyes at the dry humor in the bard's voice and resumed surveying the countryside. She was still mulling over the brief exchange she'd overheard as they were taking their leave; Diana, asking one of her commanders if he trusted Callisto. After a brief bit of stammering the man admitted to considerable misgivings, but quickly disavowed any personal feelings in the matter; stating he'd never even met the woman, much less lost a loved one to her.

_You trust her, mum_, he'd finally mumbled, his discomfort apparent. _That's good enough for me._

Well, it wasn't good enough for her. Something in Xena rebelled at this casual shirking of responsibility, the setting aside of one's judgment based solely on the word of another -- worse, orders from a supposed higher authority. She'd never have accepted such a thing, and it galled her to see it. Somewhere, if only to retain her sanity, she was going to have to keep proving herself: Certainly to Gabrielle, and the others, but mostly to herself.

Gabrielle adjusted her skirt, retrieving her staff. She was about to leave the shelter of the bushes when she heard a soft, quick scuffling that vanished before she could pinpoint its location.

Her first instinct was to call out for Xena and she swallowed, gripping her staff and stepping carefully over the leaves; glancing overhead, scanning the dense growth as she recalled that her friend's new outfit of green and black blended into the forest much better than the old leather and steel. Maybe this was another test, she thought with some annoyance, and then brightened at the prospect. It felt like forever since the warrior had offered any serious instruction, whether fighting or something more mundane like woodcraft or fishing, and she missed the easy interaction between them.

She cautiously poked her head from the thick canopy of leaves, glancing over the hillside, seeing no trace of her friend. _Okay_, she thought grimly; maybe it wasn't --

"Gabrielle!"

The bard whirled and stared at the three people standing before her. One was a tall, slender man with hair the color of sand that brushed his shoulders, wearing a meager robe that identified him as a student or some other equally impoverished social class. The other two were now staring at each other, having both uttered her name simultaneously, and she froze in recognition at the sight of both.

"Where's Xena?" they spoke again in chorus, abruptly turning to stare at one another. Gabrielle opened her mouth, unsure of what might emerge, when a voice rang out from the trees.

"That's far enough, Callisto. Keep your hands where I can see them and come out of that tree. Slowly!"

Gabrielle's eyes widened. "Ephiny?" Sudden fear entered her voice, and she whirled to face the trees. "Ephiny, no! Stop --"

She cut off as a grim-faced Callisto stepped forth from the forest, a sword at her back. From the right Kaleipus emerged from his hiding place, bow nocked, its triple-barbed arrow aimed at her heart. The Amazon stepped forward, carefully pulling the warrior's sword from its scabbard, tossing it to one side.

"Ephiny," Gabrielle stammered, "you're making a big mistake. This isn't what it looks like --"

"Doesn't look like I'm the one making the mistake." The Amazon's gaze remained cold and
impassive, as Xena's eyes flashed a silent warning to the bard. "You --" She nudged her captive with the sword. "Drop the chakram, or I'll run you through."

The gold and steel circlet fell from nerveless fingers to land silently in the tall grass.

"As for you --" Kaleipus advanced on the group, keeping his bow at the ready, glaring at Solan. "You're going back to the village with Daelus."

Solan defiantly met his uncle's gaze, standing a little straighter.

"Gabrielle?" Lilla found her voice, nearly stumbling as she ran to her sister, clutching at her arm. "What's going on? Who are these people?"

The bard gripped her staff, mouth hanging open, her feverish gaze roaming over the group as she strove to think of a response.

"Excuse me," Attalos interjected. "Isn't that the princess?"

Xena and Ephiny were already looking back up the hill, and their eyes widened as the others turned, now hearing the rising sound of hoofbeats, seeing the black-haired figure charging downhill on a chestnut mare. Xena felt her lips twitch and she held back a smile, recalling Diana's graceless early attempts at riding sidesaddle.

Solan's heart swelled in his chest and he took an involuntary step forward. Lilla frowned at the sight of the long, flowing skirts, trying to reconcile this apparent incongruity; while Ephiny and Kaleipus were drawn to the steed's coloration and size, aware that this was not Argo, seeing the subtle language of the rider's body as she slowed to a stop and dismounted. Whoever this was, it definitely wasn't --

"Xena!" Unable to contain his emotion, Solan ran forward and threw his arms around the woman's waist.

She returned his embrace, raising flushed and guilty features to the transfixed crowd. Xena felt a vein in her neck throb as she watched the princess raise her hands to the boy's shoulders, disentangling them as he stared up at her in growing confusion.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not her." As he slowly dropped his arms, she extended a hand. "My name is Diana. What's yours?"

"So--" He took her hand awkwardly as he realized who he must be addressing. "My name's Solan. That's my uncle, Kaleipus," he nodded quickly, hoping to salvage some dignity. "He's leader of our tribe."

Diana bowed, and the centaur slowly lowered his weapon, his disorientation all too apparent.

"My apologies, sir," the princess smoothly continued. "I'd hoped to meet with the centaurs much sooner, as well as the Amazon Nation --" She inclined her head politely to an astonished Ephiny. "- - and under better circumstances. If you'll accompany me, we can discuss matters more privately?"

"I don't care where we go," came the cold reply, "as long as she stays in front." The Amazon was looking directly at Kaleipus as she spoke. His eyes narrowed, but he gave a nod of assent. Ephiny knelt to grab the chakram as she spoke. His eyes narrowed, but he gave a nod of assent. Ephiny knelt to grab the chakram, tucking it into her belt.

The group fell into more or less single file as they began a silent journey back up the hill. Diana led the way, walking beside her steed and scratching its ears, never once glancing behind; Kaleipus
taking up a place just behind the princess, while Ephiny marched two paces behind her prisoner, sword held ready. The remaining members of this eclectic entourage trailed some paces behind, lost in silent contemplation.

Lilla and the older man fell behind Gabrielle, and the bard altered her path until she was next to Solan; sensing him glance at her and nervously away.

"I think I should warn you," she said quietly, "there's another one at the castle who looks like her."

He didn't meet her gaze. "So it's true?"

Gabrielle kept her tone neutral as they ascended the steepening hill. "It sounded like your uncle was really worried. How long has he been looking for you?"

"I was looking for you," he muttered, throwing a guilty glare at her. "I had to make sure you and Xena were okay."

One of the bard's knuckles cracked as her grip on her staff tightened. Attalos and Lilla were suddenly flanking them, both staring at Solan; Attalos with a combination of amusement and awe, Lilla with no small measure of annoyance as she spoke in hushed exasperation.

"Why didn't you tell me that's who you were looking for?"

"I'm sure he had no malicious intent," Attalos interjected calmly as they approached the gate. "No sane person would credit it to coincidence."

The guards at the gate took no notice of the apparent change of policy regarding Callisto, standing aside to allow their sovereign and her entourage to pass through. Diana handed her reins to one of the men, and his composure seemed to slip slightly off kilter.

Lilla bit her lip, sounding doubtful. "You're saying the gods are involved?" She glanced briefly over at Gabrielle, who was watching her from the corner of one eye. It wouldn't surprise her a bit, if even half the wild tales her sister told were true.

Attalos offered a congenial shrug.

"Until they decide to make their presence known for certain, I'll assume otherwise. Though you must admit that any bard who attempted to foist such a blatant contrivance on the public would be roundly condemned by the critics as the worst sort of mass rubbish peddler."

He nodded to the guards on either side as they passed through the gate, and Gabrielle offered a weak smile to the man holding Diana's steed, which was thoroughly ignored. The horse chose that moment to evacuate on the ground beside him, and the bard allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction at his expression as the great doors swung shut.

"I want to talk with Callisto." Ephiny's voice was bitterly cold. "Alone."

The bard swallowed. "Ephiny, it's not what you --"

"It's all right." Callisto's voice was as emotionless as the mask of her face.

"It had better be more than all right." Ephiny's entire body was coiled tight, ready to snap as she stared into the warrior's eyes. "I've got a lot to say to you, Gabrielle, but right now I want answers, and for some strange reason? I don't think I'm going to get them with you around."
"Fine." Diana sounded quite casual. "You can take the room down the hall to the right. Please don't leave bloodstains, they're ever so hard to get out. Solan --" She nodded respectfully. "May I see you and your uncle while we wait for your friends to join us?"

Solan looked uncomfortable as Lilla gave him an encouraging shove, and the centaur nodded in silent acquiescence, suppressing his instinctive dislike of being indoors. He was filthy and exhausted, growing more confused by the minute, and he fervently hoped this princess wouldn't make a fuss if his hooves were to scratch her nice tiled floor. They'd been tracking Solan for four days on scarce rations and less sleep, and he'd bet both balls that Thraxus was even now plotting his demise.

*Let him try*, he snorted, taking the boy's sweating hand in a reassuring grip. He didn't even plan on yelling at his nephew for too long; just enough to make sure he thought twice about disobeying next time.

He glanced back briefly at Ephiny as they left the room. She stood still and tense as ever, the tip of her blade quivering slightly as she stared at the three remaining women. Much as he disliked politics, he was glad to leave this in the Amazon's hands.

"All right," Gabrielle breathed as the others exited the room. "Lilla, why don't you and I catch up and give these two some space?" She turned to the stranger. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"I didn't throw it," he smiled, bowing slightly. "I'm called Attalos. Don't worry," he continued, holding up one hand. "I know my way around. I'll be visiting friends in the hospice, over in the east wing, so I'm sure we'll see each other later." His eyes were warm with concern. "Please make sure Lilla gets a chance to speak with the princess?"

"I'll do that." Gabrielle's first instinct was to trust this man, but she forced herself to remain formal and aloof. She'd talk later with Diana about him, as well as Philemon.

He bowed again and made his exit, and Gabrielle swung back to Ephiny, ignoring her sister for the moment.

"Ephiny --" She caught and held the Amazon's gaze, forcing the other woman to look her in the eye. "Promise me you won't lift a finger against her. Unless she starts it."

"Done." Ephiny's voice remained flat as she sheathed her blade.

The bard put an arm around her sister and led her away, glancing over her shoulder with no little concern. Callisto seemed to deflate as the door shut, turning away, dropping into a nearby chair in a graceless jumble of limbs.

Ephiny stalked toward the chair, stopping at a safe distance. Deep brown eyes met hers, and she suppressed a shiver.

"So." The world's weight seemed compressed into that solitary syllable. "Any questions?"

"Did you kill Xena?" The words seemed pitifully small, hanging in the air between them. Ephiny felt her hands twitch, nearly forming into fists.

The warrior blinked, the ghost of a smile curling her lips.

"Oh, yeah. That's an easy one. Yes, I certainly did." Bitterness or self-loathing coated the words, as she traced the patterns carved into the arm of the chair. "I killed her and buried her, but she's still...right here." One hand came to rest over her heart, and she felt an answering stab of pain.
"Then give me one good reason I shouldn't kill you right now?" Ephiny nearly spat the words in a cruel hiss, and her adversary's gaze fell in seeming shame.

"I can give you a lot more." Still she remained calm, and Ephiny ached for something, anything that she could understand or throw back at this murdering bitch whose fingers were still idly rubbing the polished wood like a distracted child's.

Callisto looked up, and the liquidly expressive eyes were anything but childlike. "No matter how badly you want vengeance --"

"Justice." Ephiny folded her arms, straightening her shoulders, refusing to break the gaze.

"Your word means too much. You promised Gabrielle --"

"Honor is the weakness of heroes, right?" Ephiny's lip twisted, voice drenched with sarcasm. "A luxury you don't allow yourself?"

Callisto continued, as if she hadn't heard.

"And because...I want to help you."

A burst of astonished laughter rose in her throat, and Ephiny fought it back, staring wide-eyed as if Callisto had suddenly sprouted a rack of horns and a thick fur coat. The warrior's smile was free of malice, even sad.

"I know about the troubles your people are having. It's no secret." A sneer of disgust. "Not that it's the only hot gossip, mind you. All the warlords in the area...growing civil unrest, and the rumors of Mineus wanting to...reclaim these lands." She shrugged slightly. "The newcomers are wondering whether to stick around or keep moving. Not that it's likely to be better anywhere else, but they're too busy arguing to realize it. And the ones who were here first want all the new folks to go back where they came from. Half of them think your people are a threat and are ready to scatter at the first sign of trouble, half of them want to attack before you do it first, and half think the centaurs are an even bigger problem."

The Amazon fought a reflexive smile even as the gravity and truth of the statements fully sank in. She'd known things were bad, but it was more than a little unsettling to hear it so calmly laid out, especially by this particular messenger.

"Okay, maybe it's not that bad." Callisto's tone softened, taking on a disturbingly reassuring aspect. "Most people just want to live in peace with their neighbors. But that doesn't do you any good if the Amazons refuse to negotiate." She held up a hand, forestalling the protest that reflexively rose to Ephiny's lips. "I know -- you need to settle your own affairs before you worry about outsiders. Don't you think the centaurs feel the same?"

The Amazon fought back her first response, unwilling to reveal or admit a thing until she had a better idea of the woman's motivations. At this rate, she thought grimly, I could be in my grave first.

"Ephiny, please." Callisto leaned forward, hands on her knees, looking up at the Amazon with pleading eyes. "I think someone -- maybe Mineus, maybe others as well -- is trying to encourage this mistrust. Playing you against each other so you're less likely to join forces. Divide and conquer...it's the oldest trick in the book."

Ephiny briefly wondered how you were supposed to tell if someone was crazy. Especially when they sounded so very sane.
Callisto's gaze fell again, hands clasped as if to still their incessant movement. She seemed to be avoiding Ephiny's eyes for fear the Amazon would laugh. "What Diana has created here is too important to let die. A reasonably powerful kingdom has abolished slavery...and continued to prosper. She's the first ruler around here with the intelligence or courage to follow in the footsteps of Athens. And all of Greece is watching this 'little experiment'. Waiting to see how it turns out, before they commit themselves."

Her voice betrayed anger, and fresh resolve as she looked up at the Amazon once more. "Don't you see what this means? It means that people can change. and you don't need to be a hero or a king to do it. I talk to these people, and I see what they can be...if they're free to live their lives in peace. But you have to meet them halfway!" A tinge of quiet desperation. "You, the centaurs, and everyone else...you've gotta work together. Otherwise..." She spread her hands helplessly. "Change, or die."

"Guess that explains why you're still with us."

The warrior only smiled, and the Amazon was suddenly ashamed; both of her own cruelty, and that she felt some measure of compassion for her foe. Her voice cracked slightly.

"And how do you propose to help?"

"Any way I can. If you'll let me." Callisto sat utterly still, gaze fixed unblinking upon the Amazon. "I know you have no reason to trust me...Hades, nobody has any reason to trust me."

Ephiny stood her ground, alert for any sudden moves. Gods, it would be so much easier to hate her if she didn't sound so reasonable. If she weren't so damn beautiful...

"I'm not as trusting as some."

Callisto nodded, looking solemn. "Gabrielle."

Ephiny drew closer, stopping just outside the other woman's reach.

"We both know she trusts too much for her own good." She drew a shuddering breath. "How do I know you won't hurt her?"

Callisto didn't look away. "You don't." She shrugged, discounting some unseen pain. "But I give you my word that I won't. Either that's good enough, or you kill me. Right here, right now."

"Why are you doing this?" Tears threatened to blind her and she hurled the words like stones, voice quivering with rage. "You think you can make up for Xena's murder by following in her footsteps? Or did you let Gabrielle convince you? Did she talk you into it?" She fought down the growing battle lust that sang for vengeance, seeking some verbal attack that could inflict equal pain.

Callisto met this in stoic silence; never looking away even after the Amazon fell silent, staring in impotent, miserable fury.

"I asked Gabrielle if she wanted to stay with me." Another shrug, and a sad smile. "She said yes."

Ephiny stared at her adversary for a moment that stretched into infinity, shoulders finally slumping in defeat. She'd been prepared for a battle of swords, not words; adrenaline coursed through her like flame, yet she felt utterly drained of all will. "What are you going to do?"

The blonde woman stretched, vigorously popping her joints. "Right now? Find some lunch. Then I track down Diana, and maybe we can start working this out."
The Amazon stood dumbly, staring after Callisto as she walked toward the door. The warrior queen paused in the doorway, cocking her head.

"Coming?"
Elements of Truth

Chapter Summary

Trying to resume the daily routines. More arguments, more running away, the usual verbal dancing.

When asked by the king [Alexander the Great] what he thought he was doing by infesting the sea, he replied with noble insolence, "What do you think you are doing by infesting the whole world? Because I do it with one puny boat, I am called a pirate; because you do it with a great fleet, you are called an emperor."

_St. Augustine, _The City Of God_

_Sweetmorn_

Solan was trying not to stare at the vast display of opulence around him, a task made easier by the constant pressure of his uncle's hand on his shoulder. While he was slightly tall for his age, even a grown man was small compared to most centaurs. The sound of hooves echoed off stone walls and high ceilings; Kaleipus was walking slowly, allowing him to easily keep pace, and while Solan wasn't entirely grateful for the courtesy, he had little choice but to follow. They followed the princess around the corner and she opened a nearby door, glancing in before motioning them ahead; shutting it and sagging back against it with a brief look of profound relief.

Kaleipus had been carefully observing Diana and now rapidly crossed the distance between them, tail flicking with barely suppressed urgency.

"All right, Xena," he said in a low voice. "If we're alone, you can drop the act. What in Tartarus is going on?"

The woman before him rubbed wearily at the back of her neck as Solan spoke up.

"That's not her, uncle."

"It's not, is it?" The massive upper body rotated and the rest of Kaleipus followed as he turned to glare at his nephew, forcing Diana to hastily step aside to avoid being trampled. "And when did you become such an expert, eh?" His remaining eye flinched as he realized he was treading on dangerous ground.

The woman spoke again.

"I'm afraid he's right." The centaur's body blocked the boy from view, and she walked around Kaleipus, addressing them both. "How did you know?"

"I'm not sure." He shrugged uncomfortably under her gaze. "Lots of little things, I guess -- wait a minute." He nodded in satisfaction. "It was your hands. Too soft."

The princess smiled approval which Kaleipus echoed despite himself, but the boy's glad mood dissipated as quickly as it had come.
"Is she really dead?" His voice betrayed a slight crack, and Diana's thoughts flooded with possible answers and consequences.

"That's enough, now." The centaur's voice was gruff but kind, and of more or less normal volume. Nonetheless Diana moved forward slightly, interposing herself slightly between the two males.

"I have a meeting today, and I'd greatly appreciate it if both you and the Amazon representative were to attend. I hope you'll discuss it with her as soon as we're done?"

The centaur frowned. He'd formed a decent working relationship with Ephiny over their days of travel and had no qualms about taking orders from her -- at least in certain areas -- but this woman might be a different story. It was just too early to tell, and a sour twinge trickled through his belly at the thought of how Thraxus would exploit this show of weakness. See, what kind of leader would let all these damned women tell him what to do...

A loud knock came from the door, and Diana's expression briefly flickered in annoyance.

"Yes?"

The door opened to reveal a young soldier. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, but there's some farmer outside kickin' up his heels an' swearin' he won't leave 'til he sees you." A frustrated growl came from the princess, and the soldier hurried on. "I told him t' wait for the meetin', but he won't hear it. Says he couldn't get to market yesterday with the men blockin' his wagon, half his stuff's rotted an' if he loses the rest --"

"Let me guess," Diana sighed, "he expects 'the crown' to cover his losses. How silly of me," she continued, raising her hands in supplication. "We should have just left the road washed out so nobody could travel in either direction. Then everyone could have been miserable together!"

Kaleipus was unable to remain silent. "Your majesty, I'd be glad to give this fellow a hand, but I absolutely must speak to you first, in private." He glanced at the soldier. "Unless you think he'd have a problem with me."

The soldier took in the bulky equine form that nearly filled the small room. "Y' mean, does he have a thing against centaurs? Dunno, but right now I think he'd take help from Hades himself."

Diana nodded. "Tell him he can see me or get his wares to market. If he chooses the latter, someone will be right out to help him. And please have Meg sent here as soon as possible."

The soldier snapped off a salute, shutting the door, and the princess returned her attention to her guests. She noted Solan's barely concealed look of sullen resignation with no little sympathy; for years her father had kept her ignorant of even normal affairs of state, let alone more sinister intrigues, and his indulgent but distracted dismissals had made her feel much the way this young man now appeared, as though she'd bitten into an unripened olive.

Solan took a deep breath. "Uncle, I --"

"Later." The centaur drew himself up to his full height, and Solan's shoulders fell as he looked away. Diana was about to intervene when Meg poked her head through the door.

"They're startin' to pour in, Di. Whatcha need --" She broke off as she spied their guests, and both male jaws dropped as she entered, a happy grin spreading across her face.

"Oh, wow!" she breathed, eyes wide with wonder. "You know how long it's been since I seen a centaur?"
"That's my uncle," Solan quickly offered. Amazement faded somewhat to a secret amusement as he remembered that Kaleipus hadn't been warned regarding the second lookalike. Already it seemed trivial to tell them apart, and he found himself closely examining the newcomer for any other differences that might manifest themselves.

"That's funny." The woman's eyebrows met in puzzlement. "Ya don't look like a centaur..."

"Meg," the princess interjected, "I'd like all of our guests to be at the meeting. Would you please see that they're fed and given a chance to freshen up? Starting with this young man."

"My pleasure," the cook smiled, extending a hand. "C'mon, cutie. Let's get that handsome face washed, and I won't make ya slice onions. Deal?"

Solan accepted the hand after a quick glance at his uncle, and Meg led him out of the room. Diana turned to Kaleipus with a disapproving frown.

"I was hoping to speak with your nephew as well --"

"Later, your highness." The centaur chief looked exhausted, barely holding himself upright. He swallowed at the memory of the face before him smeared with dirt and blood.

"There's something you need to know about Solan." He shook his head as Diana returned his weary gaze, praying he was doing the right thing. "And not just about him.

"About his mother."

"Wow," Meg breathed, as her young guest concluded his tale. She leaned back in her chair, looking at him with newfound respect. "You got more guts than I did at that age, kiddo."

Solan squirmed under the cook's gaze as well as her words. He'd emphasized Lilla's role heavily since she wasn't here to speak for herself, despite the prickle of discomfort at his presumption, and this unabashed admiration -- from someone who looked like Xena, no less -- was more than a little unsettling. Although he was beginning to adjust to their differing personalities, the contrast of either of these women with Xena's paradoxical tragic doubt and self-assured power made him feel as though the ground had spun away from beneath him; leaving him floating high above and wondering whether he would survive the inevitable fall.

"You're sure there's nothing else I can do?" Joxer interjected from his post at the sink, continuing to scrub the cargo of greens.

"I got everything under control," the cook assured him, with a wave of her hand. She turned her attention once more to Solan. "So you came all this way just to see if Gab and Xena were alive?"

Some vague warning bell went off in his head, but he was saved from having to reply when the door swung open. Meg's cheerful greeting died on her lips as Gabrielle and Lilla entered, the younger woman half-supporting her sister. The skin around the bard's eyes was red and swollen, while her grip on her staff seemed to hold her up as much as her reliance on her sibling; she walked with the pained gait of an old woman whose bones had been shattered and reknit in a cruel, unnatural configuration. But the worst part was her eyes, sparkling emeralds now swimming with misery and confusion.

Solan rose from his seat, a shock of remembrance passing through him as he remembered Lilla's tragic story and made the connection. Joxer blurted out Gabrielle's name before he could help himself and she turned a vicious glare upon him that almost made him cower in fear, but she
merely wiped fiercely at her eyes and took a deep breath.

"I'll be okay." Gabrielle's lack of emotion was more worrisome than any outburst, but the bard waved her sister's concern aside with some impatience. "You and Solan go on. We'll see you at the meeting."

"I --" Lilla flushed. "I don't know where it is."

"Easy as pie," Meg offered blandly, as if nothing untoward had occurred. "Just follow the crowd. Easy to get a seat if ya ain't waitin' in line."

The room's youngest occupants glanced hesitantly at each other and their elders. Lilla took Solan's hand in hers and turned toward the door, when it opened again to reveal Callisto, with a grim-faced Ephiny directly behind.

The blonde warrior stepped into the room, ignoring the multitude of eyes fixed upon her; grabbing an apple from a wooden bowl as she passed by the table, leaning against the wall as she stared out the window. Ephiny strode into the room, a mixture of annoyance and uncertainty on her face as everyone's focus shifted to her.

Lilla was the first to speak. "Gabrielle, I --"

"Later," the bard quietly replied. Her gaze was fixed on the silent figure by the window. Lilla's disquiet was apparent, but she made her exit with a final glance at her sister, followed closely by Solan. The warrior relaxed visibly as he shut the door, shoulders falling into the habitual slouch.

Joxer stood helplessly at the sink with the forgotten chopping knife dangling from dripping fingers. Ephiny's eyes narrowed as she watched Gabrielle approach Callisto, reaching out hesitantly and shying away.

"So were you and Kaleipus just tracking a known criminal, or were you trying to rescue me?"

Ephiny squirmed at the subtle accusation before bristling in anger, biting back the desire to retaliate. She felt torn between the neutral language of the soldier, concern for the safety of those she held in her heart; her tongue inadequate to the task at hand.

Meg noisily pushed back her chair and stood, plucking the knife from Joxer's nerveless grasp and tossing it into the sink as she took him by one wet hand. "We'll see ya there. And don't go messin' up my kitchen --" she glanced significantly at Ephiny -- "or I'll have to hurt ya. C'mon, baby."

Ignoring the Amazon's stunned expression, she yanked the damp apron from her paralyzed paramour and led him out of the room.

Xena wore a guilty but satisfied look as she furiously calculated some way to salvage the Amazon's dignity. "Let's cut right to the chariot race," she said casually, walking around Gabrielle, interposing herself not quite between the two Amazons. "Who's after me? Officially."

"Kaleipus and I both heard rumors. When we compared our stories..." Ephiny's blatant shrug did nothing to conceal her worry. "We decided to take you out on our own. It doesn't have a thing to do with his people. Or with mine."

"Oh, yes it does," Callisto sighed. "Whether you want it to or not. As for my 'people'..." She cocked her head as if estimating; Ephiny thought she seemed relieved, tension visibly draining from her face and posture. "Athens still offering ten thousand dinars?"

The Amazon almost looked embarrassed. "Fifty."
"The bard whistled. "You better be nice to me, Z--" An abrupt cough. "That's a...tempting figure."
"Wouldn't joke about it if I were you." A smile tugged at the warrior's lips. "Why the big increase?"

Ephiny frowned. It didn't sound as thought Callisto were gloating, but she was hard pressed to think of another reason for such a question, before remembering she was still operating under the assumption that the other woman was crazy. That was what bothered her; the bitch was being too damn rational!

"The reports said you had..." She swallowed. "That you killed Xena. I suppose they doubled her bounty and added it on."

Callisto nodded. "So you figured you'd find me first, and figure out what to do with me later?"

The Amazon practically ground her teeth at the admission, but somehow made it come out graciously. "Yes." She stood taller as she said it, looking right at Gabrielle. Yes, and I'd do it all again if I had the chance. Let the worst come. She'd done her best.

"Okay..." Gabrielle exhaled. "So we also need to worry about people trying to collect on the bounty. Is that dead or alive?"

"Either," Callisto dryly interjected, sending a pointed look at Ephiny. "But I get the feeling there's something else you'd like to say to the princess. Want me to leave?"

Her attempt at concern was rewarded with an incredulous glare, and Gabrielle's hands went to her hips in barely contained exasperation,

"Just stop that, okay? Both of you!" The bard's expression softened, and Ephiny exhaled slowly, trying to shake off the sensation of being backed into a corner; suddenly aware of the weight of Xena's chakram hanging from her waist.

"What isn't wrong," she breathed, not looking at either of them. "What's worse? That the Amazons are tearing themselves apart, or that I don't give a damn anymore?" A flicker of alarm passed over Callisto's features but Ephiny barely registered this, fingers drumming restlessly on her thigh. "I'm putting my son in danger for someone I just met, my own sisters practically threw me out, I have to go and get tangled up in all this centaur crap. And now I find you, and..." She sighed, running her fingers through lengthening curls.

"I'm not the Regent anymore, Gabrielle. Velasca's in charge now, and even if she wasn't, Xenan was getting too old to stay there much longer. She tore up all the treaties and threw them in the fire...said the Amazons were strong enough to stand alone. I..." No matter how it was said, it would sound bad. "I chose to leave. With Xenan."

Gabrielle's initial shock slowly transformed into cold anger as the unspoken implications began to seep in through the cracks in her soul. That her Amazons could be so incredibly cruel and stubborn; that she herself had allowed things to deteriorate so far by her own inactivity!

"You can't be the only one who was unhappy with Velasca."

"I was the easiest target. The rest were just really good actresses." The Amazon somehow managed to combine an affirming nod and a detached, cynical shrug. "I'd trust them at my back if it came to it, but right now...anything other than watch and wait would be suicide."

"Never had much patience with that, huh?"
Ephiny suppressed the urge to glare again. Callisto's humor sounded good-natured rather than chiding, but she didn't want to be friendly. *You don't know me,* she thought grimly. *I don't _want_ you to know me.*

Gabrielle spoke again.

"Maybe you're not their Regent anymore. But I'd like you to be mine."

Ephiny gaped, as the bard continued. "If Velasca doesn't know a good thing when she sees it, she shouldn't be surprised when someone else snatches it up. And I am still an Amazon princess." A frown creased her brow. "Besides, every Amazon is a nation unto herself. Or something like that. I'm sure I read it somewhere."

Callisto chuckled softly, earning another glare from Ephiny which Gabrielle ignored.

"Someone has to represent the Amazons here in Treus. If we negotiate with Diana before Velasca gets to her, we can stop the war before it even starts. And..." Gabrielle sighed again, looking every inch the exhausted ruler. "I need you as a Regent and a friend. We need all the friends we can get."

Ephiny couldn't bring herself to speak, or even look in Callisto's direction. Gabrielle could probably talk her way out of Tartarus; what was one crazy woman in comparison, especially to one who had managed to charm the Destroyer of Nations? The possibility suddenly occurred that Callisto might have preferred the bard alive, and this brought an avalanche of unspeakable thoughts.

She stood straighter, squaring her shoulders.

"My sword and my heart are yours...my queen." And, she silently vowed, she would figure out what was going on here if it killed her.

"Well..." Gabrielle flushed, but appeared nonetheless relieved. "I'm glad we got that settled. Things ought to go more smoothly if I don't have to keep you two separated."

Callisto raised an eyebrow as she raised the apple to her lips, biting down with a loud crunch.

"Are you sure you don't want to sit closer?"

"I'll be fine." Lilla craned her neck, striving to see over the rows of people that separated them from the princess before giving up. She knew Attalos was worried that she was worried about her sister's continued absence, and that trying to make him feel better would have the exact opposite effect; and so affected the somewhat bored tone she'd occasionally used with her mother. Though never Father...

Her smile vanished, and Attalos thankfully allowed the conversation to fall idle, leaving Lilla to her thoughts. Apart from the grandiose setting and the broader scope of decision-making, it really wasn't that different from the two village meetings had attended, more to avoid chores than any particular sense of civic duty. When they arrived the vast audience chamber had already been filled, overflowing with representatives of all lands and every conceivable walk of life, a low and constant murmur echoing from the high ceilings that only slightly subsided when Diana opened the proceedings. Once amenities were dispensed with, business proceeded in a relatively efficient fashion, with rich and poor given equal attention and interest by at least the princess, if not the rest of the council.

Diana appeared to function as moderator and occasional judge, restricting her decisions to matters which involved royal lands or defied all other efforts at resolution; a system of tickets and numbers
set up to ensure that everyone waited their turn, without requiring literacy. Lilla overheard one merchant drolly commenting on a nobles' belief that "even the thickest peasant had a decent head for figures," and another stab of pain went through her: the memory of her father toting up his gains and losses for that year, as her mother stood behind him, rubbing his weary shoulders.

She stiffened, mindful of Solan's presence. It wouldn't do to cry in front of the boy, especially in public. Apart from her own pride, she had no desire to subject him to that after remembering her own helpless frustration at the sight of her mother's tears.

And it wasn't as though she was the only one suffering; Solan hadn't just lost his parents, but one of his closest friends. The multiple shocks to her own system were beginning to take their own toll, the cumulative feeling of falling ever deeper into a dizzyingly tangled web. People had thought her mad when Lilla claimed that her sister traveled with the Warrior Princess, and what they think now?

She sought to distract herself from the growing tension, looking around for Gabrielle. Currently the princess was delicately inquiring into the matter of a bridal dowry, specifically the nature of an intimate relationship, resulting in covert smiles from some council members and open scowls from the remainder. Before it had been a tavern owner, complaining that too many of his customers were being assaulted and demanding more guards in the area; before him, a smooth-talking salesman who had pitched castles in the sky which only required the backing of the royal treasury to become a reality, and before him a family of refugees who spoke through the translations of their youngest son to beg assistance in finding their daughter's cat, the animal being the child's only surviving link to their homeland. The council greeted this last with sympathy, bemusement, boredom or outright scorn until it was pointed out that, while the animal was currently small and harmless, it would not long remain so; and that it would be in the best interest of all to locate it, before the girl's benign influence could succumb to predatory instinct.

"There's Gabrielle."

Solan spoke so quietly she hardly heard him. Lilla leaned in closer as he did the same, trying to follow where he was pointing. She eventually located her sister, who was examining with great interest an old, dark-skinned gentleman sitting with his eyes closed; legs crossed almost into a knot, one of them wrapped behind his neck. Lilla couldn't help smiling at the open, intense fascination on Gabrielle's face.

"And there's Ephiny --" Solan's whisper distracted Lilla until she saw the other woman standing at rigid attention on the other side of the chamber, arms folded across her chest, watching Callisto like a hawk. The warrior queen appeared almost bored with the proceedings, slouched against the wall, trimming her nails with a dainty paring knife; Ephiny's gaze following as the blade traveled slowly back and forth.

A gentle nudge came at her side, and she turned to see the concerned face of Attalos.

"I'm going for more wine and water. Would you care for some?"

She managed a smile and a shake of the head. Solan likewise declined, and Attalos quietly took his leave.

Across the room, Ephiny tapped Callisto ungently on the shoulder, fingers twitching in a demanding gesture. The warrior shrugged, passing the knife hilt-first over her shoulder without a backward glance.

Ephiny tucked the blade into her belt with a foul glare, making another scan of the room. She
couldn't shake the nagging sense of impending doom, which only grew as her charge continued to be quiet and cooperating, and the meeting proceeded without incident. A yawn threatened, and she stifled a smile. Just like home...

Searching for something to take her mind from its cannibalistic ruminations, Ephiny realized that Gabrielle's sister was now standing beside her. She acknowledged the girl's presence with a curt nod, never taking her eyes from Callisto.

Lilla didn't appear put off by the cursory greeting, content to stand by the Amazon's side as they observed the room at large. Solan had remained in his seat, keeping what he thought was a surreptitious eye on Lilla, which both Xena and Ephiny spotted immediately. Gabrielle had left off her observation of the limber senior citizen to engage in conversation with his family and friends, or possibly his fellow citizens; the only thing that seemed clear, through the son's translations, was that a missing cat was deemed worthy of presenting Diana with a request for assistance, while the fact these people had fled abominably cruel oppressions in their homeland was not. In fact they were more confused by the bard's outrage than she was outraged, given her notorious love of animals.

Back among the thickly packed rows of spectators, Meg had found Solan and was sitting beside him, engaging in a somewhat one-sided conversation. At the table the newlyweds had apparently tired of the council's deliberations, taking it upon themselves to resolve their own differences over the frantic screams of the bride's parents as they saw their plans for her dowry go up in smoke and flames. Diana listened to them for a time -- much longer, Ephiny decided, than she would have -- before declaring politely that they would have to take a number if they wished to have their case addressed separately. This quieted the family's objections to dull mutterings, and they allowed themselves to be led away without too much fuss.

The noise from the crowd suddenly increased as the next supplicant strode forward. He was an older man but quite fit, wearing a full set of armor more ceremonial than functional in nature. If he meant this to be an indication of peaceful intent, however, this was offset by the very functional looking sword hanging at his side in its worn scabbard, the pair of rather large guardsmen trailing behind, and his decidedly cruel and arrogant smile.

"I believe it's my turn?"

Lilla shivered at the man's voice, feeling the Amazon beside her stiffen. Callisto turned slightly, shifting focus to the newcomer, who stopped a few paces short of the table, sneering down at Diana.

"It is." Apprehensive whispers grew among the crowd at the princess's flat, clipped tones. "What can we do for you, Mineus?"

"Now, my dear. That's no way to speak to the man you almost married." The undisguised menace abated somewhat, but the king's brutal smile never wavered. "And after I went to the trouble of taking a number, just like everyone else. Why can't we simply chat a moment as friends? As you are with them."

"Bastard," Meg hissed under her breath, leaning over. "Don't you take your eye off him, ya hear? Him or his goons!"

Solan nodded mutely, more curious than fearful as he took in the various reactions. The noise and bustle had settled somewhat, most of the onlookers now watching with bated breath.

Meg glared at the intruder, cursing the day she'd acquiesced to Diana's wishes and gotten rid of her
custom 'Xena armor.' If she still had that puppy, she fumed to herself, Mineus would be shitting boulders right about now...

The princess's fingers formed a steeple as she appraised her brother-in-law.

"Most people who go to the trouble do it as part of an ongoing relationship, rather than a last resort. Unless your positions have undergone dramatic transformation in the last moon, a merger with your kingdom would be unacceptable to the people, my father or myself. And given your harsh words when you last set foot in these chambers, which I would rather not sully the record with a second time for the benefit of our esteemed Recorder -- ah, you're all recovered, Julia?" She gave a small wave to the scribbling archivist. "Excellent, please continue. As I was saying --"

"Come now, your majesty!" Mineus's tone was jovial to the point of hilarity, though he seemed the only one who was in on the joke. "You presume to speak for the people, whoever they might be -- a pretense that even I in my wildest fantasies could never conjure up. But have you now also usurped the supposed roles of these glorified puppets --" He gestured broadly, encompassing the ring of council members without taking his eyes from Diana, who still sat silently observing him. "Or have they the tongues and wits to each say to me, yea or nay?"

Ephiny's eyes were darting around the room, attempting to locate Kaleipus while still keeping watch on Callisto, the king and his minions. She nearly jumped in surprise when she felt Lilla's hand creeping into hers in an instinctive bid for safety, and she pulled the girl in close, feeling a frustratingly tantalizing body beneath the modest frock.

"Need my hands free," she whispered into a delicate ear. "You keep an eye on Solan...and try to find his uncle."

Ephiny released her grasp and gave the girl a light shove, turning quickly to refocus her attention on the princess. She'd have to trust that Lilla would have sufficient wit to conceal the paring knife the Amazon had managed to slip her; hopefully the girl was handier with weapons than her sister had once been.

For her part Diana held her tongue, now quite convinced of her adversary's reportedly unstable condition. It only added fuel to her determination to let Mineus dig his own grave, and he seemed happy to do so.

"Most of them agree with one of us. Of that I'm certain." He glanced about with some amusement. "But they seem rather...silent on the subject."

"You tend to have that effect on people."

There was an edge of dour humor in the princess's own voice, and Mineus chuckled, as if delighted at her response.

"As do you, my dear! Now let's not insult each other or these good people by pretending that we're acting for their benefit."

"Excuse me?" Gabrielle called out, waving over the heads of the crowd. "I don't think I heard you correctly. Could you please repeat that?"

Mineus's smile became somewhat forced as he raised his voice.

"Your father was a reasonable man, your highness. Why do you insist upon shaming him so?"

"Excuse me?" Gabrielle called again, stepping out of the crowd and smiling at Mineus. "I don't
mean to be rude, but since these are open meetings and anyone can speak up...do you really expect these people to follow you? After you just admitted you're opposed to everything Lias believes in?"

Mineus only chuckled again. "You really are naive, aren't you? If what Lias believed mattered, he'd be with us now. If what the people believed mattered, this world would be paradise. But every farmer knows his own animals are safer and happier than those in the wild."

Xena nearly bit her lip, remembering the reasoning that had led her down Ares' path of self-delusion. But she and Gabrielle had seen that people fought most for what they truly believed in, cared for, if only they placed enough value upon it. Her tongue itched with the desire to speak up, to follow the example Gabrielle had set for her, but every instinct and experience warned her to take Ephiny's advice to heart. *Watch and wait.*

The would-be king pressed his advantage, anticipating victory. "If all voices are equal, then may I hear my brother's in support of your majesty?" Gabrielle and Diana both went pale with anger or fear, and Mineus continued with neither pause nor pity. "No? A shame. I hear he attended these affairs more frequently in the past. You will let him know I called? I hardly see him these days..."

Diana's fingers were drumming an uneven rhythm on the stone tabletop, and Solan realized it was making him nauseous. He looked away to find Callisto was no longer leaning against the wall, eyes bright with interest as she watched the ongoing exchange. Seeing her and Ephiny standing side by side, every sense on alert, he thought Callisto would make a good Amazon before the wave of memory came crashing back.

*She killed Xena,* he thought numbly; feeling the full weight of her loss. How could Gabrielle stand to even look at the woman, let alone defend her?

The bard tapped her staff thoughtfully on the floor, wondering what Mineus knew of his brother's whereabouts and how much was sheer bluffing. *Time to put him on the defensive.*

"Since we're all asking questions, maybe you could tell us why you're the only one who needed to bring armed men to a supposedly peaceful gathering. Or if people are so happy in your kingdom, why you find it necessary to keep them from leaving." She looked him up and down, pointedly ignoring his bodyguards. "Or...if things are really so bad in Treus, why do so many people come here?"

Mineus looked wounded, and seemed on the verge of a reply, when a figure in black flew down from the ceiling as if flung from a catapult. It landed with one arm swung high, a blade flashing in the sun --

Ephiny felt a hand grab at her belt, turning just in time to register the nature of the theft as she saw Callisto hurl the stolen chakram and bolt into a dead run, leaping to the nearest spectator's head and launching herself into the air. The missile separated the knife from its owner with a shriek of steel, prompting the first actual scream from which the rest grew.

Most people chose this moment to explode into panic, and Meg suddenly found herself buffeted rudely from all sides as she attempted to shield Solan from the multitude of flailing limbs and stray objects. Mineus's guards were trying to draw their swords, only one succeeding as the other fought for elbow room in the suddenly confined area. The chakram hit the the far wall with a resounding clang, heading for the ceiling as the would-be assassin somersaulted over the guards to land behind Diana.

He sensed Callisto's presence in time to lean back and avoid a wildly swung fist, realizing too late that it had been a feint as the chakram came screaming back down. He barely dodged again as it
missed his face by a hair's breadth, embedding itself in the marble floor, and her heel met the back of his knee, her forearm like an iron bar across his throat as he fell forward.

Diana and the council members stared at the combatants, unsure if it was safer to remain still or flee. As if in a daze, Ephiny watched the warrior queen's arm snake under that of her victim, around his neck, yanking off the black hood with her free hand and tossing it aside. Abruptly Callisto grabbed his jaw, pulling until the Amazon was sure it would snap.

"Oh no ya don't..." The warrior growled through clenched teeth, shoving a knee in the small of her captive's back; bending him nearly double, forcing his mouth open. His body contorted but she kept his head locked in her grasp, and as the room silently watched her fingers emerged, depositing something on the nearby table.

"Don't touch it," she warned grimly. Diana drew her hand back from the shiny object, and the guards lowered their weapons in blank incomprehension as Mineus stepped forward with a trembling finger leveled at the princess.

"I hope you're pleased with yourself," he hissed, rubbing at his throat as if the assassin's cord had actually touched it. "Either one of us could have been killed, thanks to your foolishness! I warned you that you would pay the price for your blind trust!"

Gabrielle opened her mouth to angrily retort, catching herself at the last moment. She watched intently as Xena removed the strap of leather from her hair, lashing the man's wrists to his ankles. Even as Ephiny's own suspicious instincts raised their hackles, the warrior was picking up her prize, holding it aloft for Diana's inspection.

"Is that --?" The princess's face was alight with curiosity.

"Fake tooth." The warrior nodded. "Probably poison inside. Just a little insurance to keep him quiet."

To everyone's astonishment, Diana clapped her hands and let out a peal of girlish laughter that quickly tapered to a sarcastic chuckle. "I suppose I should feel honored."

"Well, that's no big deal." Xena examined the tooth with a critical eye before placing it back on the table, kneeling to pull her chakram from the floor. "But the fact that he doesn't even have a tongue, and whoever sent him still went to the trouble...well." She allowed herself a chilly smile.

One of the guards suddenly let go his sword, and it slid loudly to the floor as his mouth worked frantically, eyes fixed upon her. Another councilman, a wizened, pinched-looking fellow with a pompous sneer, overcame his paralysis and rose from his chair.

Finally, Xena thought sarcastically, but with no little sense of relief. Now the real fun could begin.

"By the gods, I was right!" The councilman stared with undisguised horror, trembling hand pointing directly at her. "It's Callisto!"

His words set off a whirlwind of still more, that made the previous commotion seem comparably tame and peaceful. An exasperated Diana grabbed Gabrielle's staff, stepping onto her chair and onto the table, pounding the weapon on its surface until the din quieted.

"Thank you!" she snapped, picking her dress up as she hopped down, handing back the length of wood to a shocked bard. "It's nice to know we still have some manners left!"

"She took my staff," Gabrielle muttered to no one in particular, staring numbly at her weapon. "I
can't believe she just took my staff!"

The councilman looked blankly at her before returning his attention to Diana. "Your majesty, I hate to admit it but Mineus has a point, and I'm shocked that his accusations had merit. This woman's wanted by half of Greece, and for damn good reason. She's a menace to everyone around her!"

Diana rolled her eyes. "Flautus, does this woman look like a menace? She just saved my life."

"Not to mention my own!" Mineus blurted eagerly. Callisto shot an unreadable look at him, glancing down at the tooth on the table.

Flautus emphatically shook his head, beginning to sound angry. "Be that as it may. If we don't turn her over to the Athenian courts at once, we could be in serious trouble!"

Callisto wearily brushed stray hair from her eyes. "You'll be in a lot more if you don't figure out who sent this guy. Whoever it was had the money and motivation to hire a professional, and that means they're certain to try again...as many times as it takes."

Diana nodded, motioning for her own guards who had finally fought their way through the crowd from their posts outside the chamber doors.

"Put him in the dungeon; we'll question him later. Now then --" She turned to the astonished councilman as the guards hauled the assassin away. "If you have any objections to Callisto's presence, I suggest you bring them up at the next meeting. Which as I recall is two days from now in Moesus's tavern, an altogether much more comfortable venue and one I wish I could join you in. Though my absence should ensure that the rest of you will be safe."

"Your highness, what are you saying?" The man's voice held a tremor, as if he suspected and dreaded her reply.

"I mean this meeting is adjourned," Diana sighed, "and I won't attend again, until this matter is resolved. You don't need me anyway," she continued, holding up one hand to silence his interruption. "You haven't needed me for a long time. Just --" She waved vaguely at nothing, looking tired. "Just stop treating me like royalty."

"You can't be serious!" This came from one of the peasants, a tall man with an eye patch and greatly swollen, weather-beaten knuckles. "I knew you were taking in stray dogs, but this is too much! By Hera, this woman's deeds make Xena's pale by comparison!"

"Now that's not fair!" Gabrielle whirled to confront him, somehow glad for the distraction. "Xena had a lot longer to build up her reputation. Besides, how are you going to compare them? Who killed more people? Who was more brutal?" The man glared at her suspiciously from his good eye and she attempted to sound more reasonable. What if he'd lost his family to Callisto's army? "Why don't you worry about her actions now, instead of judging her by her past?"

A sudden wave of nausea gripped her as she imagined Callisto observing the proceedings and sneering at this pitiful gesture.

"Gabrielle." She could feel the gentle hand on her arm, inviting her to look and see the face she knew would not be there. "Let it go, okay?"

Her adversary muttered something and stalked away, and Gabrielle drew a shaky breath as the noise and movement around them slowly resumed. Xena was still talking, voice pitched low and for the bard's ears alone.
"I appreciate the thought, but right now I need your help protecting everyone else. Can you do that for me?"

"I think so." She turned, but couldn't bring herself to look the other woman in the eye. "I guess talking about you as if you were dead just bothers me more than I thought it would..." She laid a hand on top of Xena's, trying for a jaunty, nonchalant tone. "Promise you won't die?"

What little good humor had been present quickly fled as the warrior withdrew her hand. "You know I can't."

"Dammit, you have to!" The bard struggled to keep her voice lowered, and Xena's face hardened again as she began to turn away.

"Don't you --" Gabrielle blindly reached out, grabbing by reflex and letting out a startled hiss as she felt her wrist encircled by a band of iron. Even as the bones threatened to snap Xena had released her hand as if burned by the touch of her skin, eyes wide with horror; the entire room had fallen silent and it seemed that every pair of eyes was staring at the them as they stared at each other, waiting for some cataclysmic act of violence to unfold.

A strangled noise came from deep in Xena's throat as she turned on her heel and stalked out of the room, a path instantly forming in front of her as people drew back and, in some cases, actually flung themselves out of her way. Lilla and Ephiny were immediately at Gabrielle's side, not quite holding her up as she stared after the retreating warrior, looking back and forth between the two women with constantly shifting expressions.

Gabrielle absently massaged her injured hand, feeling her sister's helpless confusion and the Amazon's cold rage as surely as if they'd been shouted aloud. Dimly, she focused on Diana's face as the princess bid a frosty goodbye to her still protesting brother-in-law. There would be time for tears later, maybe, if she needed them. Until then...

Watch and wait, she thought as Ephiny and Lilla silently escorted her from the room, the Amazon's touch uncharacteristically gentle. I can do that.

A fist slammed into the denuded tree, causing a flock of birds to take wing with raucous cries. Xena's knuckles were already bleeding but the pain only increased her fury, and with a piercing scream she launched a spinning back kick that could have broken a man's neck, freezing just before her foot came into contact. Her leg slowly lowered as she realized how easily she could have crippled herself with anger and stupidity; staring at the hacked-off branches littered about the base of the tree, grimly willing them not to be human limbs.

Promise you won't die, came the bitter, mocking refrain. Nobody in their right mind promises that! But she understood Gabrielle's fear, even welcomed the concern. Why couldn't she have shown compassion or understanding, for just one moment?

She almost shut her eyes, and laughed aloud at the conceit. Peace would come or not, but the harder she sought, the less hope she would have of achieving it. She was feeling altogether too much, and in desperation she reached back within herself, searching for some center or clarity.

In and out, then; slow and even breath, ignoring the insects that swirled about, drawn to her warmth. Somewhere her heart was beating and she let that go as well, until there was only the blood in her veins, the feel of wind and soft leather on her skin. Staring at sunlight drifting through leaves, as her body began to unfold in the old familiar patterns.
"The entire world is driven by a will...blind, and ruthless. In order to transcend the limitations of that world, you need to stop willing. Stop desiring...stop hating."

And even if those things were impossible, she could look at the situation and accept it. There was no way to undo the past, and life would go on. If Lao Ma's Way was not hers, there was still wisdom to be found in it.

"You're a murderer because you still think and act like one."

But she'd known the voices never stopped, that efforts to drown them out only made their cries louder. The small space of stillness she'd created for herself remained intact, ripples of painful memory fading once more. She pulled in great, slow lungfuls of air until dizziness threatened; drawing each moment out into forever as all became one...

"I thoughtcha said I could become an Amazon?"

That memory threatened to shatter her heart, but the machinery of her mind continued to slip into place, analyzing each point and leaping to the next before she was fully aware of the previous one. Her body was moving almost without volition, the motions as effortless as if she had gone through them yesterday. They came in their own time and at their own speed; strange new names silently echoing in her mentor's voice...

"The energy we call peng jing develops naturally," Lao Ma was saying, in her most infuriatingly inscrutable fashion. Xena stood awkwardly on broken legs, impatiently waiting for the lesson to begin. "Practice all you wish, execute the movements a thousand times, but without understanding you will attain only physical power."

"I've got plenty of that already." She tried unsuccessfully to mask her impatience, but couldn't help wondering how much was indeed her own lack of understanding. The other woman cocked her head to one side, almond eyes coolly regarding her with something akin to frustration.

"It is only by developing mind, body and spirit that one achieves true strength. Do you remember how I broke the vase?"

Xena forced a smile, shamed at the memory of her wide-eyed awe and complete failure to duplicate the feat.

"How could I? Never knew how ya did it in the first place."

The other woman frowned at this self-castigation. "And still you would kill a mosquito with an axe?"

Now it was Xena's turn to frown, unsure of what lesson was being taught. "Suppose it'd depend how big it was." She smiled weakly, but the attempt at humor went unappreciated.

"The goal is to minimize motion, while maximizing power --"

Xena couldn't repress the feral grin at the word. Lao Ma sighed as she rose in smooth, effortless motion.

"You believe all power is alike, Xena. Until you learn otherwise, I can teach you
nothing."

She exited the room in a swirl of skirts as Xena watched in silence, feeling like a whipped puppy.

*Some lesson,* she thought angrily; welcoming the distraction of returning pain in her legs. *Over before it even began!*

More details slowly came to the surface as Xena flowed through the routines. The way one noble had looked at her, almost calculating; his little glances to some of the council members when he thought she wasn't looking. Would they try to have her arrested, or would they actually make an attempt on her life?

A snapping twig brought her out of the deep meditative state, but she remained perfectly still. Gabrielle, likely, or maybe Joxer. She could handle Joxer much better right now, she supposed; but she'd have to face the bard again sometime, and putting it off would only make things worse. She took a deep breath before turning, and froze at the sight of Solan emerging from the bushes.

Paralyzed, she watched him slowly walk to the log Joxer had sat on the other night, taking up almost exactly the same position as he silently watched her. His expression was without anger, fear or curiosity; only a patience long past his years.

"What are you doing here?" Xena was amazed at how calm she sounded. "Someone send you after me?" She hadn't meant it to sound cruel or accusatory, but he looked away with pain in his eyes.

*Oh, good one,* she thought sarcastically, brushing the hair from her face. He went on this big quest to make sure you were okay...probably thinks it's his fault you're dead. That if only he'd gotten to you in time...

"Nobody saw me leave," Solan mumbled. He didn't know why he'd followed Callisto, why he was talking to her. She was watching him just as warily as he was observing her, the ocean of blonde hair in disarray about her head. With the dark clothing, lack of armor and bare feet she was almost the mirror image of the warrior princess. Except her eyes; reflecting endless suffering that reminded him all too much of Xena.

He shivered, recalling the more gruesome tales he'd heard. Did she dream of her parents, as he had dreamed of his own before learning Xena was not responsible for their deaths?

Callisto's voice was amazingly soft. "They're already worried about you. If they knew you were here..." She looked away. "You should get back to your dad."

"My father's dead." He saw her flinch and immediately regretted the bitter words. That was probably the last thing she wanted to hear.

"I'm sorry." She still sounded calm. "Gabrielle said that was your uncle. I should have remembered."

Solan glanced at her with some suspicion, but her expression was guileless and open.

"She told you about me?"

"We talk about a lot of things." Her fingers toyed nervously with the chakram hanging at her belt, and his eyes followed, widening slightly at the sight of the weapon. Suddenly the act of wearing it
seemed a laughable affectation, or an astounding lack of discretion.

"So she's your friend."

Xena nodded warily, but he seemed content with this, relaxing slightly as he continued to observe her. She turned away, resisting the urge to pace like a trapped animal. Tearful recriminations, vows of vengeance; she'd heard enough to last a hundred lifetimes, but anything was preferable to this awful silence.

"I wanted to go with them."

"What?" Xena blinked, wondering if she'd heard right. She turned back with a frown. "Who?"

She mentally kicked herself even as she realized who he must be referring to. He gazed up at the sun, soft streaks of color bleeding into the sky as it sank below the horizon.

"Xena and Gabrielle." How could he possibly explain his growing wanderlust; chafing at the idea of remaining with the centaurs despite his love for his uncle, or the strange comfort he felt in the warrior's presence? "When they left...I wished I was going with them."

Callisto gave a delicate snort of disapproval. "Life on the road isn't some glamorous bard's tale. It's a miserable, messy, back-breaking, nerve-wracking experience, and you don't want any part of it."

"That's what my uncle said," Solan was unable to suppress a smile. "I guess I just wanted to find out for myself. It hasn't really been that bad so far." Callisto didn't respond and he went on, emboldened by her silence.

"Can I go with you? When you leave here?"

She turned an incredulous stare upon him, and he fiercely willed himself to remain silent.

"Why?" Even as he struggled to form an answer she was rubbing at her temples as if to massage away some inner pain. "No, never mind. Don't answer that." She looked at him for a long moment, finally throwing up her hands in resignation.

"Ask Gabrielle," she growled, turning away. Solan stared at her in dismay for a moment before finding the courage to speak.

"She told me about you." When there was no reply, he hurried on. "Gabrielle did. You were one of the people she talked about. When I asked why she traveled with Xena --"

"That's enough!" she snapped. A slight tremble ran through her body.

He quickly stood. "Sorry. I'll leave you alone now. I just figured...you needed someone to care about you."

She glared at him and he quailed inside, thinking he might have gone too far.

"Too many people care about me," she muttered.

As he tried to think of a response, she turned on her heel and stalked out of the clearing.
An Attitude of Amazons

Chapter Summary

Nightmares get worse. An old friend, an old enemy, and many potential new ones.

Chapter Notes

To paraphrase Lala's disclaimer in "Got Milk?": Sex and violence? Yes. Hot grrl/grrl action, more cruelty than you can shake a pointed stick at, and we ain't out of the woods yet. Run and hide, or scroll and read.

Moral indignation is jealousy with a halo.

H. G. Wells

Boomtime

Awareness swirled through a throbbing pain centered at the back of her head. Xena uttered a low groan as she tried to move, and her eyes slowly opened as she became aware of the heavy manacles about her wrists and ankles. Callisto stood before her beaming, hands on her hips, still dressed in her revealing leather attire.

She, on the other hand, was completely nude.

"So pleased you've finally woken from your little nap. I hope we're feeling a little better?" An appreciative gaze traveled over the captive warrior's form. "You're looking much better to me, now."

Xena pulled at the unforgiving restraints. "Callisto, I'm warning you..."

A hand shot out and grabbed her roughly by the chin. "I'd say you're in no position to warn me about anything." Callisto turned her head without looking away, raising her voice slightly. "Isn't that right, dear?"

Two armored women stepped forward, holding a struggling Gabrielle between them like a wishbone ready to be snapped. Xena watched, stunned, as they shoved her forward. Callisto stuck out one foot with a devilishly innocent look, causing the bard to stumble and fall on the floor at her feet.

"Well, my sweet. We both know what you've always wanted." Callisto reached down and grabbed a handful of hair, dragging Gabrielle to her feet. The young woman struggled in her grasp, refusing to give her enemy the satisfaction of crying out. "Don't we?"

She smiled wickedly as she slid a hand around Gabrielle's waist and up to her breasts, pulling the bard's head back by her hair as her captive tried to twist free. Xena threw herself forward, blind to everything but the perverse scene before her; restraints tearing the skin at her wrists and ankles, the
chains refusing to give.

Callisto pulled Gabrielle closer in a brutal grip, pressing against her. "Oh, I understand you're eager. But I think it'll be more amusing if you sit this one out. Are you really that excited?" Her voice grew husky. "Well, I'm here to give you just what you want...what you won't admit you need more than anything." She bent her head, running the tip of her tongue suggestively along Gabrielle's earlobe.

"And you, my dear..." she breathed. The bard trembled in her grasp, the cruel smile of victory shining in Callisto's eyes. "My gift to you is far more precious. You finally get to give pleasure...to your hero."

Gabrielle closed her eyes as Xena's widened in horror. Fury clogged her ears as she flung herself at Callisto, momentarily drowning out sound. The blonde woman stared maniacally back, her own breath coming heavier.

"Why, Xena! Are you saying you don't want her to touch you? To caress you, slide her tongue over you...into you?" Her voice grew hard. "I think not." She ran her hands over Gabrielle's breasts, abruptly pushing her up against the warrior's body. "Now."

Xena threw her head back, connecting solidly with the stone wall behind as she felt Gabrielle's nakedness against her own. Not like this! her mind screamed. By any gods that give a damn, not like this!

Gabrielle leaned against her, tears flowing freely.

"Damn it, Callisto." Xena's voice was ragged with blood. "Don't make her do this." She lowered her eyes to avoid Callisto's triumphant, feral stare. "I'm begging you."

Callisto's gaze narrowed. "Exactly what I want you to do." Her tone brightened again. "But you shouldn't come crying to me, for goodness' sake! Don't beg me..." Her voice dropped to a hiss. "Beg Gabrielle."

Xena stared at her in utter defeat, and Callisto spoke again in a tone that brooked no denial.

"Gabrielle, if you don't, Xena dies. Right here, right now." She nodded to the two women who had been holding Gabrielle, and they stepped back, pulling their crossbows from shoulder holsters, cocking them back.

"Gabrielle, listen to me," Xena pleaded. "Don't...let them kill me, just please don't let her do this..." Her voice wavered, and the bard would not raise her eyes.

"She has no choice." Callisto sounded sad, almost regretful. She ran her fingers over Gabrielle's shoulder, lovingly stroking the edge of her jaw. The bard's eyes remained shut, but her face remained calm and composed.

Xena felt Gabrielle shudder against her; frozen, unable to look away as her own tears began to fall...

An incoherent yell shattered the still of the forest and Xena sat bolt upright, chakram tightly clenched in one fist, looking around wildly as she scanned her surroundings. The sky was just turning pink at the edges, and she could see through the trees to the castle, where the first sounds of activity were beginning to make themselves heard beyond its walls. Something wasn't right; she shouldn't be able to see it this easily --
Chrrrt!

Her head whipped to her left at the sound, a jolt of pain erupting in her neck. A rather large squirrel with a reddish tint to his fur sat on a branch above, clasping a nut between both paws as it stared down at her.

"Fine," she croaked, wincing as she massaged her shoulder. "Sorry to disturb you. Go on about your business, whatever it is."

The beast chittered a torrent of outrage and abuse before turning and zipping up the trunk of the tree, quickly vanishing in the leaves.

Xena couldn't help but chuckle, her smile abruptly vanishing in an ungainly flapping of arms as she nearly lost her balance. Only through pure luck did she manage to stay aloft, gripping the branch as she leaned against the trunk, heart pounding in her chest.

She stared at the ground nearly twenty feet below, recalling the events of the previous night. Her knuckles were still smarting from taking out her anger on innocent shrubbery, and for a moment's anger she could have rendered herself useless with a broken foot or worse. It was why she'd tried to meditate in the first place, to work off the overpowering malaise that subtly invaded her thoughts. And it was working fine, she thought balefully, until Solan showed up...

"It wasn't his fault." she said aloud, nervously licking her lips. Without looking she rolled from the branch and dropped like a stone, landing somewhat unsteadily on the forest floor, momentarily resting in a crouch to regain her balance. No, she was the one who kept avoiding her problems, too angry and afraid to show her face to anyone; once more running a grueling circuit of surveillance, long after the sun had set and the light that streamed from the castle windows dimmed to a dull glow.

Apparently losing her temper wasn't the only old habit she'd reverted to. Sleeping in trees was harder in some ways than traveling through them, but it was great for avoiding people, and it kept you alert. On the other hand, the odd, not-quite-asleep state it encouraged seemed to dredge up all sorts of flotsam from the depths of her subconscious. Then again, meditation had the same effect, but that was supposed to be a good thing.

Get a move on, she chided herself, rising to her feet; breaking into a slow, loping run, angling uphill and around toward the back of the palace. She'd hit the river and have a real bath, a good cold one, and then check on Argo. If she couldn't keep her word to her horse, how could she do the same with Gabrielle?

The soft light of dawn made the chill air all the more exhilarating, bringing out subtle highlights in every drop of water; arcane portents in the rush of senses that made every moment sublime and significant. It was going to be a good day, she decided, no matter what.

"Is she --?"

"Yes'm," the stable boy whispered. A towheaded lad of thirteen seasons, he knew enough of the previous day's events to be aware that he should feel fear or loathing for the woman inside; but the gentle demeanor she exhibited toward both himself and her steed was enough to win him over. So he'd left her alone with the animal, though he knew the slightest scratch on any of these beasts would mean dire consequences, and risked a quick trip to the front courtyard for a cup of the newest vendor's beverage; a potent brew, black as the Stygian depths that made his belly burn with fire, his thoughts sprout wings and take flight. Rumor was the princess drank it, and he kept the
new habit a guilty secret, fearing he would never hear the end of it from the other stable hands.

The Amazon queen hadn't announced herself as such, but everyone was talking about her in hushed whispers, servant and soldier comparing notes and finding themselves more baffled than before. For his part, he was content to drink in the sight of these women; dreaming of some day owning his own steed, and as long as he was dreaming big, a wife as pretty as the ones popping out of the stonework lately.

The thought added extra flourish to his bow. Gabrielle's smile seemed to take his breath away, and she was inside before he'd fully recovered from the shock.

She looked about the dim interior, slowly walking the row of stalls, stopped as she caught sight of blond tresses. Xena was combing the knots from Argo's tail, wearing an expression that was pensive but far from melancholy. The contented animal appeared to have been meticulously brushed from head to hoof, a job that usually took three candlemarks to do properly; while the warrior's hair was freshly washed, the unhealthy pallor no longer apparent.

Xena looked up, taking a deep breath.

"Gabrielle, I'm sorry --"

"It's okay." The bard raised the bolt, slipping inside the stall and latching it behind. Xena looked about to protest, and she held up a warning hand.

"You're right. I shouldn't have asked you to keep a promise like that." She still fully intended to voice her remaining suspicions to Diana privately, but for now she had a fine line to walk. Too much loyalty could get her killed, and too little might end in her praying for death.

She stroked Argo's nose as the other woman resumed brushing.

"Joxer told me how he found you and Argo. After Callisto left her wounded."

"Really?"

"He said he should have realized it was you, of course --" The bard smiled slightly. "If he'd only paid attention to Argo. 'Animal instinct' and all."

"So what's the verdict?" The warrior didn't appear offended, and Gabrielle offered up a silent prayer of relief.

"Looks like a clean bill of health," she smiled. And the lie was so small as to be no lie at all; she wouldn't entirely place her trust in Argo's ability, but the horse's character assessment was definitely a positive sign. "And it was silly to even worry about it if you rode her all the way here, but let's not waste time weeping and apologizing, because it's only going to make us both feel worse. Deal?"

"Deal." Xena found herself slightly less ecstatic than anticipated, striving to remember this was just the sort of time- and face-saving attitude she'd always hoped the bard would cultivate more of. Be careful what you wish for, she thought, shrugging away the little hurt as she combed out the last of Argo's tangles. "Think my armor's done?"

"Ready for the shock of some good news?" At Xena's inquiring look, the bard smiled broadly. "The blacksmith's apprentice dropped it off this morning, with a written apology from his master that it wasn't done yesterday. It's up in our room."
"Good." Xena's relief was evident in the single syllable, and she patted Argo affectionately on the flank. "See you later, girl. I won't take so long next time, okay?" The impatient snort drew a chuckle from the warrior. "All right, I'll take you out soon. Maybe tomorrow."

Argo twisted her head and fixed a single reproachful eye on Xena, who sighed and scratched her between the ears. "Okay, definitely tomorrow." The mare gently butted her head into the warrior's chest.

"Need rescuing?" Gabrielle casually inquired, resulting in a sardonic roll of the eyes. At least, she thought as they exited the stall, it was nice to see things getting back to normal.

Gabrielle was obviously trying not to look around, but the men of the army of Treus, being under no such compunctions, continued to watch them both surreptitiously and otherwise. Xena had insisted that the quickest way to accustom the men to her presence was to follow Diana's example, and since sleeping in the same barracks was out of the question, the most frictionless method of accomplishing this was to take their meals with the soldiers. She hadn't mentioned to the bard that she'd already spent a few candlemarks with the men during the morning drills, exercising right alongside them; wouldn't have even worked up a sweat, if she hadn't exhausted herself the night before.

Luckily, the men were too nervous of her and their commander to bother her with attempts at conversation. She'd even taken Tunalus aside and shown him a few moves -- mostly theoretical discussion, but a sufficiently practical demonstration to ensure the lesson was taken to heart. He was a good kid, and definitely caught on faster than Joxer. Maybe if things went well, she and Gabrielle could spar again soon...

"...just act like it's no big deal," Xena had warned her, "like you're having a nice breakfast with the Amazons."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes by way of response. Dealing with the Amazons had never been easy, and Ephiny's gloomy report made the analogy a rather poor one.

"Call me crazy, but it doesn't seem like a great idea. I mean, coming only a day after you made those guys look like fools."

Xena frowned as she fastened the armor. "I'm more worried about Ephiny. If I made anyone look bad, it was her. And what I did to you --"

"I told you to not worry about it." The bard's pronouncement carried the weight of finality. "But just to make sure, I talked to her last night."

"And?"

Gabrielle flexed her sore hand, testing the fingers. "She doesn't trust you, and she thinks I'm crazy. But she trusts me." She frowned. "I guess everyone here trusts me more than you."

Xena sat on the bed to pull on her boots, noting the excellent fit with approval. "That bothers you?"
"I don't know." Gabrielle looked uncomfortable discussing the subject. "It's like they think I'm some kind of hero, or goddess. Like I'm keeping you under control. I feel like I'm being put on a pedestal, and I know I don't deserve it --"

"Hey." She looked up at the hand on her shoulder. The newly retooled armor was less intricate and covered significantly more skin, its styling a cross between Callisto's armor and the set Xena had worn when she first met Hercules. Even the chakram was in its usual spot at her waist, her sword across her back.

"It'll be okay. First time they hear you snore, they'll forget all about that goddess thing."

Xena came back to the present to find Tunalus looking at them from the corner, his short black curls windblown and wild. For a moment she dreaded that he'd call out some greeting, but he only smiled and returned to his meal as one of the commanders strode by the table.

She looked at the bard's mostly untouched plate, shaking her head. "And you say I should eat more?"

"I had a big dinner. Thank the gods everything went all right last night. And not just with Ephiny."

"Yeah?" The warrior affected a casual demeanor, scraping up the last of the juice with her bread.

"Yeah. Naturally, at first she was ready to go after you, but I talked her out of it. Then we went to find Kaleipus and found him talking to this farmer like they've known each other for years..." A small grin cracked the mask of her face. "Religion and politics, awful jokes, the whole bit. We got back and nobody had seen Solan for a while, so I was a little worried, but he showed up about sunset."

"Did he say anything?"

"No, but he didn't seem upset either." The bard's tone was low and reassuring, recognizing the underlying fearfulness in the casual question. "What's his name...Attalos, was talking to Diana and Lilla, and we all ended up having dinner together. Diana had everything brought out to the courtyard so Kaleipus could join us. Lias was even there, he was looking a lot better...Joxer let Solan sleep in his room, and then he and Attalos took the stable so they could keep Kaleipus company..." Her fingers drummed restlessly as she endeavored to recall all the pertinent details. "Xenan and Solan seemed to hit it off. Oh, and Ephiny, Lilla, Meg...Diana and I, we all slept in Diana's room and had a little girl talk. It was really nice," she concluded softly, striving to keep blame from her voice. "You should have been there."

Xena gave her a blank stare. "Girl talk?"

"Yeah," the bard countered, lightly punching her arm. "You know...all talk and no action. Love, relationships, human interest...character development..."

Xena chuckled and gave an embarrassed shrug. "You know me. Probably wouldn't be more than a candlemark before I went screaming out the window."

The bard grinned but let the remark pass, leaning closer and dropping her voice.

"Then I was up before anyone else this morning, and I thought to myself, 'You know, I don't think Xena's paid any attention to Argo since we got here. And I'll bet if she stayed out all night again,}
she's going to be carrying a load of guilt the size of Sisyphus's boulder.'" The warrior smiled unwillingly, but Gabrielle continued relentlessly. "So it seemed logical to assume you'd be in the stables. And here you are," she finished, looking slightly smug.

"Hate to spoil your good mood," the warrior remarked, barely concealing a smirk of her own, "but here comes Joxer."

Gabrielle smiled through gritted teeth. "Thanks for the warning."

"Any time."

"Morning, guys!" The bard thanked every god there was that Joxer had at least toned down his boasting, and hoped he wouldn't take the reappearance of Xena's armor as an excuse to wear his own again. The soldiers mostly ignored him, but a few wore extremely hostile looks. Xena idly wondered if anyone thought he was having an affair with the princess.

His eye fell on Gabrielle's nearly full plate, and he bent down to whisper to them. "I hate to bother you in the middle of breakfast, but some guy's at the gate with a bunch of women. And he's asking for Xena."

The two women looked at each other.

"You wanna handle this one?" the bard asked casually.

Xena's lip twitched. "Wanna help?"

"I told you to be quiet!" Gabrielle hissed, shaking her staff inches from the trembling nose of the heavyset merchant. His eyes bulged piteously as they darted around the room, trying in vain to see who was holding their hand over his mouth.

The bard's eyes went over his shoulder, narrowing even further. "And you!" Her tone was frustrated, but laced with concern. "How about once, we try breaking the news gently?"

Another woman, who somehow sounded familiar. "Gabrielle, I saw that look! He was ready to start screaming --"

"Just promise you'll do it my way next time." The bard's pronouncement sounded final, and the unseen woman sighed heavily.

"I'm making a lot of promises to you lately." Gabrielle's glower intensified, and the other woman seemed to relent. "Fine. No problem."

The bard relaxed. "Well? I think the suspense is killing him." She nodded her head at the astounded merchant, who was breathing a little easier now that his captor's grip had eased slightly. "Or maybe it's that choke hold of yours. Just a hunch."

"Sorry," came the sheepish reply. His aching jaw was released, and the hand awkwardly patted him on the shoulder; he wheezed heavily, trying to regain his breath as a nagging memory flickered. Something in that voice...

Gabrielle took a deep breath. "What we're about to tell you? Only Diana, Meg and Joxer know." She paused to reconsider. "Well, and Ares. And probably a few other gods by now --"

"I don't think we have too much to worry about." A dry smile was audible in those rich tones. "Not
with Salmoneous."

The merchant blinked, mouth working silently, and Gabrielle watched tensely as he slowly turned around. "Xena...?"

His jaw fell completely open as he took in the tragic figure before him.

"Got it in one," the blonde woman sighed. His mouth snapped shut, brow furrowing in concentration as she continued.


Gabrielle could swear smoke was starting to pour from the man's ears. Finally he shook his head, an expression of cheerful wonder spreading across his chubby features.

"Ladies? You have outdone yourselves."

Gabrielle chuckled as the other woman offered a wicked smile, and Salmoneous felt a sense of wonder at how easy it was to see the woman he knew...once he knew what he was looking for. He shook his head again, heart slowing to a more normal gait. "So, uh...about those other reasons?"

The man sounded quite anxious, and part of Xena's mind veered off in another direction even as she filled him in on the problems facing Diana. Salmoneous shook his head in disgust.

"War's only good for business if you're an arms dealer," he growled, his normal good cheer vanishing for only a moment. "Now don't think I'm not interested in hearing the whole story, because I am. I've got a lot of urgent business to attend to, but -- let's talk over dinner, later. If you're available? Please, I'd love to have you join us --"

"Us?" Gabrielle interjected. "You mean all those women that were with you?"

"All right, what hare-brained scheme have you concocted this time?" Xena sounded more amused than annoyed, but Salmoneous was looking downright virtuous in his indignation.

"Xena, you wound me."

A wry grin crossed the warrior's lips. "If I didn't slice you open on first sight, I'd say you're safe."

Salmoneous chuckled nervously. "Always the kidder, eh Xena?" He glanced about, lowering his voice. "Uh, sorry. Guess I'll have to work on that when we're, uh..."

"You'll do fine." Xena administered an affectionate clap to his shoulder, not letting him look away. "Now, what devious method have you come up with to part these mostly honest citizens from their hard-earned dinars?"

"It's not like that at all," Salmoneous protested. "I've given up on the getrich-quick schemes. You have my word!"

"You mean another one backfired," the bard smiled. "Was it baldness ointment? Cyprean swampland? Titans with two heads and the centaurs that love them?"

The merchant's face fell and Gabrielle relented, reaching out to grasp his forearm in sympathy. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to tease, really." She shot a warning glance at Xena in case she didn't take the hint, but the warrior remained silent. "So what are you doing?"
Salmoneous drew himself up, smoothing the wrinkles from his robe. "Polo."

Now it was Xena's turn to gape, as Gabrielle appeared to find a mote of dust in her throat and spent a few minutes coughing, trying to regain her bearing. Salmoneous' look still spoke volumes of injured pride, but he at least had the patience to wait for her to draw breath.

"All right, maybe I shouldn't have sprung it on you like that." The large man laughed aloud at the expressions on their faces. "Seriously, it's more than that, but -- that's our primary focus as far as the public image." His demeanor grew serious again. "You see, I was in Athens for the Olympics last year --"

Gabrielle sat down on the bed, eager to rest her feet. "I suppose it's more honest than Miss Known World pageants."

Salmoneous rolled his eyes. "I'm just as glad that one never got off the ground, let me tell you..."

Gabrielle cleared her throat. "Polo?"

"Right!" He continued unabashed, rubbing his hands together. "I met this young woman, Felicitus, in the tavern I was staying at. We started talking, and one thing led to another, and we had most of the details worked out that first night. Next morning, the tavern had one less bar wench, and we had the first member of our team. A fierce, ferocious, feminine fighting force of nature! A tornado on the playing field, wreaking devastation amongst all those who oppose us!"

The pompous drama vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. "At least that's how we advertise it. Violence sells, y'know." He sighed briefly before the smile returned. "But we're doing great, the women can support themselves and their families and -- I'm sorry, but I really need to get back. Can you walk with me, and I'll explain more on the way?"

As usual, Gabrielle thought, the merchant was either intent on surprising them or afraid of being tarred and feathered if they knew the exact nature of his plans. She sincerely hoped it wasn't the latter. However, knowing the perverse tastes of the Fates, she wasn't about to bet on it.

An anxious young voice calling Salmoneus by name was rising above the crowd, and the merchant picked up his pace, leaving the bard and her companion behind in the rush. Xena shouldered people aside with muscle and threatening glares, creating a protective zone around Gabrielle as she cut a swath through the mass of bodies. As they approached the rude set of tents hastily thrown up around the edge of the merchants' circle, a woman with flaming red hair and a faceful of freckles ran up to them, panting as she skidded to a stop.

Before she could draw breath Salmoneous had grabbed her by the shoulders, wearing a look of dread.

"Meridus, What's wrong? Is someone hurt? Or --" His voice grew almost angry. "By the gods, are the council backing out? They'd better not try, after all that --"

"Everyone's fine and it's not the council," she whispered frantically; finger across her lips, eyes wide as she glanced nervously at the tent behind her. "Keep your voice down!" She cast a puzzled side look at Gabrielle and Xena as she strove to keep Salmoneous quiet, but the merchant was having none of it, the woman's panic having already infected him.

"Don't tell me they're still training? The game starts in less than two candlemarks, and we haven't even had time to advertise!" The merchant's hands leapt from the woman's shoulders to his thinning hair. "Half our profits are from first-timers, you remember that!"
"That's not what I'm worried about!" the young woman hissed, glancing back at the tent again. Her face paled as the curtains were thrust open.

A muscular, olive-skinned fellow strode forth. He was dressed in leather leggings, a black open-chested tunic and a feathered helmet, and wore a look of supreme contempt, with patience stretched to its limits. His eye fell on Salmoneous, frozen in shock, and he shoved Meridus aside, replacing her grip on the merchant's collar with his own; drawing the other man to him, leaning in and staring fixedly at his hapless victim.

"Draco, old buddy!" Salmoneous laughed nervously. "I was beginning to worry you wouldn't show up!" His eyes darted in Xena's direction, and the warrior couldn't help but suppress a chuckle. The merchant wasn't just worried about his own hide, and she suspected they were about to discover his secret.

"I've held up my end of the bargain, fat man," the warlord growled. "I said we would play your silly game. That my men and I would wipe the ground with your little crew." His eyes narrowed as he lifted the hapless merchant into the air, muscles ripping with effort. "And you promised that the Warrior Princess would be the judge, because you know she's the only one I'd accept. Because we both know her so well. Because we trust her to be impartial!" He spat, as if to wash the word from his mouth.

"Don't think I've forgotten that offer from Mineus." Dark eyes bored into the merchant's. "Now either you produce Xena, and she confirms your story..." He smiled, teeth bared in a snarl. "Or I'll take this kingdom right now, and save Mineus the trouble. And I doubt I'll be inclined to share."

Salmoneous struggled as his collar tightened further. From somewhere out near the edge of his universe, Callisto's voice cut through the growing darkness.

"I'm afraid that'll be a bit of a problem."

Draco turned in astonishment, slowly lowering Salmoneous, as he took in the two women before him. Meridus grabbed the merchant to ease his fall as he sank to the ground, rubbing his throat.

"I know you," the warlord rumbled in surprise, staring at Gabrielle. His eyes flickered to Callisto and he folded his arms across his chest, fingers running across huge biceps. "So what's the problem?"

"I killed her."

The playful, savage smile left no doubt as to the truth of this statement. Gabrielle felt another shiver at the sudden transformation, keeping her expression detached as she watched Draco from the corner of her eye. Meridus looked utterly confused.

The warlord's nostrils flared, and he scratched thoughtfully at his sparsely haired chin. "You must be Callisto."

"In the flesh." Xena moved to take charge of the discussion. "Now then, Salmoneous. You told Xena all about your nefarious little scheme --" she smiled darkly. "So why don't you fill me in?"

The meaningful glare left no doubt in Salmoneous's mind that the wrath of Draco would be Elysium compared to his fate if he didn't start spilling his guts. He shuddered at the unfortunate choice of mental imagery.

"Okay. Maybe there were a few things I should have mentioned earlier --"
"Talk!" Gabrielle slammed the end of her staff on the ground and glared at the merchant; Xena's gaze flicked over her, but the warrior remained silent. Draco regarded the others with impatience and a cultivated aloofness.

Salmoneous coughed as Meridus helped him sit up, glaring at the bard. "I wanted to convince warlords to play exhibition matches with us instead of looting and pillaging, okay? We're a great challenge, we've already beaten the best the Olympics had to offer --"

"Which you'll never hear about from anyone else," Meridus dryly interjected, arms folded across her ample bosom.

"I figured I could sell the idea to at least a few warlords, but most of them have joined up with Mineus." The merchant shot a baleful look at Draco, who returned it with an arched eyebrow. "Draco was my last hope. I told him that everyone would benefit. The profits, the gambling, the merchandise --"

The bard gave a bitter chuckle. "I thought you were doing this out of the goodness of your heart."

"I never said that!" Salmoneous managed to look guilty and offended all at once. "I mean, I am. But we have to eat too, you know. There's nothing wrong with making an honest living!"

Meridus helped him stand, and he brushed the dust from his robes as he turned to Xena. "We don't make much on admission, but we draw huge crowds and give them a decent entertainment value. We try to make up for it on merchandise, but we have a _great_ variety and pricing structure --"

"Most of these girls have never had a single dinar of their own. Salmoneous teaches every member of the team how to manage their own finances." Meridus stared defiantly at Gabrielle, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "He would _never_ cheat us."

Draco's lip curled. "How touching. Too bad sentiment doesn't pay the bills." He turned back to Salmoneous, looking thoroughly bored by the proceedings. "Your little rag-tag bunch may have a victory or two under their belts, but we'll pound them into sand no matter what the odds. _Or_ the rules."

The merchant lost his poker face before regaining some measure of composure. "You mean we're still on?"

"I never said that." The quiet menace was more chilling than any boast, and Salmoneous froze with a swallow lodged halfway down his throat.

The warlord turned slowly to Callisto and found the woman staring at him with a rather demure and pretty half-smile, waiting patiently as if she anticipated his words. Draco stepped forward, taut with rage

"I swore I would win Xena's heart or defeat her in battle. Thanks to you, I'm denied both those pleasures. So give me one good reason --"

"Why I shouldn't kill you myself? Right here? Right now?" Xena's eyes sparkled with provocation but she refrained from outright laughter. "If I had a dinar for every time I've heard that one!" She surveyed him up and down, quelling her own faint response to the warlord's raw physical presence. _Like Borias's little brother...is _that_ why I thought he was cute?_

"You won't kill me," she purred, grinning coyly. _You're just as scared as angry, aren't you? Ah, Draco...if you only knew._ "After all, if I killed Xena...I must be even better than her."
She let the smile grow wider; seeing his astonishment grow, as unwelcome truth sank in.

"By the gods," the warlord breathed, stepping away from her. He shook his head, regaining his composure.

"I suppose a date is out of the question?"

"In your dreams."

"And you won't face me in battle?"

"Only if you give me a good reason." A cynical smile. "And, just because you couldn't conquer Xena? Not good enough."

Draco's eyes were ablaze with enjoyment. "And if I decide to take this kingdom?"

The smile vanished, but her voice remained quietly confident. "I'd stop you."

"Why?" His voice was fierce and excited, as though he knew he had reached the crux of his interrogation.

Xena cocked her head, the smile lessening only slightly. "Because it would be the right thing to do."

Draco slowly shook his head, staring at her in amazement for a long moment during which no one else dared to draw breath. He turned his head to Gabrielle.

"You have this effect on everyone?"

The bard shrugged, trying to look modest as her heartbeat slowed.

Xena pulled back her shoulders, rising to her full diminutive height. "This kingdom and the adjoining lands are off limits to tyrants, raiders, warlords, petty thugs and perverts. I'm sure you qualify for at least one of those titles. I already suspected Mineus might be behind some of this, but thank you anyway for your contribution. Independent confirmation makes my job so much easier."

She resisted the temptation to bat her eyelashes.

"Now, you could still join with Mineus and just hope and pray you'll end up on the winning side."

She kept her tone reasonable, every sense on alert. "But I'd heard you were a more...practical man."

She grinned slyly up at Draco, hands casually clasped behind her back, ready to grab for her chakram or let fly with a pressure pinch. Some far-off mumbling or movement was coming from the far side of the merchant's circle, her ears perking at the sound.

"I take it you have a better offer?" Draco's voice was outwardly casual, the slight hoarseness betraying intense emotion.

She stared boldly into his eyes. "Since Xena won't be able to fill the position --" she let the playful edge return -- "I'll be the judge of this contest, and the game will proceed as scheduled. If you decline, you and your men are welcome to remain as long as you stay out of trouble. And at the first sign of any disturbance, the minute you so much as piss in the wrong alley --"

Suddenly Draco's face was full of glaring eyes and bared teeth, a chilling hiss nearly burning his ears. He involuntarily stumbled back, quickly regaining his balance, if not his dignity; Callisto was watching him, anger fled, leaving her face seeming years older. The irritating little bard was tensed almost to the snapping point as she watched them, and the strategist in him coolly noted this, filed
it away as he straightened his shoulders, clearing a slight roughness from his throat.

"Your terms are acceptable."

"Gabrielle!" Everyone turned to see Diana, looking both shocking and casual in a subtly colored and multi-layered peasant skirt that looked as warm as it was comfortable.

"What trickery is this?" Draco snarled, his hand reaching automatically for the hilt of his sword.

"You said you killed Xena!"

His target appeared only slightly offended. "My name is Diana, Princess of Treus, thank you very much. And my cook --" she indicated a breathless Meg behind her, wearing a similar but more flamboyant dress with ragged little ribbons adorning her hair and clothes. "-- is Meg." The cook's gaze darted about the assembled crowd, seeking out her friends as the princess continued.

"And we've heard tell of a Hestian priestess who bears a remarkable resemblance as well, though we've never actually met her. Small world, isn't it?"

Salmoneous cleared his throat nervously. "Your highness, I hope there's been no misunderstanding. I signed that contract in good faith, and I assure you, I fully intend --"

Diana raised a hand. "No problems on this end. I take it you were able to negotiate with the competition?"

Draco stepped forward, giving a sarcastic bow.

"Draco the warlord, your majesty. My sincerest apologies for an honest error. And I give you my word this kingdom is safe from my army until the games are concluded. I swear it on the head of Ares."

He gave a self-satisfied smile, sweeping up Diana's hand to bestow a gentle kiss. The princess smiled wearily, but her heart wasn't in it.

"I accept your oath," she nodded. Her eyes sought out the bard. "Gabrielle, I actually came to warn you --"

"There you are!"

The new voice held a triumphant note, but the raven-haired woman now forcing her way through the milling crowds looked more like the loser of some manner of battle; her obviously once-white robes disheveled, covered in random streaks of grime, shoulder-length hair ripped halfway loose from the copper band that had held it back in a fiercely tight bun. She was busily straightening her glasses from their skewed perch as she escaped the buffeting waves of humanity that swelled around them.

"Your highness, I don't think you quite understand --"

Her eyes fell on Xena, and the warrior mentally rolled her eyes.

"Callisto of Cirra?" The woman's tone was official, her posture stiff and awkward. Gabrielle's heart sank into her boots and Xena stood straighter, matching her interrogator's seriousness.

"Yes."

Diana's face betrayed no emotion, and the newcomer shot her a hard look. "You were protecting
this woman, your highness?" Her tone was incredulous. "Didn't you believe me when I said she is extremely -- ah!" She threw up her hands and turned back to Xena.

"My name is Eleas. I'm an adjudicator for the court at Athens, and I'm here to return you to that city for immediate trial."

"Now just a minute --" Draco started as everyone looked at him, backing up a step under their scrutiny.

The crowd parted once more, disgorging Tunalus and another soldier whom Gabrielle didn't recognize. The latter threw the princess a grudging salute, and Tunalus bowed slightly.

"There a problem here, highness?"

The unknown soldier looked ready to split his leader open, but Diana only shook her head and smiled.

"Not yet, Kristos. But I think your presence may be helpful. This man and I --" she indicated Draco -- "were just discussing the evening's festivities. You were saying, sir?" She turned back to him, giving him full and rapt attention.

A quick look of anger crossed Draco's face as he glanced around at the few peasants and merchants that were watching them. "My men and I traveled two weeks through bad weather and low rations," he growled, "and by Ares, we'll have our satisfaction one way or another. Now I don't care who you are, but this woman, as you call her --" he flung out one arm to indicate Xena -- "isn't going anywhere, until our business is concluded!"

The adjudicator's gaze never flickered as she returned his stare. "Draco, is it?" She nodded, as if checking something from a mental list. "You'll be coming back as well. You'd better pack warmer clothes; I hear there's snow now in Athens. Gabrielle of Potadeia --"

She turned to the bard, ignoring the increasingly frustrated warlord. "You were reported to have traveled with Xena during the last years of her life. Is this true?"

Gabrielle nodded dumbfoundedly, clutching her staff as though she were drowning. Eleas nodded, appearing sympathetic for the first time.

"I'll need to interview you for the report to my superiors. But I doubt they'll require a personal testimony."

Diana drew a deep breath. "Eleas, I can explain --"

"No." Xena's jaw set in a child's stubborn pout. "I'm sure you're just doing your job, but I don't have time for this, and I'm not going with you." She walked up to the adjudicator; the woman stood about her height, but seemed far more frail underneath her full robe. Eleas stared at her as she strove to sound reassuring. "But if there's any way I --"

Everything seemed to slow down but the shouting, Gabrielle thought; even her own body felt like it was moving through thick syrup as a young woman flew from a gap in the crowd, lunging at Xena from behind with a short sword.

Kristos stumbled back with a look of surprise on his ugly features, grabbing clumsily for his own weapon. Meg brought her fists up, looking frantically about in an effort to determine where to direct them as a rather chunky, well-dressed man was pushed into her from behind, and his reflexive clutch at her bosom resulted in her choosing his face as her target. He yelled in protest
and she answered with a screech, kicking him in one knee and shoving him forcefully back into the crowd, which quickly absorbed him.

Draco's head was whipping about in a futile effort to track all of the actors, his jaw stretching further in confusion; Salmoneous, silent and pale, clutched Meridus to him in an effort to protect her or himself as she furiously shouted and beat at his head and shoulders, her attention focused wholly on the woman attacking Xena. Tunalus's immediate response had been to assure the safety of the princess, and as he saw that she was out of the way of immediate danger he changed his course to intercept the attacking woman. *Too easy*, his mind shouted, why wasn't Callisto moving -

The would-be assassin -- now, he could see, no more than a girl of perhaps sixteen summers -- registered his presence too late. Her focus on her victim was maniacal in its intensity, and Tunalus almost felt as though he were watching himself execute the movement Callisto had demonstrated earlier; a hard twist of the arm to make her drop the sword, planting his foot in her back, bringing her to her knees with a shove.

A lull fell in the shouting as Draco's arm fell numbly at his side. Xena was gazing down at her attacker. and Gabrielle's breath came out in a painful wheeze.

Kristos glanced around nervously, his sword drawn. "Everyone go about your business!" he shouted hoarsely. "This matter will be properly dealt with! Nothing to see here!" He waved the sword for additional emphasis, glaring at his junior.

Tunalus paid no mind, concentrating on keeping his captive restrained. He glanced at the princess for some order or instruction, but she and Meg had both run to Gabrielle's side. Salmoneous's nerveless grasp fell away as Meridus stepped forward.

"Terriea..." The older woman knelt before the girl, whose eyes unwillingly drew away from Callisto; meeting her pained gaze.

"It's no use, Meridus." Every muscle screamed defiance, though she couldn't hide the pain of this unnatural position; the hate in her voice chilling every observer to their bones. "I'll see that bitch in Tartarus."

"Now just one minute!" Eleas sounded quite panicky as she straightened her clothing and eyepieces yet again, stepping forward from a nearby tent where she had apparently taken shelter. "This woman must receive a proper trial before execution can take place. I'm sure the court would welcome any additional testimony, but --"

"No," Gabrielle seethed, throwing off Meg and Diana's hands. "You wait. As a princess of the Amazon Nation, I claim sanctuary --"

Everyone fell silent at the piercing scream that sliced through the air, staring at the blonde figure responsible as it died away. In the distance, a horse whinnied.

Xena glanced around approvingly. She didn't dare look at Gabrielle, and she prayed the bard would follow her lead.

"That's better." *Now, Princess...play it cool*. She raised her voice a bit, deliberately addressing all present. Eleas was staring at her as if she were a viper in the adjudicator's soup bowl.

"Tunalus, you're to be commended for your quick reaction, but you can let her go. I'll take full responsibility."
The boy nodded uncertainly and released his captive, who glared at him as she rose, vigorously massaging her arm. Eleas gasped.

"Your majesty!" She swung around to Diana, who cocked her head quizzically. Meg was standing alongside, a possessive hold on her twin's arm.

"Are you just going to let this woman --" Eleas sputtered momentarily in supreme outrage. "I was under the impression Treus was in accord with the laws of Athens!"

"What she said," spat Kristos. "I don't know what kind of game she's playing, but I don't like it one bit. And I don't trust her any further than I could throw her!"

Tunalus stared at his fellow guardsman as if seeing him for the first time. Xena merely glared at her accuser until he sheathed his sword and backed away, muttering dire imprecations; returning her attention to Eleas.

"Go with Gabrielle. I'll meet with you as soon as possible. Salmoneous --" The adjudicator gaped as her intended target turned away, effectively dismissing her. "You and Draco set up, and tell everyone the game will start on time. Gabrielle --" The bard perked up as her friend addressed her.

"I appreciate the effort. But giving me sanctuary would open up a hornet's nest you can't begin to --" She shook her head. "Just don't."

Gabrielle stared, finally nodding. "All right. But don't think you can make a habit out of refusing my help." She grabbed the feebly protesting adjudicator by the forearm, dragging her away.

Xena turned calmly to a stunned Draco, enjoying his complete bafflement.

"What are you waiting for, the gods to declare holiday? Round up the men and get back here." A lascivious smile. "Scout the enemy before you meet them on the field."

Draco leered, recovering some equilibrium. "It'll be our pleasure." He took Salmoneous' arm with exaggerated courtesy. "Why don't we walk together, you and I, while we...round up our teams?"

The merchant darted nervous glances at Xena but received no help, and allowed himself to be led away by the warlord, who seemed much more intimidating when he was being polite. Kristos approached Xena with an obsequious half-bow.

"Callisto, you have my sincerest apologies for this unwarranted attack, and for my rudeness. I'm sure you understand I have only the kingdom's best interest at heart."

Xena nodded graciously. "Of course."

"Such an attack on a guest of the king is unpardonable, of course." Kristos lowered his voice, glancing back at Terriea. "You would have every right to demand imprisonment, or execution..."

_Awful eager to get rid of her, aren't you?_ Xena regarded him, red and sweaty despite the chill afternoon breeze. Was the girl an accomplice, or an unexpected annoyance? Better to let him stay nervous for now; Terriea's eyes were flickering about, looking for an escape route, and she couldn't afford to have this girl meet some untimely accident on the way to a cell.

"I'll keep those options in mind." The junior guard offered a respectful bow at this obvious dismissal. Kristos' eyes narrowed but he held his tongue, and at Diana's nod both men took their leave.
"Quite a trick," Terriea shook off Meridus' arm, stalking up to Xena and halting mere inches away. The warrior never flinched or took her eyes from the younger girl.

"Got everyone eating out of your hand, don't you?" she spat bitterly. A broken, twisted smile emerged. "Doesn't matter. Sooner or later...I'll get you."

Xena continued to stare into the girl's eyes. After looking for so long into Callisto's hatred, it was like an infinite series of mirrors; reflecting the voices of her victims, as they had done to Callisto in Tartarus. Lao Ma's voice echoed in her mind: You need to stop willing...stop desiring...stop hating.

She swallowed the bile that threatened to rise; heard herself speaking again, recapturing the casual tone of command that was nonetheless a polite request.

"Meridus? We haven't got much time before the game." The redhead looked on, dumbfounded, as Callisto returned her attention to her adversary. "We need to talk."

Terriea shivered, but made no other move. "Do I have a choice?"

Xena didn't rise to the bait. "Always."

The young girl nodded shortly. "Then let's get it over with."

Diana watched them go with more than a little trepidation, barely noticing Meg also take her leave. She was just starting to relax when another guard appeared.

"'Scuse me, yer majesty. Got some Amazons to see ya?"

The princess's hands automatically went to her dress, smoothing its wrinkles as the crowd parted for the much-discussed warrior women. A number of gasps and mutterings were heard at the sight of the female warriors, dressed only in leather and feathers, heads held high and proud. Each wore an elaborately crafted mask that evoked images of predatory birds, and bore at least one weapon if not three or more, including dagger, sword, bow and the traditional chobos.

Diana bowed to the woman in front with the most elaborate mask, who stepped forward, removing her mask with a flourish and a somewhat defiant stare. The Amazon was about Gabrielle's height but with wiry muscles over a painfully thin frame, the pupils of her eyes shaped almost like a cat's. The princess returned her suspicious glare with a warm smile.

"Do I have the honor of addressing a representative of the Amazon Nation?"

"You do." The leader's nose wrinkled as she appraised the princess with a critical eye. "You must be Queen Diana."

"Actually my father is still king, but he's been ill for some time." Diana's voice bore no trace of the pain such a statement must have cost her. "I've done my best to rule in his place, in the hopes he'll soon recover. And you are?"

The corners of the Amazon's mouth quirked up.

"I am Velasca, rightful Queen of the Amazons. We had heard the ruler of Treus was a woman, and hoped you would assist us in our efforts to reclaim our lands across the river."

"I thought the Amazons signed a peace treaty with the centaurs," the princess casually countered. "Was I misled?"
Velasca ran a frank gaze of assessment over her. The taller woman was far less physically imposing than Xena despite their equal size, but her recent trials had lent a quiet strength that shone through the demure outward appearance, and she carried herself with an easy grace even with the awkward, traditional dress.

The Amazon's cool bravado subsided, giving way to a more calculating air. "Your highness --"

The princess dismissed the honorific with a practiced wave of the hand. "We're not much on formality here. Call me Diana."

Velasca's eyebrows knit in confused contemplation, as if doubting the veracity of the woman's claim to the throne. Diana continued smoothly onward.

"I'm sure that whatever disagreements you have can be worked out --"

"Pah!" Velasca made no attempt to turn her head, and a gob of spittle landed perilously close to Diana's foot. The princess restrained the guard with a wave of her hand. "The centaurs dishonor treaties, by laying claim to land that is rightfully ours. Twice this past moon, they have assaulted our sisters' hunting parties without provocation. They have no respect for our borders, or our people."

Diana's brow furrowed momentarily, trying to reconcile this statement with the admittedly sketchy information Gabrielle had been able to provide her on the age-old feud.

"But we have no quarrel with you, your majesty. We merely wish safe passage, and your assurances that you will not move against us when we attack the centaurs -- for attack them we shall --" The brief snarl was quickly replaced with the assuredness of a warrior seasoned by countless battles.

"Until then," Velasca purred, "I hope you will allow my Amazons free passage in your city? From what I have heard, we could learn greatly from one another."

Diana inclined her head. "And until then --" She cast a hard glance at her guardsman, visibly itching to draw his sword. "I'll try to convince you there's no need for a fight."

Velasca's smile was almost charming.

"This is highly irregular," Eleas protested miserably, as the bard pulled her along.

Gabrielle shook her head as if a troublesome insect had made its way inside. "Normally? I'm a very patient and understanding person. But it's been a crazy last couple of fortnights, and I'm in no mood to play by the rules." She slammed the door behind them, looking around for the right hallway. "Now if you'll watch and listen, you might actually learn something."

She found the correct hall, counting left and right as they made their way toward the far end. The adjudicator made no reply, being engaged in holding grimly onto her glasses, trying desperately to keep from losing her sandals on the polished stone floor. Gabrielle skidded to a halt in front of the tenth door on the right -- right is outside, right? Right! -- and yanked Eleas inside, clapping her hand over the other woman's mouth.

The bard put a finger to her lips and jerked her head, indicating the large window to their left as she removed her hand from the adjudicator's mouth. "This is the rear courtyard, where the men train," she whispered. "I'm positive this is where Xe--" She broke off, features hardening. "-- Callisto brought her."
She strove to regain some empathy despite her instinctive dislike for the woman. "You can watch from here, if you're worried. But I'm sure Terriea's in no danger."

Eleas frowned, making no move to look out the window as she studied the bard intently.

"You really miss Xena, don't you?"

Gabrielle fought the urge to swallow, feeling the woman would find some sort of meaning in anything she did. She simply nodded.

"Yes." The truth hurt, she thought to herself numbly; every change she was seeing in her friend appeared to be for the better, even though it made her more nervous than ever. She suddenly saw where this might be leading. "But I'm not trying to replace her. No one could do that."

The adjudicator sighed and sagged against the wall, leaning her forehead on the cool stone. Her voice was muffled somewhat by the folds of her robe. "Gabrielle, you can't save everyone."

The bard laid a hand on Eleas' shoulder. "Xena used to tell me the same thing. That she wasn't worth saving...that she couldn't be saved." She smiled faintly. "I didn't believe it."

Eleas looked up at her with reddened but dry eyes.

"Gabrielle." The woman's voice was weary and sad beyond belief. "She's taken Xena's life! She's taken her sword, she's taken her..." She gestured vaguely. "That round thing, her signature weapon..."

"Chakram."

"Bless you. Gabrielle, she's taken her horse, for Zeus' sake! I don't think you fully grasp what's going on here!"

The bard drew back, folding her arms over her chest. "Why don't you tell me?"

Eleas grit her teeth, fighting her desire to grab the young woman and shake some sense into her. "Callisto must be held responsible for her crimes, but it's obvious the woman is mad. Once she killed Xena, she had to find something to fill that void..." Her voice dropped to a horrified whisper. "Don't you see? She is trying to become Xena! Even if you're not trying to replace Xena, she is!"

Gabrielle merely looked at the adjudicator with such deadly calm that the other woman stepped back. She was about to reply when she cocked her head, listening intently.

"They're here," she whispered, grabbing Eleas by the arm, pulling her toward the window. Bright red curls stood out as an obviously worried Meridus followed closely behind the others; Xena was leading the way, not bothering to protect her back from her assassin.

Terriea turned around with a belligerent glare, hands on her hips. She stood an inch taller than Callisto and was more solid than bulky, dressed in a plain brown tunic and pants that concealed her budding figure, auburn hair tied back in a severe ponytail.

"So." Terriea folded her arms as the other woman carefully regarded her. "Talk."

Xena glanced at Meridus before replying.

"Why do you want to kill me?"

The glare never wavered. "You killed my family."
Xena bowed her head. "You saw it happen?"

Eleas drew in a hissing breath, and Gabrielle squeezed her hand in warning and reassurance.

"I didn't need to!" Terriea spat, wrestling down her fury. "I heard it all from where I was hiding, and I don't care if it was you or one of your men. You're the one who's going to die."

Xena nodded, as if this was only right and proper. "You're still young. You look strong...healthy. Got your whole life ahead of you." She shook her head. "Killing me won't bring them back."

"You think I'm a fool?" Terriea chuckled bitterly. "Nothing will bring them back...or stop the nightmares." She unfolded her arms, fingers twitching with desire. "The only thing that's kept me alive is the thought of you dying. Begging for mercy, like they begged you --"

"Stop it!" Meridus pleaded, lowering her voice as the girl's startled eyes momentarily flickered to her. "You told me you could --"

"Because I thought I'd never see her again!" Terriea shouted, controlling her rage with a supreme effort. "You think I'll let her go after getting this close? Let her walk around smiling and laughing while they rot in the ground?" She shook her head vehemently. "I'll join them first!"

"Terriea." Callisto stood unmoving, hands at her sides. "I know this won't mean anything. But the woman who killed your family is dead."

Gabrielle stiffened. The adjudicator never noticed, eyes glued to the scene in front of them.

"I won't fight you." The warrior spread her hands open before her. "And I won't let you destroy yourself."

Terriea spat at her feet, eyes blazing as she stepped forward. Meridus shouted, and Gabrielle felt fingers dig deep in her wrist.

Callisto never moved as she deflected the flurry of strikes, suddenly flinging her hands apart. Terriea staggered back, arms flailing; regaining her balance, settling into a fighting stance.

"Don't!" Meridus pleaded, echoing Gabrielle's own thoughts. Terriea stared hungrily, hands curled into loose fists.

"I know you're angry." The warrior didn't even sound winded, and this seemed to infuriate her opponent all the more. "But it's not just me you're angry at. And you're not just angry."

Terriea let out a low growl, crouching lower, sending lightning-quick jabs at her opponent's face. Again the warrior didn't flinch, waiting for the real attack which came when Terriea launched a kick at her head. She pulled back just far enough to avoid it, grabbing the girl's ankle in both hands as she straightened, extending the leg.

"You're angry at your family, because they left you."

Terriea swung her arms desperately, unable to connect; Callisto twisted her ankle and gave a light shove that sent her opponent sprawling in the dirt. The girl scrambled to her feet with a snarl, wiping dust from her face.

Meridus stared at the combatants, frozen with uncertainty. The adjudicator's grip on Gabrielle's hand was almost as painful as Xena's had been, and the bard returned the pressure, thankful at least that it wasn't the same hand.
With a blood-curdling yell, Terriea sent three blows into Callisto's stomach in rapid succession. Gabrielle winced but the warrior made no attempt to block or dodge, eyebrows knitting as her body absorbed the full force of the impact. The girl drew back and spun, putting her entire body behind the next blow, but Callisto turned slightly; pulling the oncoming fist, using the momentum to send her opponent hurtling over an outstretched leg and rolling in the dirt. She came to her feet, breathing heavily, baring her teeth in a snarl.

"And you're sad for your family, because you loved them."

Terriea screamed as she charged again, and Callisto took a step back before planting her rear foot firmly, deflecting another volley of punches. Both hands shot out, grabbing onto her attacker's forearms, twisting cruelly upward. The girl let out a wordless howl, trying another kick that Callisto casually blocked with a lifted leg; the warrior's expression curiously gentle as she twisted further and Terriea collapsed to her knees with an agonized cry.

Callisto knelt in front of the now-sobbing girl, slowly relinquishing her grasp.

"And you're sad for yourself."

Meridus was at her side, glancing uncertainly at the other woman as she took Terriea in her arms; holding the girl to her chest for a long moment, stroking her hair as she and Callisto silently regarded one another.

Eleas turned away from the window, sinking to the floor with her back to the wall as she drew a pained and trembling breath. Gabrielle had known what would happen, and even through her shame, she couldn't shake the thought that her earlier analysis had not been completely in error. Something was desperately, fundamentally wrong; and if she didn't solve the puzzle, she was sure she would not have the strength to carry out her task.

"So," came Gabrielle's casual inquiry. Eleas blinked away tears, but the bard wasn't even looking at her, still staring out the window.

"Feel like watching the big game?"
Games People Play

Chapter Summary

Chicks kick ass and take names. Music soothes a savage beast, but the mirth of song and dance causes much confusion. Major revelations are had.

The introduction of a new kind of music must be shunned as imperiling the whole state, for styles of music are never disturbed without affecting the most important political institutions...The new style, gradually gaining a lodgement, quietly insinuates itself into manners and customs, and from it...goes on to attack laws and constitutions, displaying the utmost impudence, until it ends by overturning everything.

Plato, _Republic_, 370 B.C.

Now the sounds of big bells, resounding drums, harps, and pipes, are produced. It is no pleasure for the great lords to play and listen alone. They must enjoy it either with the common people or with the rulers. If with the rulers, it will cause them to neglect their attention to government. If with the common people, it will cause them to neglect their work...[therefore]...to engage in music is wrong.

Mo Tzu

Boomtime

The day dawned fresh and exciting as the ones before it, but by mid-afternoon the skies were cold and grey, promising storms that never materialized. Most citizens refused to let the weather dampen their spirits, going about their routine with an extra layer of clothing, an added briskness to their step. Merchants did livelier business, bolstered by the infectious undercurrent of excitement, while everyone from commoner to noble continued to mingle and interact in a thousand unforeseen ways, encouraged by and encouraging the hundreds of rumors running rampant throughout the community. Countless debates ranged from lively and thoughtful to hot-tempered and physical, and whatever opinions were expressed regarding the political stability of the monarchy or the mental stability of its current head, it was agreed that the afternoon's promised game was not to be missed; Draco's men were favored by a great margin, but a surprising number of the shrewd or mad staked money, goods and services, even their reputations on the distaff team. And all the while the slow influx of the curious, hopeful and desperate alike never ceased: A half legion of Roman centurions fleeing their own rulers; the determined few who somehow managed to slip through Mineus's borders; oceans of humanity, forced inward on all sides by the tightening noose of the surrounding warlords and their forces.

So it was in this atmosphere of anticipation and apprehension that the hour of the game approached, and the size and influence of Treus continued to swell with each passing candlemark.

"What's going on?" Solan tried in vain to peer over the taller adults. The number of vendors patrolling the area seemed to have doubled since yesterday, and the air was filled with cries touting
fresh roasted nuts, fine wine and more.

Lilla shrugged.

"Just some silly game." She'd seen the commotion from an upstairs window; a competition apparently centered around throwing a ball back and forth while running into one another at high speed, with some secondary emphasis placed on maneuvering it into nets at either end of the playing field. Personally, she felt the number of spectators was due more to the skimpy uniforms worn by the female players, and the rapt attention being lavished upon them by the mostly male audience irritated her a way she couldn't quite pin down. More than a few women were also eyeing the players, male and female alike, with undisguised appreciation, and Lilla wondered how much of this supposed competition was merely for the benefit of lustful onlookers.

"I thought I saw them." Solan abandoned his attempt to watch over the heads of the crowd. An abrupt roar of approval heralded a goal or spectacular injury, and Lilla quickly pulled her companion back in an effort to keep him from being trampled. He shrugged her arm away, brushing sandy hair from his eyes.

"I want to see what's going on," he insisted. A note of curiosity crept into his voice. "Don't you?"

Lilla groaned in exasperation. "Didn't yesterday teach you anything? The less we know about what's going on, the better." She lowered her voice as she glanced around, but the crowd's attention was focused on the field of battle, the spectacle taking place upon it.

"Attalos said we could stay with him. We should get out of here and let Gabrielle handle things. She's --" Lilla faltered. "She can handle it. I mean -- she's an Amazon, and a princess..."

Solan's jaw set in a stubborn line.

"We can help her," he quietly insisted. "And we're safer around people who know how to take care of themselves."

"But we can't expect them to take care of us!" Lilla met his obstinate glare with a calmness suited to her advanced age. "We'll only be in the way. There's too much going on. It's not safe for people like us --"

Solan crossed his arms. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The crowd parted, and Lilla's attention was abruptly diverted by the sight a scowling, dark-skinned warrior on the far side of the field. Solan saw a flicker of frightened recognition on her face, and the roaring observers once more closed ranks, obscuring the figure Gabrielle and Eleas appeared beside them. The bard smiled warmly.

"We've been looking for you."

Eleas nodded stiffly in greeting. Solan took in the bard's improved color and demeanor, wondering if Callisto had told her of their conversation last night.

"We talk about a lot of things..."

"Where's Callisto?"

Lilla and Eleas stared, apparently undeceived by his innocent tone. Gabrielle appeared to take it in stride.
"She's the referee." The bard pointed over the heads of the crowd with her staff, unable to keep a hint of pride from her voice.

His eyes shone with enthusiasm, which suddenly diminished. "What about my uncle? Was he talking about leaving?"

"I don't think so." Gabrielle smiled mysteriously, but declined to elaborate. "See that guard tower? Go in the door at the bottom, all the way up, then take the crosswalk over and down. Much better view from over there."

Lilla mistrustfully eyed the enormous stone towers. "Won't the guards be angry if they find us wandering through?"

The bard gave her sister's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Trust me, they're used to it. People treat the palace like a second home. And Diana opens up more every day. The hospice, the library..." Her eyes shone with admiration and Eleas shook her head, mumbling something under her breath.

"Just go on over and you'll see them. Oh, tell Ephiny that Kaleipus is back from town?" Behind them, a tall Amazon pricked up her ears, keeping her back to the other women as she gave dark-skinned companion a furtive nudge; Eleas barely had time to hold onto her glasses before the bard had grabbed her and plunged into the crowd.

Lilla turned to an expectant Solan with a compliant smile, sighing. It was indeed frustrating, trying to protect someone; particularly when they were trying to do the same for you.

Chilapa stared after the departing women. That blonde with the staff looked familiar somehow, but she couldn't quite place it. Beside her, Nichola gave a rare smile.

"Keep your eyes peeled," the older Amazon murmured. "If the centaur chief shows up, Velasca will want to know everything."

Lilla was expecting trouble, but the guards they encountered either nodded amiably or ignored them completely. Halfway across Solan insisted on stopping to observe the courtyard, and she reluctantly allowed herself to be drawn to the ledge.

She had to admit it was an impressive sight even with an overcast sky and no bright, cheerful sun. A number of arcane marks were inscribed at various points to delineate or affirm something or other, and from this height the field could be seen at a glance, the individual players small enough to be enclosed entirely in one hand. The women were easily distinguished by the arresting red and black motif to their uniforms, while the men looked rather uncomfortable without their armor, some of them wearing only grimy, tattered suits of underwear of various hues. Each carried a long staff with a net fixed to one end, which was wielded alternately and often simultaneously as a weapon and a means of transporting the ball. One member of each team was mounted, in concession to traditional rules of polo engagement; the woman in this position appeared less experienced than her male counterpart, who was finding it more profitable (and from the look on his face, more amusing) to harass her and her animal than to directly assist his teammates.

Currently the men were advancing in two sections, forcing the women to defend against both until they could determine which held the ball and concentrate their attack. Lilla realized there was no way she'd have been able see and comprehend what they were doing from the ground, even with an unobstructed view from the sidelines, and marveled at how easy it was to see the big picture from a different angle. There were even more women in the audience than she'd initially observed, and she thought she recognized more than a few of them as Amazons.
Solan's eye roamed across the edges of the field, quickly locating Callisto sitting between two men on a bench, with more on either side to seat the rest of each team. The one to her left was a portly, bearded fellow in purplish robes, the other a decidedly menacing individual with dark skin and a full set of armor with feathered helmet; and the latter was currently yelling at his men, urging them on to greater efforts in between excoriating them for failing to utterly crush their opponents. What was the matter with them, he was shouting, that a bunch of women were such fierce competition?

Callisto leaned over and whispered something that made the warlord burst out laughing, resulting in the other man sending a nervous glance at them as he continued to offer exhortations of his own. Attalos was contributing his own cheers to the rest of the women's team, and Solan turned to point out to Lilla their friend's location. He found her staring intently at Callisto, or so he thought until she spoke.

"Who --" She licked her lips nervously. "Who's that man?"

"Which one?" Solan was puzzled enough, but Lilla had already picked up her skirts and resumed travel, an added quickness to her stride.

He had to run to catch up, almost running into her from behind. The iron resolution of Lilla's jawline made the resemblance to her sister even more pronounced, and this prompted a startling mental image of her in Amazon leathers, which Solan quickly and guiltily suppressed.

"What's wrong?"

"A lot of things," she grimly replied as they descended the far stairs, not deigning to elaborate. Another roar came from outside, swelling painfully in their ears as they exited the base of the tower, a horde of bodies thundering by mere inches away; abruptly dying to a mixture of groans and scattered cheers as one of the men stumbled from the net wearing a dazed grin, triumphantly holding something overhead.

The men on the sidelines had nothing but hostile glares as they passed, and Lilla nervously sought out Solan's hand again. Attalos was waving at them from the other bench as they hurried past the central benches, trying not to obscure anyone's view.

"Foul!" Callisto called as she stood up, startling them into running faster. A chorus of protest rose from the men.

"Hello, you two!" There was a distinct flush to Attalos's features, Lilla thought uncharitably, explained easily by his being surrounded by women. Granted, they weren't all exactly spring chickens; most were bruised, bleeding or both, every last one covered in sweat and filth, but none of this distracted from the fierce determination in their eyes, the healthy grins sported by more than a few. She could see Solan eyeing them warily, with something that wasn't quite desire.

"Stalemate," Attalos continued, hoarse and breathless from cheering. "Nine apiece, next goal takes it! Gods, I wish Attalan was here...you know, I should send a message so she doesn't --"

"Attalos." She took the philosopher by the sleeve and drew him aside. "That man on the other side of Callisto -- the warrior. Do you know his name?"

"Let me see. I know it began with a delta...Doofus, Darfus..." He frowned as he ticked names off on his fingers, and her own itched to simply throttle the information out of him; suddenly they snapped. "Draco! Yes, that was it --"

His triumph faded to confusion and he opened his mouth, faltering as she turned pale. Solan was at
her side in an instant, lines of concern etched in his face.

"Lilla, what is it? Please tell me what's wrong..."

"That was no foul!" a voice yelled from the field.

"What else would you call it?" Callisto replied with dry amusement. "You're supposed to get the polo ball in the net. Dungballs don't count."

A wave of laughter emerged from the crowd, with scattered yells of approval and off-color attempts at wit.

"Hi, guys!" came a bright, cheerful voice, and they turned to see Gabrielle advancing toward them, still pulling the hapless Eleas along behind her. The adjudicator's eyes were drawn almost unwillingly to the women of the team, who returned her nervous gaze with open curiosity.

"Solan, have you met the team? Some of them have sons and daughters about your age."

"Gabrielle," Lilla frantically hissed. "That warlord's the one who attacked Potadeia...the one who killed Mother and Father! What are we going to do?"

The bard puffed out her cheeks, relinquishing the adjudicator's hand in exchange for her sister's.

"We're going to wait for them to finish the game."

"What?" Lilla's initial shock quickly became outrage, earning another dark glare from Eleas.

"Hi, guys!" The broad smile on Joxer's face was readily explained by the presence of Meg at his side, still clutching his hand as if to prevent his escape. Diana was walking beside them, more distinguishable than before in an elaborate formal gown and tiara.

"Gab, you were always the one who told me how important this stuff was!" Lilla was fighting to keep her voice low, staring at her sister as though she were a complete stranger. "Always talking about justice, and doing the right thing, and...that man burned our village and killed our parents! We can't let him get away with it!"

"Wait a minute --" Solan frowned in attempted recollection. "You said you didn't actually see Draco himself --"

"I didn't need to!" Lilla turned her outrage upon him, secretly glad for the excuse. "Everyone knows it was his army!"

Solan didn't look away. "What if everyone's wrong?"

Eleas seemed on the verge of injecting herself into the discussion, when Attalos spoke with quiet authority.

"You know, Lilla, killing one person, or two...or even more, usually doesn't change the world. It's really a trivial act compared to the thousands who've died to satisfy the appetites of others...because they had the wrong ideas, the wrong language, the wrong skin color...or just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time." He scratched his chin as he regarded the two sisters. "You don't want to become what you hate, or the cycle never ends. And your enemy wins."

Gabrielle was nodding in agreement as he continued, caught up in the flow of his own narrative. "One of the most powerful ways to fight is with ideas. It doesn't seem like much, I'll admit." A
deprecating chuckle. "After all, they just sit there waiting for someone with the knowledge to read them, or the courage to discuss them. But think of it!" His eyes shone. "Writing can endure far longer than the life of any one person. You can kill a man in the blink of an eye with a sword, while it may take years to kill him with an idea. But with enough people behind it, an idea can topple the mightiest of kingdoms almost overnight."

A cynical bark greeted this, and everyone turned to see Ephiny doubled over on the bench, the blonde woman she'd been talking to obviously sharing her amusement. The Amazon chuckled, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

"What dung heap did you pull that from?"

Attalos grinned, dispelling the serious atmosphere. "Never underestimate the power of an idea. For instance --" He indicated the seated players, most of whom ignored him. "I observe that people with light colored hair are generally of good cheer, those with brown hair sensuous and those with red hair of fiery temper. Are these predetermined traits that are in their very nature, or do we expect such behavior and cause or enhance it through their upbringing and our interactions with them?"

The Amazon's eyes rolled. "With an army of you, I could just put the enemy to sleep. No wonder Gabrielle likes you."

The bard breathed a sigh of relief for the awkward intervention and turned to address her sister's concerns, only to find Lilla's attention drawn elsewhere. Terriea was sitting alone on the ground some distance behind the bench, knees drawn up to her chin, a distant look on her face.

Gabrielle hesitated a moment too long, unable to speak as her sister walked over and sat beside the forlorn, silent figure. The bard felt positive she would only make things worse if she continued to watch, and returned her attention to Attalos.

"Thanks for the save."

He nodded as Eleas followed his gaze, swallowing at the sight of Terriea ignoring the young woman who was trying to engage her in conversation. The adjudicator shook her head, adjusting the eyepieces that kept slipping down the bridge of her nose.

"Gabrielle, if you're hoping to convince me to abandon my sworn duty, you're making a poor job of it."

The bard gave her a thoughtful look.

"Now that you mention it, I've been wondering...no offense, but you don't exactly look like the warrior type. Shouldn't your superiors have sent someone along to help you take people into custody?"

Eleas looked extremely uncomfortable. "We're not warriors. I'm not the only one in the field...there are least a score of us throughout the territories, and twice that many back in Athens. They give us a list, and we're supposed to work with local authorities." She glanced at Diana and swallowed as a vast weight seemed to settle upon her. "To be honest, I don't think they expected anyone to survive after finding Callisto, let alone bring her to justice. Especially someone like me...I've only been out of the academy a little over a season, I haven't even won half the cases I've argued..."

Gabrielle put a sympathetic arm around the other woman's shoulders.

"Want to talk about it?"
Two of Salmoneus's players were harrying the current ballholder into the corner by their own net, jabbing their staves and whirling them about to prevent his making a pass, while the rest of the team ran a defensive pattern, preventing Draco's forces from assisting their comrade. Even without armor the men were having a difficult time keeping up with the women's greater fleetness of foot, many of them sufficiently distracted by the proximity of exposed female flesh to allow their adversaries to dodge or deliver a strike of their own. Ephiny had to acknowledge a grudging admiration; the women were in excellent condition, worked well as a team and adapted quickly. It was also to their credit, she supposed, that they weren't relying solely on their looks to do the job.

Joxer's eyes were fixed on the playing field, and Meg chuckled to see his rapt focus upon the well-muscled players and their ample endowments. She turned to Diana, smiling at the sight of her twin's relaxed good cheer.

"You're lookin' happier."

Diana returned the smile, reaching behind Joxer to squeeze the other woman's hand. "I've just been cooped up in meetings for so long, I think I forgot how to have fun." She cocked her head at Joxer, raising one eyebrow in her best Xena impression. "Though you might want to keep your eye on him."

"I can give you plenty to look at after the game, big guy..." The cook's intimate murmur tickled Joxer's ear, predictably turning his knees to mush. "Which one you like best? 'Sokay, you can tell me..."

"You're too cruel," Diana remonstrated with a grin, returning her gaze to the field. Joxer turned a puzzled look upon the princess.

"You really think Draco's going to leave quietly? If he loses?"

"Our friend doesn't seem too concerned, so I assume she's in control of the situation." Diana's smile had disappeared, but she didn't sound angry as she continued to watch. "And my men are keeping an eye on things. I'm not putting all my eggs in one bask--"

A thud and a muffled scream interrupted her, and a collective gasp echoed on the lips of the crowd. A black-haired woman lay prone on the field, her staff lying nearby, an expression of agony on her face as she clutched her shoulder.

The mounted woman reigned in her skittish steed and turned, uttering a savage yell as she charged the grinning warrior responsible for her companion's condition. Her other teammates were shouting warnings but she only had eyes for her opponent, drawing back her stick in preparation to clout the brains from his skull. Another warrior stepped forward and thrust his stick between the horse's legs as she passed, quickly drawing back as it snapped and sent animal and rider rolling in the dust.

"Foul! Foul, dammit --" Xena finally gave up, vaulting from her seat and running onto the field. All pretense of civilization had been abandoned as the game degenerated into a brawl, and she hurled herself into the fray, thrusting aside woman and man alike, dealing out blows with equal impartiality.

"That's enough!" The momentary chaos seemed to have been averted but she held the glare, waiting for someone to challenge her. "Anyone else moves, and you both lose!"

"You want to pick on dumb animals?" someone yelled from the sidelines. The crowd parted to reveal a trio of centaurs: an older, graying one with an eyepatch, his arm around the comparatively tiny child beside him. Between them was the one who had spoken, a strapping, mature chestnut
with reddish hair. He thumped his bare chest with a fist, baring his teeth as he stared down the no longer smiling mercenary. "Try picking on me, instead!"

"Settle down!" Xena barked. The horse had struggled to all four feet and was wandering around the field with a dazed look. Its rider threw a hate-filled glance at the guilty party before turning to see Callisto kneeling by the fallen player's side, carefully probing her injury.

"What's your name?"

"Aria," came a gasp through gritted teeth. Xena shook her head as she helped the woman sit up.

"Nothing broken, but you've got some serious dislocation. Looks like you'll be sitting the rest of this one out."

"Are you insane?" The woman tried to stand, earning another wince of pain for her trouble. "We only need one more goal --"

"No," sighed the rider who had tried to brain her opponent. "She's right...you could ruin it for life. It's not worth it." She offered a brave smile, trying to make the best of things. "Besides, I think that fall knocked all the sense out of my horse."

Aria was close to tears from pain and emotional fervor, earning loud guffaws from Draco's men which in turn drew black glares from the other team, as well as most of the crowd. Salmoneous had returned to tearing his hair out as Draco clapped in approval, and Xena felt a twinge of anger at the smug grin on his face.

"Hold still," she ordered, jabbing two stiffened fingers into the juncture of neck and shoulder. Aria hardly had time to gape before Callisto had grabbed the deadened limb and reset it with an audible pop, causing onlookers to wince, gasp, and in one case actually faint.

Meridus and one of the other women from the sidelines had arrived with a litter, and Callisto helped them lift her patient onto it before releasing the pinch. Aria bit down on her lip as the pain returned, looking into the eyes of the woman who had healed her; Callisto took her good hand in a reassuring squeeze, and Meridus gave her another unreadable glance as she and her companion bore the injured woman off of the field.

A mocking laugh pierced Salmoneus's ears, and he nearly jumped from his seat when Draco clapped him on the back.

"Why, I believe you've run out of alternates!" The warlord did a good job of sounding astonished, but the poorly concealed grin belied any sympathy on his part. He was about to continue when Callisto's hand descended on his own back, startling him as much as he had Salmoneus.

"Well, Draco...let's look at this rationally." The blonde woman slid her arm around the warlord's shoulders, and he suppressed a shiver as he tried not to look down the front of her armor.

"With an incomplete roster, I suppose you could settle for a forfeit...but I don't think you'd want your reputation to suffer. And you know it would." She clucked her tongue, shaking her head in dismay. "Big, bad warriors can't beat a bunch of girls. Honestly..."

Draco forced himself not to rise to the bait. "The terms were clear. If you have to forfeit, so be it." He shrugged, making light of the matter. "A smart leader doesn't turn down a bloodless victory."

"Ah," Callisto smiled, cocking her head. "But will your men see it that way?"
"Now wait a minute!" Salmoneous interrupted. "With Xena dead, you took on her responsibilities. The honorable thing to do is find someone else to referee, and have you take Aria's place!"

Draco's jaw dropped as Callisto's arm fell from his shoulders.

"Why?" Oceans of implication spilled forth from the single syllable. Salmoneus trembled, but managed to meet her gaze.

"Um...B-because if she were here, it's what I'd ask her to do..."

"And if she were here," Draco interjected angrily, "I'd say no way in Tartarus. You must be mad, to think I'd go along with that!"

"Oh?" The merchant's instincts rose to the challenge. "Even if we let you in as an extra man?"

"No!"

Salmoneus snapped his fingers. "What if we let her count for three players? We've got three out of commission right now, it'd be perfect --"

"What part of no don't you understand?" the warlord shouted. "We had an agreement! I thought you business types understood that! You can't go changing the damned thing just because it's suddenly inconvenient!"

"You picked a fine time to start worrying about ethics." Xena's chuckle was ripe with bitterness. "Pity it wasn't in time to save your victims."

"Talk about character assassination," Draco snarled, his eyes narrowing. "You haven't got a leg to stand on and you know it. Now I pledged an oath, by Ares, and that means something to me even if it means nothing to this pig --"

"Like you said," Callisto interjected, deceptively mild. "Keep a civil tongue in your head, or someone might --"

"All right, you leave me no choice." Salmoneous's voice held real desperation. "Triple or nothing!"

"Now just a minute!" Gabrielle had finally located the source of the trouble and predictably thrown herself into the fray. "What happened to the goodness of your heart, and feeding the families of these hard-working women?"

"Has anyone ever told you, you are way too quick to judge?" The merchant sounded honestly hurt. "We bet on ourselves with the extra profits whenever we can afford it. It's a perfectly respectable business practice!"

"Triple, you say?" Draco thoughtfully stroked his chin, an avuncular gleam in his eye. "That might almost be worth the risk..."

Gabrielle shook her staff in the merchant's face. "I can't believe you're even suggesting it! How are you going to face your team with a clear conscience if you lose all their money?"

"He's right about one thing," Callisto observed, surveying the increasingly restless crowd. "If we don't get some action going, we can kiss those extra dinars goodbye." She turned a sly smile upon Draco.

"Gotta admit, the two of us would be a real crowd-pleaser. You get out of that armor, show a little
chest, I'll even wear one of those stupid uniforms."

"Don't tempt me, woman!" the warlord growled. Callisto's smile grew larger as she continued.

"Gabrielle, think you and Salmoneus can come up with a little razzle dazzle? Work the crowd into more of a frenzy?"

The merchant's eyes lit up, and the warrior wryly noted that Gabrielle was also showing definite signs of interest. Draco drew a deep breath, striving for patience.

"You're still short another player. Not to mention a horse!"

"You! Big Red!" The startled centaur looked over at them, and Xena nodded emphatically. "Yeah, you. Ever play this kind of game?"

Daelus looked taken aback. "Oh, no. I mean...I couldn't possibly --"

"Hah!" sneered the warrior who had tripped the horse. "Ain't so hot, are ya, pretty boy?"

The centaur's lip curled, and Xena suppressed a grin. But Draco still wasn't done.

"And where would you possibly find a new referee we could agree on?"

"Don't worry." She gazed wearily off to the sidelines, wondering if this day would ever end. "I think you'll be pleased with my choice."

Xena leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, trying to ignore the noise and cheering. The damned uniform exposed more skin than Callisto's old armor, but her distaste was solely due to the rough bits that chafed, and she couldn't very well have expected a perfect fit with no forewarning. At least all the attention was being directed appropriately; she'd only gotten the ball to the right person, and Euphimedes needed the praise a deal more: Far from her first game winning goal, the stunned expression on the woman's face hinted it might be her first ever. Salmoneus was vigorously protecting his new star's interests by settling bets as quickly as possible, and the losers were thankfully taking Draco's example of gracious sportsmanship to heart by paying up and taking their leave without a fuss.

_Damn well better not make trouble_, she thought fuzzily. They'd gotten their dinar's worth, that was for sure.

"Callisto?"

She opened her eyes to find Meridus standing over her, holding out a skin of water. The warrior regarded it blankly for a moment before accepting the offering, upending it over her head and swallowing what found its way to her mouth.

She handed the skin back, not bothering to wipe her face. "Thanks."

"Thank you," Meridus said seriously. She took a seat next to the warrior, ignoring the sharp glance thrown at her as she watched the assembled throng. Thankfully she didn't continue, and Xena was nearly convinced of her safety when she spotted Salmoneus running up, grinning from ear to ear, with Gabrielle and Solan trailing behind at a more reasonable pace.

"That was fantastic!" the merchant cried, practically dancing with glee. "You had them eating out of your hand! Thank you, Xe--" He let out a loud gasp that turned to a high-pitched squeak.
"What he meant to say," Gabrielle interjected, offering a smile as she leaned heavily on her staff, "was that Xena would have been proud of you." She eased up as the merchant bit his lip.

"Yeah," Solan offered shyly. "Everyone was really good out there...but you were great! That flip you did, and the way you took that one guy down..."

"Don't you think it was more impressive the way she handled a delicate situation without resorting to violence?" Gabrielle's interruption sounded forced, and Solan frowned, sensing something amiss.

Xena shut her eyes and leaned back against the wall, hoping everyone would take the hint and leave. When she opened them again, they had.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

Except one, she thought, responding with a baleful eye which completely failed in its mission to intimidate. Suddenly she itched to be out of the overly adorable costume and back in some sensible clothes; even that damned dress looked pretty comfortable right now.

"Guess I know why you're so good with kids." Meridus sounded completely at ease. "You're practically one yourself."

Xena felt herself turning as crimson as Euphimedes, now being hoisted onto the shoulders of her teammates by the enthusiastic crowd. "I'm older than I look."

"Seriously, now." The redhead sounded friendly, if less sympathetic. "That boy was trying so hard. It wouldn't have killed you to be nice."

The warrior leaned back against the cool stone, her voice still calm rather than irritated. "If I want a lecture, I'll ask Gabrielle."

"Yes...Gabrielle." Meridus scratched her head thoughtfully. "If she were in front of you right now, and you had only a few moments to live...what would you tell her?"

"What kind of question is that?" Xena was intrigued despite herself, and turned her head to stare at her interrogator: A young woman of medium height and generous figure, about Gabrielle's age and with a few more lines in her face. Ringlets of bright red hair fell about her shoulders in curls tighter than Ephiny's, complementing the spattering of freckles about the nose and eyes; her eyes a shocking emerald, as vivid in their own way as the flaming hair, with a mixture of humor and empathy she hadn't seen since Lao Ma.

"Terriea's been like my own daughter," Meridus said softly. "The elders in my village put her with friends of mine, after she lost her family, but she wouldn't have anything to do with them. She came to me every night when she woke up crying, and I'd sing to her until she fell asleep. So when I left with Salmoneous, she wasn't about to let me go alone." A light shrug. "Even if she'll never admit it, you did something for her that I never could, and it wasn't just giving her some real responsibility. I don't know what it was...but I wanted to thank you."

"You did," came the gruff response. Meridus smiled, as if she'd expected no less.

"And then I thought, what good would that do?" A brief chuckle. "So now I want to do something for you."

A stab of fear entered Xena's heart that so closely resembled joy, she was unable to tell the difference.
"Everyone has a song to sing, Callisto." Meridus reached out and took her hand, stroking painfully stiff tendons with a calloused thumb. "Sometimes we just need help finding the words."

Diana's private chambers were made available for the victory celebration when Meg insisted that while friends were welcome in her kitchen, the addition of fourteen strange women was not, especially with most of them in various states of injury. The princess found her father in the royal garden sitting by the fountain, and including him in the festivities proved as enjoyable for the distaff in attendance as it did for the aged monarch, who immediately ingratiated himself with the oldest player by having known her uncle's wife for some years prior to her marriage. The establishment of this tenuous familial connection having eased the few remaining tensions among the participants, a still-blushing Euphimedes was given the head of the table at Lias' insistence; this resulted in gentle teasing from the other players, with even Terriea relaxing sufficiently to join in, and by the time the dinner courses arrived everyone had talked up a royal appetite indeed.

The team had helped to clear away dishes afterward, which helped to mollify Meg somewhat, and a half dozen women were currently setting up musical instruments in the middle of the room for an impromptu performance. "Strictly amateur," Salmoneus had assured everyone, causing a number of the players to pelt him with their remaining bread.

"Where do you think she is?"

"Ephiny, I think you've asked me that a hundred times since we came inside." The bard waved across the room to Diana. "If I know her, the last thing she wants after something like that is to be around people."

"Sort of like Xena."

"Yeah."

"Hey you two, why the glum faces?" A jovial Salmoneus thrust glasses of wine into their hands, oblivious to the bard's distaste. Ephiny tossed back most of her own in one swallow, casting a hopeful eye on the bard's cup.

"Sorry." Gabrielle attempted another smile but failed. "Guess I'm just not in a real party mood."

The merchant gave a sympathetic nod. "Well, I think...um...Callisto's feeling better, anyway."

Ephiny's eyes narrowed. "What makes you say that?"

"Gods, Ephiny, will you lighten up a little?" Gabrielle hoped it hadn't been a mistake to leave the staff in her room, but given her hairtrigger responses of late, she didn't want anyone suffering the effects if she couldn't control herself. She turned to Salmoneus, trying not to sound anxious. "Where is she?"

The merchant tactfully expressed his relief by refilling Ephiny's glass. "With Meridus, in one of the conference rooms. They weren't laughing and telling jokes, but they were working pretty hard on something. And they didn't look upset --"

"Huh." The Amazon took another swallow, forcing herself to slow down. The wine was definitely the kind to be savored; powerfully good stuff, with a subtle flavor and hearty afterburn that threatened to bring water to her eyes. The six musicians were tuning their instruments, the subtle strains of almost-music mingling with the taste of the wine in a bittersweet memory of another party that now seemed long ago and far away: Eponin had whipped up some incredible dessert out of berries, surprising nearly everyone with her hidden talent, and Solari beat all comers in darts
before passing out from too much ale...

"Ephiny?"

She blinked, realizing that Salmoneus had thankfully taken his leave. Gabrielle was giving her that concerned look again.

"Nothing," she shrugged, with a diffident smile. "You know...Amazons."

It brought the hoped-for smile, but someone else overheard as well. The blonde woman she'd spoken with during the game had turned around, her conversation forgotten as her eyes lit up.

"I knew I recognized those leathers!" the woman exclaimed. "No wonder you were asking about the Amazons near Icacia! Why didn't you say so?"

Ephiny had the good grace to look embarrassed. "It's not like I hide it, but I don't go out of my way to advertise. We're not real popular."

Diana took a hefty slug of wine, face going slightly pale as she recalled the unexpected new delegation in town. At least the Amazons hadn't bothered to attend the party; if they came to the castle she might have to warn Kaleipus, not to mention Ephiny and Gabrielle. Now certainly wasn't the time.

"Don't be ridiculous!" the blonde scoffed, laying an affectionate hand on the other woman's arm. Like most of her teammates, she'd also changed from her uniform to a simple dress and blouse, the variegated shades of red nicely accenting her hair. "Everyone I know respects your people, even most of the men. You make us all proud to be Greeks!"

"We're not Greek," Ephiny gruffly replied. "We're Amazon. That's the point." But Gabrielle noticed that she didn't remove the blonde's hand. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Oh!" The woman put a hand to her mouth. "Gods, I'm sorry, you must think I'm awfully stupid...I'm Genipher. My niece Elena, she always wanted to join the Amazons. Will you tell me more about them? Please?"

"What's to tell?" Ephiny laughed ruefully, feigning disinterest for protocol's sake. Cute she might be, but the blonde's personality wasn't her type.

"As if you know what your type is!" "Bunch of petty, vicious, backstabbing --"

"Even if they were," Gabrielle calmly interjected. "we're all still Amazons. And we should try to settle our differences. You said yourself, not all of them were like that."

"Even if they were," Gabrielle calmly interjected. "we're all still Amazons. And we should try to settle our differences. You said yourself, not all of them were like that."

"I should hope not," Genipher smiled. "Gods know I've felt that way about my 'mates often enough. Well as we get along, I'd hate to think I'd ever agree with them on everything!"

"It's not just that." Ephiny found herself warming to the woman's unexpected charm and good sense. "Even when things are going well...just seems that's when they go out of their way to find something little and blow it all sky high. Like the children," she continued, escaping Genipher's hand by waving her own for emphasis. "Like it or not, unless the gods get involved, we need men to have them. So the women who want children get into fights with those who don't, and those that think we shouldn't have anything to do with men under any circumstances kick up a fuss about depending on them, the young hotheads and the cranky old ones say Artemis has abandoned us, and it all...just turns into a big mess," she finished lamely.

"I know whatcha mean," Meg sighed, startling everyone else into noticing her presence. "Mad as I
get sometimes at that boy...I'm glad it works at all, or nobody'd ever have 'em at all. And then where'd we be?" Behind her, Diana nodded in support.

"And even if we could have children without men," Genipher added, "doesn't it make more sense for us to work together and learn from each other, instead of being enemies?"

Ephiny nodded, a little bemused by the woman's cosmopolitan outlook. An abrupt poke in the ribs reminded her of Gabrielle's presence.

"Hey." The bard's tone was gently teasing, a welcome relief from the constant stress she'd been unable to completely conceal. "So what else is wrong?"

She swirled the wine around in her glass, feeling her tongue and thoughts roll with it. "Whenever Phantes and I talked about children..." A brief flicker of sorrow, almost a soothing familiarity with the passing of years; continuously spreading ripples that never completely faded as her love encompassed that pain, enfolding it within.

"We argued about names, where we wanted to raise them, what they might become...but the one thing we always agreed on? We wanted a son and a daughter."

Meg's eyes darkened, anger easily outmeasuring the hurt. Every midwife for leagues around had assured her she could never have even one child, and this chick whined about not being able to have a second? Leave it to an Amazon to think she could have it all...An' he's a centaur, she remembered, anger giving way to curiosity. That had to have thrown her 'sisters' for a loop!

Ephiny stared into her wineglass. "I don't know if I could ever love another man the way I loved Phantes. And I can't just use a man and forget him, like..." The faintest blush appeared. "Like most of the Amazons. I want someone who'll at least try to be a father to Xenan, as well as his own child."

"That's right -- you said you had a son." Genipher looked around the room, trying unsuccessfully to locate Xenan. "Where is he?"

"In the stables." Ephiny sounded uncomfortable again. "He hasn't exactly had a lot of exposure to other centaurs. I told Kaleipus they were welcome at dinner, the royal family themselves invited everyone...and then I remember, how in Tartarus are they supposed to get up those stairs?"

"That's a shame." Genipher seemed genuinely sympathetic. "Are there any other children his age? Around here?"

"Some," Ephiny acknowledged. "He's really more comfortable by himself...or around women." She shook her head. "I'm just glad he and Kaleipus get along."

Genipher's eyebrows formed a puzzled knot. "I thought the Amazons only took women for lifemates?"

"Usually," Ephiny replied with a bland, casual air. "Not necessarily." Chew on that, Miss Open Minded!

"What's wrong with women?" Meg inquired, somewhat defiantly, hands on her hips. Gabrielle found herself distracted from the rising heat in her cheeks by the almost imperceptible blushes that appeared on the faces of Solan and Attalos, who had arrived to the discussion at some indeterminate point.
Ephiny gave a wry chuckle.

"Nothing...everything. You want a list?" The Amazon offered a resigned grin. "She'd have to be pretty special, that's for sure!"

The small crowd's rapt attention shifted from her, and a flurry of murmurs arose as Meridus and Callisto entered the room, faces illuminated by the numerous dimly flickering candles. The latter had rid herself of the revealing uniform and returned to the loose-fitting dark green shirt and leather pants, with a worn but relatively clean pair of boots; without sword or scabbard, though the chakram still hung at her waist. Her hair had been brushed and partially tied back at the top, with the rest cascading about her shoulders, leaving her delicate features startlingly exposed and vulnerable.

Meridus nudged Xena in the small of the back, causing the warrior to nearly lose her balance, as well as the carefully crafted mask of neutrality. She slowly approached the seated musicians, looking about the room and taking in the legion of expressions both fair and foul. Mostly fair, she had to admit. Lias rose on somewhat unsteady legs to raise his glass and she bowed deeply, his courtesy slightly easing her discomfort.

"Good evening, Xena." The king seemed oblivious to everyone else's sudden reactions, his eyes twinkling with the enjoyment of food, festivities and friends. "I understand you're to provide part of the evening's entertainment?" Diana and Gabrielle began whispering to those nearby, who in turn passed along the recent history of illness as the explanation for this odd behavior.

Xena cleared her throat with some trepidation.

"Yes, your majesty --" A blush. "Pardon me. Lias." The king wagged a friendly warning finger and the warrior gathered her composure, taking her seat among the musicians as Meridus handed out the neatly copied sheets. She saw everyone and no one as she gazed into the crowd: Terriea in the back row wearing her pain like an open wound, Lilla sitting next to her, now holding the girl's hand. Gabrielle was at the center of a small cluster of women, both she and Ephiny watching like hawks.

"It's okay," Meridus whispered, giving her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Just forget about everyone else. It's the music that matters."

The redhead nodded to her teammates as she made her way to the back of the room and took a seat by Terriea, not looking particularly surprised when the girl pointedly ignored her. Xena swallowed and closed her eyes, the roaring silence in her mind threatening to drown out the shifting of bodies, the faint call of an owl from the forest outside.

The first hesitant strains arose from behind her, echoing the deceptively simple melody, and she felt a surge of gratitude for these young women who could so effortlessly reproduce the sounds in her head with no rehearsal, only the fragile bond of their victory to unite them. Her voice lifted to join the slow, haunting strings; it was somewhat higher, as she'd predicted, a clear soprano with a dusky undercurrent and a piquant, bitter sweetness.

\[
\text{In a little while} \\
\text{I'll be gone} \\
\text{Guess I stayed in this town too long} \\
\text{I came when I was young} \\
\text{and unafraid} \\
\text{But I never should have stayed}
\]

A darker tone resounded from below the higher ones, the audience inadvertently shivering at the chilling loneliness expressed in those sparse notes. Xena's hands were clasped together, resting on
her knees, eyes closed as she lifted her head slightly.

Dreams of city lights
that won't come true
They block the stars that I once knew
By fame and mystery
I was bribed
from the stars and the open sky

The melody shifted and she went with it effortlessly, the rising tone becoming a question.

Home
where it all began
Going home
Home
Will it be the same
Going home

A lump rose in Gabrielle's throat as a plaintive wail came from one of the wind instruments, Xena's voice joining with it as one for the all too brief diversion, mournful melody rising above the distant strings. Returning they descended and separated, wordless sounds fading into nothingness, gathering breath.

Home
is the place we end
Home
Home...
where it all began
Going home...

Where should I turn
Should I go?
Once I used to know
Maybe with you
I'll find the way
But I know that I can't stay
I know that I can't stay.

The final notes faded into the air as Xena opened her eyes, anxiety fading as a perfect calm settled over her. Now would come more accusations, cries of manipulation, more anger and tears. For this moment, there was nothing that mattered more than the look of pain and love on Gabrielle's face; and the feeling that for once, she had found something worthy to return her friend's gift.

Lias was the first to stand, the rest of the room joining him in fierce applause. The musicians rose as one to bow, one of the older women casually grabbing a startled Xena by the arm and hauling her to her feet. Salmoneus was leading the rest of the men, Solan standing on one of the benches next to them as he joined in the enthusiastic clapping; Gabrielle adding her own, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Xena's vision blurred and suddenly the musicians were surrounding her, burying her in a crushingly intimate mass. Some whispered to her, others silently communicating through touch with a fierce love that was desperate in its desire to be heard and felt. She returned the gesture with awkward fervor as the thunderous approval continued; slowly dying as the embrace ended, normal conversation returning to the room with an almost palpable sense of relief.

Meridus appeared from the shadows, clapping loudly to gain the band's attention.

"All right, you lot," she called out. "Enough maudling. Give me something to dance to!"

The women hastily sprang to their chairs, grinning and bantering as they began fiddling with their instruments again, the strings noodling and playing against each other as they began searching for
some elusive groove. One of the drummers had acquired some silverware from the table and was teasing out a staccato series of clashing sounds from a sword, a nearby wineglass and anything else within reach of her long arms, while the other idly rolled her fingers across the surface of an enormous drum taller than herself, producing a surprisingly loud thrum. It took hold of the melody, shaping it in a repetitive theme that rose and fell as Meridus began to sway.

Gabrielle watched, transfixed; Xena stood alone, all else forgotten as she in turn watched the redhead undulating to the slow, even rhythms. Occasionally a sharper note announced itself and vanished before becoming too noticeable; it was all coming together into something, and the bard could not have said whether the music gave form and shape to the dance or the other way around. Xena was sliding forward, her feet hardly seeming to touch the ground as the distance between them narrowed, their motions fluidly opposite yet intertwined as they gazed into one another's eyes.

Lilla kept glancing nervously at Terriea but found herself repeatedly drawn to the same sight that captivated the other girl; music playfully tugging at her own feet as the rising rhythm sounded deeply throughout her blood and bones. The dancers wove their hands and arms in long, sweeping motions around themselves as the music gained further coherence, nearly everyone in the room responding in some fashion: The second drummer had begun to pound out a deep, throbbing background that enveloped its listeners before they realized it was a new addition, the instruments driving each other and gradually rising in speed and volume as the musicians' faces shone with intense concentration, reckless joy.

Meridus let out an ecstatic laugh, throwing back her head as she spun on one foot, twirling with increasing speed and outstretched arms before coming to a stop; upper body hypnotically swaying as she grinned a silent challenge. Both drummers were now joined in the pulsing rhythm, only adding to the growing speed and ferocity.

The blonde woman returned the devilish smile of abandonment and threw her own head back, her body almost a blur as she flawlessly duplicated the feat and finished with a casual backward flip that barely rose above her own height. Meridus returned the smile, smoothly turning in place to follow as the warrior fairly oozed around her, a frankly appreciative gaze roaming over the other woman's body. Their movements grew more perfectly synchronized as Callisto's feet suddenly doubled their pace, adding to the dizzying smoothness of her movements, and Meridus returned the blatantly smoldering gaze. The warrior turned an elegant backflip on her hands and Meridus followed close on her heels, her own feet a blur in the dim light, the combined sound of their feet striking the floor adding to the heated rhythms.

The music fell drastically in both pitch and volume, leaving only the drums and the lowest-pitched of the strings, its owner's fingers fairly flying over the frets as the others rested, exchanging knowing smiles. Callisto lifted an eyebrow as she and Meridus drew apart to silently appraise and circle one another; the redhead gave a sly nod, swirling her long skirts as they approached and once more retreated.

As she came within arm's reach again the warrior reached out and grabbed her, spinning the cooperative body along the length of both arms. Their hands found each other before her victim could go flying free, and the movement was just as quickly reversed. Meridus laughed again and they circled each other, hands linked, arms fully outstretched as they spun with ever-increasing speed.

Xena's breath was coming shorter, her aching muscles screaming their usual complaints, but it paled in comparison to the wordless joy that was almost more satisfying than any battle. No; it was a battle, but no one would be harmed...she wanted to dance with everyone, hug them all, and she
pulled Meridus to her, flinging the woman into the air with all of her strength.

A collective gasp came from the audience as the redhead rose in a graceful arc, nearly brushing the ceiling. For the briefest moment she hung in the air, returning to Callisto's arms only to be swept between her legs in a graceful slide; coming to her feet again and whirling about with an exultant grin. Again they approached one another, limbs in constant motion, each daring the other to drop from exhaustion as bass and drum returned to something resembling the original tune.

In a flurry of chaotic drumming the music rose and then halted, the audience barely given time to see both women frozen in place when the sound and motion abruptly resumed. No one dared to blink or draw breath as the pipe and drums staggered haltingly through a lilting series of stops and starts in a seeming effort to confuse the dancers; neither woman missed a beat, using the stops to engage in humorously exaggerated poses and lightly snapping their fingers around each other each time the music resumed. When the volume dropped to a whisper their movements likewise grew softer and more furtive, creeping about each other -- again they froze and resumed as if on cue, defying all attempts to catch them off guard, and as the full force returned they were in each others' arms, spinning as one until they nearly rose from the ground and the music degenerating into a messy, crashing finale as they slowed, swayed, and finally collapsed in a laughing, panting, sobbing heap on the floor.

One of the musicians leapt to her feet with an exuberant cry, smashing her instrument against the chair and floor before her fellows piled on her, the entire pile devolving into a fit of writhing bodies, ululating war cries, gulps of air and the occasional snort. Ephiny let loose a blood-curdling yell of her own before she could stop it, and the room burst into applause and cheers as the furiously blushing Amazon finished her wine in a single gulp.

Llias was quietly shaking his head and chuckling to himself as Diana draped a protective arm around the frail monarch's shoulders, laying a weary head on them as he returned the embrace. From the corner of her eye, Lilla saw Terriea watching Meridus with a look of supreme love and pain. Joxer and Salmoneus were exchanging high-fives as if the triumph had been theirs, Solan grinning from ear to ear as he stood between them. Callisto and Meridus were struggling to help each other sit up, their gasping laughter tapering to unsteady quiet giggles, and finally to nervous silence.

The warrior looked into the audience and Lilla watched in fascination as her sister returned the gaze; it was the same as Terriea's profound hurt and hopeless devotion, as Gabrielle's face when she talked about Xena or even looked at her, or the one on Solan's when... *Oh, gods...* The musicians had started up a lively, more traditional round, the rest of the team throwing themselves onto the dance floor.

Meridus and Callisto rose to their feet, and the warrior offered a tentative forearm which was clasped vigorously and then raised. The redhead planted a quick kiss on her fingers, smiling a shy smile nothing like her lascivious presentation moments ago; and Ephiny's eyes were drawn to the sight of the bard's own fingers, tightening around her mug until its contents threatened to spill over.

"South wing checked out?"

"Yep. You see the game?"

The guard grunted affirmatively. "I'll say. Lost twenty dinars."

The first gave a hearty laugh. "Don't worry. I won it back for ya."
A ribald chuckle. "Forget the money, how about a date with onea them? You see that blonde with the enormous..."

Xena remained perfectly still despite her spine's vigorous protests, shoulders and feet pressed tightly against the opposite sides of the tall archway as she waited for the guards to pass underneath. The sound of their footsteps and discussion finally faded and she dropped to the floor in near perfect silence, noting her growing agility with grim appreciation. At this rate, in a few more weeks she might actually surpass her former levels.

She slipped into the shadows and set off down the hall, senses alert for the slightest disturbance. She wasn't entirely sure what she was looking for, but anything was better than the prospect of a complete breakdown before a roomful of horrified witnesses. To her considerable relief the party had quickly wound down, Ephiny declining Diana's offer of a bed to join Kaleipus and her son in the stables. Eleas had tried to engage the king in discussion but gave up when he mistook her for a childhood friend, and Xena had noticed Joxer looking anxiously around -- probably for Meg, since Gabrielle had been right there in front of him, and damn hard to miss with a chip on her shoulder the size of Olympus. Maybe, she thought sourly, she'd be lucky enough to find some obliging bad guy to beat to a pulp without feeling too guilty.

_Gods..._ came the sarcastic response. _You really are some piece of work, princess!_

But then again, why shouldn't she be upset? A little song and dance couldn't come close to wiping the slate clean, no matter how it might have briefly eased the burden on her soul. If only the others could have relaxed enough to join in; Ephiny always loved to dance, and Gabrielle had certainly come a long way since her first awkward steps as an Amazon...

She froze as a faint, trilling sort of chirrup caught her ears. Diana's bedroom was about twenty paces ahead at the far end of the hall, and there were two other doors nearby, with all too many shadows for something to hide in.

The pitiful sound came again, definitely from inside Diana's bedroom, and the warrior hesitated a moment before making her way to the door and entering. Now devoid of human occupants the room seemed bigger, the ornate ceiling looming overhead in darkness out of reach of the few remaining candles. A damp chill had crept in through an open window with the dying of the fire.

Xena quickly moved to shut the window, shivering in the breeze, and the noise rose to an insistent yowl. She turned around, directing a puzzled look about the room, her gaze falling upon Diana's enormous four poster canopy bed. Inching cautiously forward, she drew aside the curtain and peered within, and the suspicious lines in her face softened at the sight of what had to be the Indian girl's lost cat.

From its size alone the locals were right to worry, especially if it was still just a baby; the thing would have been a decent armful even for her, maybe the weight of a child of six or seven years, and the teeth and claws were nothing to sneeze at either. But it was a magnificent thing, with a mottled gray and white coat in patterns as though it were wearing boots and a mask. Its eyes were half shut, pupils rolling slightly off center as it raised its head to stare at her.

"Well, hello there," she said softly, crawling onto the bed. "Guess you're not lost anymore, huh?"

The animal feverishly writhed among the sheets, emitting a mournful wail, and a stray thought fell into place. She reached out a tentative hand to scratch between its ears and the touch was eagerly accepted, the cries turning to a deep purr of satisfaction as it bobbed its head in encouragement, hindquarters hunching into the air.
Xena smiled sadly as she stroked its muzzle. "Yeah, I know, sweetie..." The poor thing had to be in first heat, she realized; the long journey probably confusing and frightening enough, now the prisoner of instinct in a strange new land. "Looking for a fellow, were you?"

The beast turned its head and snapped at her.

"Hey!" She lightly bounced a finger off of its nose. "None of that, now."

"Chirr?" it protested, sniffing her face and flopping a large, possessive paw across her chest.

"Yeah, yeah," the warrior muttered, disentangling herself. "You think you got problems? I don't wanna hear it."

"Churhrhrhr!" The purr reached a frantic volume as the cat bit down on the blankets, vigorously tugging at the mouthful as it kneaded the bed with its claws. Apparently, she was still young enough to nurse. Xena chuckled at the thought of the maids discovering the damage.

"You're just a big baby," she crooned, giving its ears a good scratching which was favorably received. "Aren't you?" This was bad; already she was starting to feel the impulse to just keep the animal for herself, and that one had better die the immediate death it deserved before she could succumb. Cruel as it seemed, until the owner came back it might be safer to chain her up somewhere; the human population of the castle likely wouldn't feel safe once they saw her for themselves, and at least it would keep her out of trouble --

The faint sound of footsteps had her on her feet in seconds, and the beast gave another annoyed hiss as it sat up, batting at her with one paw. Before she could react it had leapt from the bed, knocking the shutters open and disappearing out the window.

Xena swallowed a curse as she sprang forward to shut it again and throw the latch. Her only thought was to conceal herself as quickly as possible, and she hurled herself to the floor, rolling under the bed against the far wall, almost cracking her head on the stone.

The door opened and she relaxed slightly at the familiar sight of Gabrielle's boots, the end of her staff. The bard appeared to be alone, and Xena debated a moment too long whether to reveal her presence before realizing she'd already made the decision; as always, the internal strategist insisted it would be safer to first find out why she was here. At worst she'd come out looking embarrassed, dust herself off and maybe they'd have a little laugh about it. Maybe have a good laugh about it, before they slapped her in chains and dragged her away...

Suddenly, the bard was kneeling. Xena barely had time to move her head to one side, avoiding the end of the staff in her face by a hair's width as it slid underneath the bed, and then even that became moot as she registered the steps outside, seeing Gabrielle drop and roll, coming to rest up against her. The bard's eyes widened as they stared at each other, her mouth ajar in shock or preparation for a scream.

Xena could feel their hearts frantically pounding together, and deliberately, slowly held a finger to her lips, sliding a meaningful gaze in the direction of the door. Gabrielle's eyes followed, panic slightly subsiding as she gave a brief nod in return. Both women shrank further against the wall as the door opened and shut.

Suddenly, the bard was kneeling. Xena barely had time to move her head to one side, avoiding the end of the staff in her face by a hair's width as it slid underneath the bed, and then even that became moot as she registered the steps outside, seeing Gabrielle drop and roll, coming to rest up against her. The bard's eyes widened as they stared at each other, her mouth ajar in shock or preparation for a scream.

Xena could feel their hearts frantically pounding together, and deliberately, slowly held a finger to her lips, sliding a meaningful gaze in the direction of the door. Gabrielle's eyes followed, panic slightly subsiding as she gave a brief nod in return. Both women shrank further against the wall as the door opened and shut.

A pair of feet in sandals passed within scant inches, lifting from the floor and disappearing; the bed sagging slightly as the unseen visitor flopped back with an audible weary exhalation, bouncing twice before coming to rest. Xena stifled a sneeze, her only consolation in seeing Gabrielle attempt to do the same.
An odd chunk echoed throughout the room, as though a bedspring had come loose, followed by a faint hiss and a brief, barely restrained choking. Gabrielle's apprehension increased and she was about to give it up and reveal their presence when the door opened again, Diana's dress and slippers instantly recognizable. The bard froze and involuntarily pulled back, shivering at the sensation of Callisto's body trembling against her.

"Gods, it's so good to get away from all that noise! I was looking for you --" Diana broke off, and a long moment stretched away.

Both women watched as the princess approached and stood beside the bed, one foot tapping impatiently. There was a faint wheeze that reminded Xena of air being let out of a bladder, and a sharp, piney scent that filled the air.

Meg sounded guilty, and a bit wheezy. "I'm sorry, Di --"

"You're going to be a lot sorrier if you don't give me that right now," came the sharp retort.

Diana's feet disappeared and the bed shifted and bounced under the additional weight. The chunk came again, reminding Gabrielle of a flint being struck, and then a hiss of air.

"Uh...Di?" The cook sounded hesitant, even apologetic. "You sure you wanna be doin' that?"

"Of course I'm sure." Diana's voice now had that same oddly strained quality, fading to normalcy as the strange aroma grew stronger. "If I wasn't, I wouldn't be doing it, now would I?"

"Well..." Meg sounded dubious. "You know what happened last time." Her voice trailed away, and Gabrielle's imagination saw Diana administering the patented Xena Look.

An audibly contented sigh accompanied a creak of wood. "Here...I really don't want any more. Just make sure Eleas doesn't catch you." A note of weary amusement. "I think it's illegal to enjoy it in Athens except for religious purposes."

"Nice to see someone can still crack jokes," came the bitter reply.

"Believe me, some days there's nothing I want more than to burst into tears and run screaming into the hills." Another sigh. "You see why I laughed so hard, when you wanted to switch?"

"Guess so," the cook muttered. "You had more fun than me, that's for sure." An awkward pause. "I think I got some bad news."

A low chuckle. "So what else is new?"

"No, I mean it. I think Philemon..." A frustrated growl. "Damn, I hate this. I think he's screwin' around on ya."

"I see," the princess murmured. "I take it you have some idea with who?"

"Who else?" A core of guilt, under a crust of considerable bitterness. "I wish I'd said something to you before she...well, you know."

Another awkward pause ensued. Diana sounded slightly offended when she spoke.

"Just what do you think Cilla has done?"

"She --" Meg fumbled and tried again. "Well, her and Phil --"
"No," Diana sighed. "You're hardly alone, but no. I think I understand."

"Wish someone'd explain it to me," the cook grumbled under her breath. "All I know's what I saw, and I know I seen her sneakin' outta Phil's room more'n once --"

"You saw what you wanted to see," the princess replied sharply, before her tone softened. "What you expected to see. Philemon's been very lonely, and I wouldn't blame him for turning to someone else." Another sigh. "From what I've been able to determine, I don't think it was her idea."

An uncomfortable exhalation. "Well...if you're sure."

"I'm sure." Diana sounded distracted, still pursuing this train of thought.

"Hey, I believe ya!" A faint, nervous scratching sound, and the cook sighed heavily. "Okay, sorry for jumpin' to conclusions. You think we can talk about somethin' else now?"

"Gladly," Diana replied, but without rancor. Another pause stretched out into awkwardness until the cook spoke again, her voice more subdued.

"Your dad okay?"

"Better," Diana said quietly. "I wanted to thank you for..." A swallow. "For everything you've done. For both of us."

Meg's fear was evident. "You want me to leave?"

"No, of course not!" The princess sounded surprised, amused and angry all at once, and quickly lowered her voice. "When he saw me earlier...he thought I was you."

The cook swallowed uncomfortably. "That musta hurt."

"I wasn't actually paying much attention," came the calm response. "Until he said that he loved me very much...that he'd never regretted adopting me...and that he hoped we would continue to care for each other after he was gone."

Gabrielle felt a hand tentatively creep into hers and returned the awkward squeeze, feeling a stab of pain in her heart. The bed creaked slightly as one of the women shifted position.

"What about Phil?" Meg asked quietly. "You ask him how he feels about me?"

Another long moment passed during which Gabrielle felt she aged at least a century. Finally the princess spoke, her voice wearier than ever.

"Is that what all this is about?"

"What all this?" Meg's voice reflected Gabrielle's own growing nervousness.

"You," Diana replied with sorrowful, cynical amusement. "Me."

The cook sounded panicky, almost on the verge of tears. "Di, I swear to you, I never wanted --"

"No!" The princess's alarm communicated itself to the unseen listeners, their hands automatically squeezing harder together. The bed creaked alarmingly, Meg hiccuping muffled sobs into something. Diana's voice was streaked with tears of her own. "No...oh, gods no. Don't ever blame yourself, Meg..."
"How can ya not blame me?" came the sniffled response. Diana was uttering soothing noises, the soft whisper of hands on clothing bringing to Xena's mind a vision of the princess holding her twin like a child. The bard's hand was sweaty in hers and she shut her eyes, leaning back against the wall to relieve the ache in her neck.

The cook's sniffles had abated somewhat and Diana spoke again, her resolve apparent despite the remaining tremor.

"Meg, what happened between us was not wrong, it was not a mistake and it was not because we weren't in our right minds." A fierce tone of determination arose. "Don't you understand, I love you! Maybe not as a lover, but as a sister, as a friend...you're as much a part of my life as my father, or Philemon, or my daughter. And I refuse to let you sit around crucifying yourself for everything that's wrong with this kingdom!"

"But it was a mistake." The cook's voice was broken and forlorn. "I was just bein' selfish..."

"No," Diana whispered. She cleared her throat roughly, the no-nonsense tone once more echoing Xena. "The only mistake I made was not telling Philemon myself, letting him hear it from anyone but me. He doesn't hate you any more than I do, and you were not being selfish. We were lonely...and maybe just a little bit curious."

"Speak for yourself, sister." Meg's voice held a gruff humor despite the tragic note, and Diana chuckled weakly.

"Don't worry. I never had any illusions about being your first." Her voice softened. "But I'm glad you were mine. And even if it never happens again...we shared something beautiful that nobody can ever take away from us. And I won't let anyone try to use that against us, or twist it into something evil."

"I love you, Di..." Meg was crying again, speaking calmly through the tears. "An' I love Joxer...an' he loves Gab, an' she loves Xena, an' Xena's not Xena anymore, an' your dad's dyin', an' I don't know what to do..."

"It'll be okay..." Diana murmured softly. "We're all going to be okay..."

Gabrielle's head was whirling so badly she felt as though she were standing and about to fall rather than already lying prone, tears leaking profusely from her own eyes as she listened to the comforting sounds. Meg's sniffles slowly faded and the cook finally spoke again, her voice so soft it barely reached their ears.

"Di?"

A slight motion from above.

"It won't ever happen again, will it?"

A brief sigh. "I don't know."

Meg was almost inaudible. "Will you..." She gathered her resolve. "Would you kiss me again...just one more time?"

The princess's voice grew husky with emotion. "Only if you kiss me back."

Xena's skin began to burn.
An Infernal Machine

Chapter Summary

Just when things are starting to get under control, all hell breaks loose.

It's hard for a girl to be sure if
She wants to be rescued. I mean, I quite
Took to the dragon. It's nice to be
Liked, if you know what I mean. He was
So nicely physical, with his claws
And lovely green skin, and that sexy tail
And the way he looked at me,
He made me feel he was ready to
Eat me. And any girl enjoys that.

_Ursula A. Fanthorpe_

_Boomtime_

She was going to go up in flames any moment, she was sure of it; despite the chill of the stone floor and surrounding air, her skirt and top were nearly drenched through, clinging to skin where she was pressed against the equally heated body behind her. The noises from above had died down some time ago, but Gabrielle was still afraid to even scratch the itch slowly meandering down her nose, threatening to drive her mad...

Soft lips grazed her ear, and she stifled a shudder.

"_Think they're asleep."_ An almost inaudible whisper, hot breath tickling her flesh. "_Go...I got your staff."_

The bard forced herself into a snail's crawl, pausing at the edge, pricking up her ears. One of the sleeping women stirred, breath catching in a whistle before dying away to a light snore. A light tap of encouragement or impatience on her foot caused her head to jerk up, nearly colliding with the bed's underside.

She made her way to the door as quickly and quietly as combining those traits would allow, risking a quick glance outside and finding the hallway mercifully deserted. Looking back, she could discern no sign of movement from inside the bed's curtains as the warrior oozed forth from beneath, and she slipped through the narrow opening as Xena followed closely behind, hugging the staff tightly to herself quietly shutting the door with a dire look, pointing down the corridor before turning and striding off.

Gabrielle broke into a trot, still trying to keep from making a sound. They negotiated three intersections and as many turns before a red-faced bard finally outpaced the warrior, coming to a halt to block her path; chin raised in defiance as she held out an expectant hand.

Xena silently relinquished the staff, rudely yanked from her grasp before she had fully let go. She fidgeted under the intense scrutiny, her gaze finally dropping again.
"Think I'm starting to catch on," the warrior sighed. "Everyone who wanted Meg punished for her part in the attempt on the king's life. Angry wives and mothers that want her run out of town, all of Diana's enemies...can you imagine what they'd do, if this came out?"

She uttered a nervous, deprecating laugh and began to pace back and forth in the narrow hallway. Gabrielle's grip on her staff began to feel increasingly slippery and uneven.

"She can't have children, you know."

"What?" The bard found herself thrown farther off balance, by the larger implications and the quiet sympathy in the other woman's voice. "Why?"

A pained shrug. "Happens to a lot of women in her line of work." Gabrielle swallowed as the warrior continued to pace. "Agis probably promised her a share of the loot when he originally recruited her for his little scheme, but when Lias took her in, she had the wealth of the entire kingdom at her fingertips. So there wouldn't be any motivation for her, unless..."

"...unless she wanted something that money couldn't buy," Gabrielle breathed.

"Like a child," the warrior grimly confirmed. "So as far as all these fine, upstanding citizens are concerned, Meg has all the reason in the world to get rid of Diana. Break up her marriage, steal her daughter, you name it."

The bard took a deep breath, suppressing a shiver. "That assassin. You think someone local hired him?"

"I'm almost sure it was Mineus. Didn't you see his face when I pulled that guy's hood off? And I'll tell you something else," Xena continued, glancing about as she lowered her voice. "That assassin? He's from Chin."

Gabrielle blinked, struggling to keep her expression calm. "How do you know?"

A dryly raised eyebrow. "You see anyone else around that looks like him?"

The bard swallowed her immediate response, recalling An-Tai's distinctive features; sorrowful and angry at the realization that she'd sent him on a fool's errand. Potadeia had probably been ashes before their paths even crossed, and who knew what he would do when he learned it no longer existed?

"What I wanna know," Xena muttered as she resumed her nervous pacing, "is where Mineus found that kind of cash. Diana said he was nearly broke, and those assassins aren't cheap. Doesn't make sense to throw them away on a suicide mission. Unless he's got something else up his sleeve, maybe formed an alliance --""

"Why were you in there?"

The warrior froze, every instinct on alert.

"Could ask you the same thing." She fought to keep her voice casual. "Maybe it was just a coincidence. These things happen. We've got bigger fish to fry --"

"No." Gabrielle planted her staff firmly on the floor, fighting the sensation of falling into those enormous brown eyes. "I have to worry about whether or not I can trust you, and that's pretty high on my list of priorities!"
The blonde woman stared back, shame and outrage warring for supremacy.

"What have I done that you don't trust me?"

"Nothing!" Gabrielle burst out, throwing up her hands. "Everything, I don't know! I can't even tell if there's anything wrong or I'm just imagining it! First I felt like I was the only sane one here, and now I don't know what to think!"

She leaned heavily on her staff, cradling her forehead in her free hand as her features twisted in pain. Xena reflexively moved forward to comfort her friend and stopped dead as the bard's head snapped up, eyes wide as she stepped back with her staff raised.

"You see?" Gabrielle whispered. "Is this why you never let me get close? Is this what it's like for you? Always on edge, never trusting...ready to take someone's head off if they so much as breathe wrong?" She shook her head, slowly backing away. "I don't know if you're the one who's changed or me. And I don't know how much more I can take!"

"Gabrielle--" She bit back the plaintive response, as the young woman flinched at the sound of her name, The bard clutched her staff against her as though she'd forgotten how to wield it.

"Every time I try to talk to you about anything that matters, something always interrupts it. Every time I talk to anyone else, I have to worry about keeping all the lies straight! Every time I think I have some kind of a grip on things something else happens, and during those precious few moments I find to try to write, not a word comes out!" Her fingers caressed the staff with renewed purpose, voice dropping to a growl. "Every time I think I've broken that cycle of hate, it comes right back in my face! And no matter what I do, it ends up being wrong!"

Xena wouldn't have dared speak even if she'd felt capable. A jumble of reactions rose in her gorge, running the gamut from bursting into tears to a freezing verbal dissection she shuddered to contemplate; the only thing stopping her from simply closing her eyes and accepting the inevitable, some small voice of rationality or hope.

Gabrielle seemed to emerge from a trance, looking at her staff with a mixture of fear and disgust. She threw it at the warrior as though it were a poisonous snake and Xena reflexively caught it, too startled to do anything else.

"You're the warrior!" Gabrielle shouted. "I'm the bard! What's wrong with this picture? How am I supposed to know who you are if I don't even know who I am?"

"Gabrielle." Xena's voice was low, urgent, her eyes flickering nervously down the hallway. The bard drew a trembling breath.

"Yeah, right...gotta keep quiet. Can't tell anyone the truth, that'd be too simple..."

"Life's not simple," Xena snarled, unable to contain herself. "You think love is all you need, huh? Try filling your belly with it!" The bard's face twisted in misery and it only fired the vicious reaction swirling in her gut. "I've seen people do some pretty stupid things in the name of love! It's just a trick nature plays to get us to reproduce, and I want no part of it--"

She ground to a shocked halt, unable to say where the hate-filled words had been dredged from. Gabrielle's panic had fled before an icy calm and she reached out again; the warrior hesitantly offered the staff, pulling back before their hands could make contact.

"What's going on?"
Both women turned to see Eleas rubbing sleepily at her eyes as she fumbled with her glasses and the sash of her robe. Gabrielle's mind was racing a league a minute, but Xena spoke first.

"Everyone says I need a keeper," she said flatly, grabbing the startled adjudicator by the hand. "Looks like you're it."

The bard watched as they disappeared off down the corridor, finally turning and trudging off in the direction of her room. She'd wanted to visit the hospice before trying Philemon again, but first it was time to give in and wear the damned furs. Even if they couldn't warm her heart, they'd keep her body from freezing.

While she figured out what to do next.

Xena came to a halt outside the stables, finally allowing the wheezing adjudicator to catch a second wind. It was a given with her luck, the first thing would be more awkward questions. *Like there's any other kind?*

She leaned against the stable door, gazing up at the stars. Tonight they appeared more plentiful and closer than ever, an ocean of glittering light, and it occurred to her there must be some way to sail the skies as well; to explore all the strange new wonders it must have to offer. But where once she would have dreamt of conquest, now there was only the urge to know more...and, she had to admit, the urge to be anywhere other than where she was.

Eleas's breathing was returning to normal, and Xena watched in silence as the other woman weakly wiped at her mouth.

"Who's out there?"

She recognized the gruff voice immediately. Before Xena could change her mind she was opening the door, pulling Eleas behind before the adjudicator could voice a protest.

Kaleipus and a group of humans were seated around a makeshift table strewn with leftovers from the earlier meal, a scattered deck of cards nearby. Joxer was scrambling to his feet with a guilty but hopeful expression as Solan sat up, clothes rumpled, blinking and bleary-eyed. Lilla was curled up in the straw and wrapped in a riding blanket, dark hair barely visible; Xenan lightly snoring with his head in Ephiny's lap, while Genipher lay on the Amazon's other side, mouth slightly open, one arm curled around her hips; both women vaguely supported against the sprawled and likewise unconscious form of Daelus.

Ephiny's shoulders visibly tensed Xena walked past the group without a word, taking a seat on a bale of hay by the far wall. The Amazon carefully moved her son's head, as well as Genipher's arm, to the soft straw surrounding them. Kaleipus and Joxer both watched as she rose and strode toward Callisto, quickly looking away as she turned a glare upon them.

"Nice game." The Amazon leaned against the wall, leisurely surveying the room.

Braced for the worst, nothing could have prepared Xena for this casual compliment; just the barest hint of a concealed grudge that, knowing Ephiny, would likely be present until the woman had breathed her last. *Gonna play rough, huh?*

"Thanks," she managed.

"Where'd you learn to dance?"
Xena bit back the immediate retort. "My mother taught me." An internal curse as she anticipated the inevitable, but no sympathy was offered. Then she remembered she was dealing with. *Good old Ephiny,* she thought wryly; who would speak her mind always and true, even to the gods themselves. Faking any kind of emotion simply wasn't in her.

"You ever think about joining the Amazons?" Solan and Joxer were surreptitiously watching as well, debating the merits of the team's performance and, in more hushed tones, their appearance.

"Yeah." The taste of possibility, long turned to blood gone sour. "Once."

Ephiny sensed she was treading on dangerous ground, but she'd gone too far to stop. "Everyone should have a second chance."

Callisto looked up with wary assessment. "Why are you doing this?"

The Amazon knelt beside her, commanding her attention.

"Because if it weren't for Gabrielle and Xena, you'd be dead by now. And not just because they gave you a second chance. If it weren't for Gabrielle, I might have killed you the moment I saw you." Her gaze held the warrior's, refusing to look away.

"She's obviously under a lot of pressure," Ephiny continued quietly. "I admit -- at first, I was ready to blame it all on you. But I've lived too long to look for simple answers to everything. All I know is...there's a lot more going on here than meets the eye."

*Ain't _that_ the truth,* Xena thought.

"Gabrielle should be the one doing this." The Amazon's discomfort was readily apparent, overcome only by her courage. "But if she can't, then I owe it to her, and Xena...and to you. I need to try."

Xena exhaled, the lack of deception putting her more at ease than the words.

"I'm supposed to be training Diana's army," she casually remarked as both women rose to their feet. "Wanna help?"

"Sure," the Amazon replied before she could reconsider. She cocked her head at Eleas, seated next to the others and trying extremely hard to not look in their direction. "Bringing your bodyguard?"

Xena suppressed a groan at the subtle humor in the Amazon's voice. Her little shadow probably wouldn't hesitate to slap the shackles on herself, if given the opportunity.

"I've got nothing to hide. Hey," she called softly, and the adjudicator raised a startled gaze. "We're gonna train with the men. Care to join us?"

"Count me in." Kaleipus rose to his feet, more quickly than one might expect from his size. Daelus lifted his head from the floor, gazed blearily around, and the centaur chief prodded him with one hoof.

"You too, son. Neither of us have drawn a bow for a week since *someone* insisted on doing all the hunting."

Ephiny rolled her eyes, and Solan gave a mischievous grin.

"But uncle, I thought you said it was my fault. After all, I was the reason you were on the journey to begin with --"
"Enough," the centaur growled. "You stay here and keep an eye on Xenan." Solan's face fell, but he dutifully plumped down in the straw with a decidedly disgruntled look. Genipher stirred a little beside him, murmuring as she returned to slumber.

"I can't believe you're just leaving him here!" Eleas had regained its normal aghast tone. "He's barely a child --"

"He's my responsibility," Kaleipus interjected, "and old enough to look after himself. As well as others."

From her stall, Argo gave a loud whinny of affirmation. Solan blushed as his uncle turned to the women with a smile and a stylish bow. "Shall we, ladies?"

So accustomed was Joxer to being ignored that he barely noticed the adults taking their leave, wandering after them in a daze. At one time in his life he would have run, but he'd been doing it for so long he'd grown almost numb to the constant fear that had once characterized his every waking moment. Now he stumbled after them, clutching his helmet under one arm and shivering as the first flakes of snow began to drift through the air; the only thing that truly mattered was the people he loved, and at that came another pang of worry as he wondered, not for the first time, what had happened to Meg.

Joxer had barely disappeared around the corner when the stable door opened again and Lilla slipped out, carefully setting the bolt back in place. She'd barely woken in time to see the erstwhile warrior leaving and her decision to follow had been made without hesitation. Unfortunately she'd neglected to look and see if Solan was really asleep; the young man's exit was even quieter than her own as he watched her round the corner.

An eerie calm had descended over the palace grounds as the odd procession made their way across the deserted courtyard, approaching the great double doors, footsteps crunching on gravel. Through and over the wall they could make out a dull din of grunts and thuds, the clashing of metal. Eleas pulled her shawl about her shoulders, taking slight comfort in seeing even the hardened woman warriors suppress a shiver as the wind picked up.

Xena swung open the doors, coming to a halt just inside the doorway. Hundreds of torches illuminated the area, strewn about the walls of the training yard, whose occupants were at maneuvers with sword or spear; a few clustered by the far wall, laughing as they filled their mugs and skins from the barrel perched on a table nearby.

A missed blow somewhere started a chain reaction, reducing every man within seconds to silence, caught in mid-move or sentence. Most were staring with a mixture of awe and fear, others regarding her with an impassiveness that made her more nervous than hatred. Only a few gave her companions more than a second glance, and Xena steeled herself for an ugly scene, waiting for someone to make the first move.

A loud, low and painful whistle broke the silence. Even as she'd identified the culprit, every other man on the field was swinging around, staring at their compatriot with murderous intent.

"Don't worry," she smiled. "You'll live."

The men broke into a fierce undercurrent of mutters and chuckles. She strode forward into the torchlight, and they fell silent once more as Eleas felt the centaur and Amazon on either side gently take her by the arms, guiding her over to the wall. The three of them found themselves ignored or dismissed after cursory inspection, and Ephiny found herself a little insulted.
"Well," someone sneered. "Wondered when you were going to come poking your nose in."

A short, compact man with an eyepatch and a shock of short white hair strode forward, evidently one of the commanders; chest almost as big as the barrel, tendons in his forearms like corded wood. Even in the dim light Xena could see his eyes, a piercing blue that made her old color seem pale and washed-out in comparison.

The officer stared down his unfortunate subordinates, raising his voice to a bellow. "The next man to speak gets permanent latrine duty! Got any smart remarks now?"

"One moment, captain," another interjected; obviously a fellow officer, a taller man perhaps a decade younger. "Let's not allow our feelings to cloud our judgement. This woman has done good for the kingdom lately, and I'd like to hear what she has to say."

"Actually, I'd like to hear what the men have to say."

The officers slowly turned their heads back toward her, an incredulous look coming over the face of the captain as he looked her up and down.

Xena smiled, turning on the charm. "One at a time, of course."

Her adversary slowly walked toward her, moving with bowed legs and a graceful, easy air despite his bulk. Xena pursed her lips. Ex-sailor, or I'm a harpy's uncle... Tiny snowflakes drifted in the air between them, and now she could see the flesh around his eyepatch twisted, scarred with old burns.

"Like Diana said...I'm not here to replace anyone. I'm here to teach whoever wants to learn." Her voice was pitched low, soothing a wounded animal.

The officer's lip twisted as he tossed his helmet to one side, stalking up to within arm's length, glaring into her eyes.

"You taught me all I need to know," he snarled, "when you took my eye. I'll be damned if I give you the chance to take the other!"

The second officer sighed heavily. "All right, Blutus, that's enough --"

"I'm senior officer, Lieutenant," the captain growled, glaring around at his fellows and the courtyard full of men. "I'll decide what's enough." He returned his attention to Callisto, motionless before him.

"But I'm a reasonable man," he continued, meaningfully fingering the hilt of his sword, "I'll give you a sporting chance. You go through me...and you're free to do whatever it is you do."

The warrior's shoulders slumped in resignation. "I don't want to fight you."

"Really?" he sneered, muscles tensing. "That's too bad. Because I want to KILL YOU --"

She whipped to one side, as the sword cut through the space she had just vacated, seeing her friends reacting from the corner of one eye. Her opponent hadn't lost his balance, already coming at her again; movements short and fluid as his sword traced a defensive pattern in the air.

Eleas was dimly aware, with some shock, that neither of her companions was making the slightest move to help -- some insane warrior ego thing she wasn't supposed to understand? But their paralysis was contagious and she found herself frozen between them, seeing their faces reflecting her own helpless confusion. While some of the men appeared concerned, a disconcerting number
were cheering, even beginning to place wagers.

Ephiny risked a look at the door to ensure their escape wasn't blocked, and her jaw dropped as she took in the sight of Joxer, Solan and Lilla standing within the broad archway, each face stamped with its unique brand of horror. She momentarily agonized over whether to point them out before realizing the decision had been rendered moot, seeing Kaleipus's features knot in outrage and anguish as he also spotted them, and her stomach lurched in sudden fear. That meant Xenan and Genipher were all alone --

The captain feinted and Xena stepped forward, ducking as his blade tore through the air, with enough momentum to bounce off the hard earth. He faked left with a snarl, landing a solid kick to her belly, and she staggered back; coughing, trying to make herself appear winded as cheers, shouts of warning grew in volume. The sword whirled intricately, occasionally jabbing at her midsection. Shorter arms meant he had to get close...

She sidestepped as he moved in, grabbing his wrist in one hand, smashing the heel of the other into the back of his elbow. The sword fell from paralyzed fingers as he tried another kick, and she increased the pressure, persuading him to follow as she turned and sent him stumbling over her left leg, sprawling face first in the dirt. He scrambled to his feet with an enraged grimace as she grabbed the weapon at her feet, twirling it expertly before turning and hurling it with all her strength; the blade flew through the air to embed itself nearly a hand's breadth into the soft stone of the wall, a soldier nearby staring at the quivering hilt inches from his face.

Blutus was already charging again, as an incoherent roar filled the air. Xena spun completely about, planting her feet firmly, crouching and landing both hands in the small of his back; he half-stumbled, half-flew into a rack of spears, the impact reducing them to kindling, She shook her head in amazement, clucking her tongue.

"Who made those toothpicks? Better yet, who paid money for them? I'd say they should both be flogged."

He shook his head, sputtering in incoherent rage as he launched himself into the air; Xena bent slightly at the knees, taking him down along with her as they rolled across the cold, wet dirt. The soldiers' cheers increased as the combatants came to a halt with their commander on top, even as they saw he wasn't taking advantage of his superior position; in fact he wasn't moving at all, though he appeared to be exerting great effort, and now they could make out her arms and legs, intertwined in an intricate lock with his own, immobilizing his limbs completely.

The captain raised his head with a bellow and brought it back down. A red gout sprang from Xena's nose and smeared across her mouth, and he delivered a second blow to her cheek before she yanked one arm free, landing a blow to the side of his head that made him hear bells despite her open hand.

Xena disentangled herself before he could recover his senses, wiping blood away as she backed off, keeping a wary eye on her opponent. She risked a quick glance around and nearly froze at the sight of Solan anxiously shifting from one foot to the other, looking between her and his uncle. Lilla and Joxer had moved in to protect the young man, frantically surveying the courtyard; while more than a few soldiers appeared to be watching their comrades more closely than the fight, some visibly fingering weapons.

Blutus was on one knee, fighting for balance. Xena stepped forward to assist him even as instinct shouted a warning; a meaty fist came at her head and she barely caught his wrist, twisting and planting her foot painfully into the pit between arm and shoulder. He howled and sent a kick at her other leg, forcing her to let go, but she had ample time to avoid the next, and he rolled to his feet,
breathing heavily as they faced off.

His face twisted, and she relaxed into a wet rag as he charged.

A group of soldiers scattered to either side as the two warriors collided with the wall behind them, knocking loose a number of torches. The men standing nearby hastily grabbed up the flaming lengths of wood, backing away, unwilling or unable to interrupt. The captain was on top again, sending powerful strikes down at Xena's face, forcing her onto her back and shoulders until she was nearly upside down. He stiffened and squirmed, one arm flailing, as onlookers clawed and strained to see.

Suddenly her feet were at his throat and chin, pushing him into an unwilling standing position; one arm trapped in her grasp as the other waved madly about.

Blutus threw back his head, a scream clamped behind his lips, as Xena's legs wrapped around his throat. A powerful flex of her legs sent him into the ground so hard he bounced back up, the iron grip on his wrist and forearm threatening to snap the bones.

"Surrender --" she gasped, even as she realized it was a lost cause. His body strained and Xena twisted the final inch, wincing along with the spectators at the sound of his shoulder slipping from its socket, the howl that was finally wrenched from his throat.

She slowly relaxed the pressure, feeling him silently shaking in her grasp. The combined smell of their exertions threatened to overwhelm her senses.

"Yes!" A swarthy soldier was administering blows of joy to the backs of his fellows, all of whom were staring in disgruntled amazement. "You will pay the dinars, gentlemens? I told you she was the best!"

Ephiny let out a pained breath, giving astonished thanks to Artemis. Intervention by herself or the centaurs would have been tactically awkward, in every way she could think of. The second officer was starting to approach his fallen comrade, but froze when Callisto casually jabbed two fingers into the captain's neck; a comical look of shock coming over their faces, as his arm went limp.

"Hold still," she said unnecessarily, popping the joint into place before releasing the pinch. Blutus sagged against her as the pain returned, strength seemingly fled as she helped him to his feet.

"I don't know what you're playing at," he whispered weakly. "But you won't get away with it..."

"Whatever," she muttered, half-dragging him over toward the younger officer. The man was doing his best to look sympathetic but his good humor didn't seem overly mean-spirited; more the calm satisfaction of a boisterous youth who has finally seen a pompous elder taken down a peg or two.

"Well, Cledarus?" The captain's voice was bitter as he stared at his junior. The lieutenant shrugged.

"Better put some ice on that." Cledarus took hold of his superior as Xena relinquished her grip; offering a nod to the warrior, who was licking her lips with an odd expression as she wiped off the remaining blood. "Now, where were we?"

Suddenly Xena was surrounded by soldiers, crowding in on all sides; still keeping a respectful distance, eyes hungry with curiosity and barely concealed hostility. An inquisitive hand reached out to touch the chakram at her waist and she gave a hiss of warning, baring crimson teeth and placing a possessive hand over the weapon.

The man quickly backed away with raised, empty hands as his companions broke into quiet
"All right, give the lady some room!" Cledarus snapped. He turned his attention to Blutus, helping the older man sit at the table. "You ought to get to the hospice. Get that checked out --"

"I don't think so," Blutus grunted. The lines of age were etched deeply in his face as he sat straight and rigid, fingers of his good hand twitching as though they were twirling a dagger.

"I wasn't kidding, you know," he continued in a low growl. "About Mineus. Even odds says at least half these men are in his pay --"

"I don't doubt that," Cledarus returned, equally subdued. He patted the other man on his uninjured shoulder. "Let's both keep an eye on her, shall we?"

Solan watched in awe as the crowd parted like water to let Callisto through, both Lilla and Joxer forgotten. She stood before the men, hands clasped behind her back, coolly appraising her audience.

"As the princess has told you, I'm here to offer my experience. But let's get one thing straight." She surveyed them briefly, noting their rapt attention. "I can show you weapons you've never heard of...more ways to kill than you've ever dreamed of. But no amount of strength or skill can give you the one thing that truly separates victory from defeat." Her eyes glittered darkly. "Motivation."

"Yeah?" yelled a heavily scarred man in the back row, in a challenging tone. "What's yours?"

"None of your business." Xena paced back and forth in front of the men. "And nobody can give you motivation better than you. Not me, not your commander, your princess -- not even the people you love. Because," she concluded, coming to a stop and facing them, "there is no force among gods or men more powerful...than the force of your own will."

Some of the men appeared thoughtful, some simply nervous. A few broke into outright sneers, and a tall, wiry man stalked forward.

"I say you're a fake," he growled. "I was captured by Callisto and forced to fight under her. I was lucky to escape with my life!" He pointed to an ugly scar that ran up one arm. "I served in her army half a season. I saw her every waking moment. And I don't care what you look like." His finger stabbed at her chest. "You're a frau--"

Xena grabbed his finger, twisting as she spun, forcing him to do likewise to avoid having it broken. His momentum required little encouragement, his arm cooperatively twisting behind his back, and she planted a boot in his rear and let go, watching impassively as he sprawled face-first on the ground.

He scrambled to his feet, face red with embarrassment, quickly backing down from her unblinking stare. A loud guffaw came from the crowd, dying when she glared in its direction.

"To make a long story short -- I'm not the woman I used to be. If you have any questions, you can ask them politely...later." She relaxed as she saw their shoulders straighten imperceptibly; even if they didn't realize it, they were accepting her leadership on some level.

"Now, as I was saying...all your skill won't do you a bit of good without a why. So. Who wants to to tell me why we're fighting?"

The men blinked in confusion, a few scattered mutterings dying out. A pasty looking fellow in the second row straightened with confidence.
"To defeat the enemy!"

Xena turned to him with a pleasantly ruthless smile. "And how do you tell who the enemy is?"

He hesitated, clearing his throat. "Ah...your pardon, ma'am, but it's not our place to worry about such things. We fight who our commander tells us to."

Now Xena's smile had become rather predatory. "And who tells him?"

"I'd sure like to know!" someone yelled. Daelus swallowed, wondering how long it would take before Callisto had to resort to physical means to keep the men in line.

The warrior's eyes glittered as she brushed a light accumulation of snow from her hair.

"How many of you are married?" Perhaps half the men raised their hands, and she noted the sour looks on the majority of the abstainers. "And you. How many of you have families here?" A smattering of hands dropped, and she gave them a conspiratorial, triumphant smile. "You love them, and you want them to be safe and happy. So there's one motive. Can't say about the rest of you. Next?"

"You didn't answer my question." The hostile questioner was still invisible in the crowd, but the sneer was a familiar one.

"I've got one for you, Kristos," came a pleasant rejoinder -- Tunalus, she now saw. "When are you going to stop asking stupid questions so she can start teaching us actual tactics?"

"Well, theory is just as important as practical experience..." Xena's eyes gleamed with merriment. "But if you're so eager, why don't you help me demonstrate?"

"Me!"

"No, me!"

"No way --"

A veritable stampede thundered toward her, crowding about, again giving her just enough room to breathe as she raised her hands in mock surrender. And you're the married ones, she chuckled to herself, surveying the sea of eager grins; hopefully their lust for knowledge was equally as great. Blutus was hunched over slightly, glaring daggers at her, while Cledarus was casually leaning back in his seat across from the captain, one leg slung over the other as though he hadn't a care in the world.

Eleas leaned on the firmly built Amazon at her side, feeling faint as she watched the blonde warrior go through the motions of a choke hold; repeating them more slowly, as she explained the appropriate time and place for such a maneuver. "I don't think I can handle much more stress tonight."

Ephiny glanced over at Kaleipus, seeing the grizzled centaur engaged in deep discussion with Daelus; turning his gaze from Callisto to her with a wayward smile.

"Can you imagine what she could teach the Amazons?"

Eleas held her breath as she waited for the reply.

"I've imagined it more than once," Ephiny said dryly. "Practically made her the offer myself." She
shook her head in disbelief. "You know, it's amazing how alike they are."

"Her and Xena?" The adjudicator sounded cautious rather than puzzled, and Ephiny nodded.

"Twins separated at birth. Maybe closer than mother and daughter."

Eleas already looked already sorry for asking. "Wouldn't you always worry she was up to something? You're saying you'd trust her?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Ephiny snapped, instantly softening her harsh tone. "Look. I'll admit -- it'd be damned hard. But there was a time when I never thought we could trust Xena. And she became one of our strongest allies."

"And the centaurs," Kaleipus pointed out. He and Daelus were still raptly observing, as Callisto covered the finer points of disarming an opponent without a weapon of one's own. "She and Gabrielle both."

"Absolutely," the Amazon confirmed. "If it hadn't been for them, our nations might have slaughtered each other before anyone else had the chance. Xena convinced me to forgive the centaurs, but it was Gabrielle who convinced her to forgive herself. And they both taught me...never take anything for granted."

Lilla had joined them, Solan and Joxer trailing behind. The bumbling warrior seemed to be hiding some extreme inner agitation, and Ephiny dimly recalled Gabrielle recounting the tragic comedy of her first meeting with the clumsy but good-hearted young man.

Poor guy used to work for Callisto, she realized with a start. He might have even been witness to the startling transformation into whatever the woman had become, where she herself had only reputation and rumor --

A shout of pain drew her attention. Callisto was backing away as an enraged soldier rose to his feet, furiously rubbing his jaw.

"I'm not waitin'!" he howled. "GET HER!"

A wave of men separated from the rest and poured on top of the warrior until she disappeared completely, the remaining soldiers freezing in surprised indecision.

"No!" Joxer shouted, running toward the pile. His chest collided with an outthrust leg and he spun away with a dazed look.

Kaleipus reared forward, sending a tremendous kick behind him before the drawn dagger could descend. The soldier flew into the wall with a sickening crunch, falling limp and unmoving to the ground. Daelus had drawn his bow, setting two arrows in place, casting about for a target.

"Fools!" Cledarus shouted in a panicky voice as he sprang to his feet. Blutus stared at him, rising from the table until the second officer's blade met his exposed throat. The captain had only time to exchange the briefest hate-filled gaze before Cledarus grabbed his superior by the collar, hurling him into the wall.

Blutus screamed, clutching his shoulder as he sank to the ground, nearly passing out. Through a haze of agony he saw Callisto emerge from the pile of bodies wearing a savage grin, leaping free and running at the corner where the two walls met; hitting the corner at full speed, bouncing from wall to wall before disappearing over the edge, war cry fading into the trees.
"Don't just stand there, you idiots!" Cledarus was standing over his fallen superior, holding the blade at his throat. "Get out there and find her!"

One soldier hurled himself at the traitorous second officer, only to be run through the belly. Blutus's single eye widened as the man's body fell lifeless before him.

Kaleipus turned to see two men grabbing Solan, and reared up, directing a brutal kick to one's head and seeing him drop like a stone; the other man beat a hasty retreat, dragging the boy with him, but the centaur was distracted by another pair of men trying to leap on top of him. He threw them off even as more kept coming, the images fast and furious as he flung himself about: Eleas cowering in the corner by a rack of crossbows, Lilla in front of her looking petrified, while Ephiny protected them both, her blade catching the light of the torches. Daelus had run out of arrows after putting them to deadly effective use, and a well-placed rope around his ankles brought the younger centaur down, men piling on top of him and holding him fast.

Xena landed with a grunt of impact, chuckling as the battle lust descended. No monsters here, she thought with a giggle. The dark of the forest tickled the edges of her soul, beckoning her to hide within its depths.

She thrust the rage back where it belonged, crouching low in the bush at the sound of approaching soldiers; shivering at the wet chill of the snow clinging to the leaves. An overpowering musk filled her nose, vaguely familiar.

"Why didn't you bring a torch?" someone complained, almost directly beside her.

"Forget the blasted torch," another snarled. "Spread out and find that bitch. Rate you're going, you'll be lucky Cledarus gets ahold of you first."

"What's that noise?" another nervous voice asked.

A smile crept over Xena's lips as she identified both smell and sound.

"Me slicin' you open," replied the de facto leader. "Now shut up and --"

His voice vanished in a terrified shriek and a thunderous growl. Xena used the noise to cover the sound of her ascending the tree, observing the festivities from a safe perch on high. The bloodbath was over in moments; two men lying dead as the rest scattered into the forest, putting the horror behind them.

The cat raised its blood-soaked face as Xena dropped from the branches, sniffing suspiciously at her approach.

"Guess you remember me," she whispered. The animal returned to pawing the nearest body, apparently having reassured itself of her benevolence. "Got lucky already, huh?"

The beast grabbed an arm in its mouth, pulling the bandit toward nearby fallen tree. A quick look inside clinched it; the wood was partly rotted and hollowed out, offering a ready-made den. Xena surveyed the mangled bodies with clinical detachment, shaking her head.

"You gonna let them blame this on me?" The busily engaged feline paused in its labors and looked up, blinking innocently and licking blood from its whiskers. "Oh, no, that's okay...you just let me worry about it. Not like I don't have enough problems."

The cat cocked its head to one side.
"Hey," she whispered. "Take care of those kids, okay?" Before she could feel too foolish waiting for an answer she'd jumped back to the lowest branch, flipped to the one above and ascended to the top of the tree; covering the distance back to the palace in seconds.

She vaulted to the top of the wall, running along the edge, crouching low to avoid the flickering torchlight. The fighting inside the courtyard had come to a halt, those she assumed still loyal to the kingdom surrounded by the rebels; Cledarus had left his injured commander lying by the far wall and was looking around, sword at the ready. Ephiny had been disarmed and boxed into the corner with Lilla and Eleas by a trio of men with their own weapons drawn, Kaleipus and Daelus likewise held hostage, kneeling on all fours as they watched Solan and Joxer struggle against their captors.

One snarled, cuffing the boy across the face. Fire and ice ran through Xena's veins, and Gabrielle's desperate voice echoed in her mind as she froze in the corner above Ephiny, concealed in shadow.

She hurled the chakram to her right as she jumped, disabling Ephiny's guards with blows to the temple and throat as Cledarus whirled about. The metal ring rebounded from a wall, flying directly at his face, and he jerked out of its path, barely holding onto his sword in the process.

"Now!" Tunalus yelled, throwing his belt around the neck of the man guarding him.

The captive soldiers surged outward in all directions, breaking through the ranks. Joxer took advantage of the distraction by stomping on his captor's foot, but this only resulted in an angry growl; he tried sending the back of his head into the man's face and went limp, sagging in the man's arms.

Fingers wrapped tightly in the man's hair and he screamed as he felt himself being pulled off the pitiful excuse for a warrior, the pain mercifully ending with a fist in his face. The thug holding Solan took one look and instantly let go, scrambling away with an expression of sheer terror as he inadvertently entered the center of the yard and was sucked into the battle.

Xena lifted one hand as the chakram returned, hooking the weapon back at her waist. In an instant she was kneeling to run her hands over Solan, checking for injury. "You okay?" His eyes widened as he looked over her shoulder.

"That's enough!" yelled the traitorous first officer as friend and foe alike ground to a stop. She slowly stood and turned around to see Cledarus standing a scant twenty paces away, crossbow cocked and aimed directly at her heart. He glanced nervously around to make sure of a clean shot.

Xena's gaze never left him, and she motioned for Solan to stay back. Cledarus sneered as she balanced carefully on the balls of her feet.

"Even the Warrior Princess only caught arrows." He paused to savor the moment, relishing the grim look on her face. "This thing fires a bolt with such force... Goes right through the finest armor."

Solan's heart skipped at the sound of the catch being released.

Xena's body bent slightly and turned at the waist, the bolt screaming to a halt in her grasp. Her fingers flexed as her audience gaped in astonishment, snapping it in two, dropping the pieces to the ground. With catlike grace she took two steps forward, covering nearly half the distance to her attacker; feet barely leaving a trace of their passage in the light blanket of snow.

Cledarus fumbled the second quarrel into place with a look of panic, swinging the weapon back up. Again her body blurred and froze, her face twisting in a brief grimace of pain before the quarrel fell
in pieces. Before he could move she was on him, twisting the crossbow from his grip, hurling it away, sending her fingers into his neck.

The second officer fell to his knees with a gasp, a trickle of red beginning to flow over his lips.

"Okay, bright boy." Deep brown eyes stared him down. "Short and sweet, thirty seconds, talk or die. Who's your boss?"

"Picked up a few tricks...from Xena?" Cledarus's face was turning from red to purple as he stared back, trembling. "No use..."

"Stop it!" yelled Eleas, surprising everyone with her outburst. "You can't just kill that man in cold blood!"

"She won't do it," Cledarus held himself upright with a supreme effort. "Just like Xena...gone all soft." He summoned the strength to spit at Callisto's feet. "See y'in Tartarus...bitch --"

Fingers slammed into him again, and he fell in a choking fit. She backed away with a furious expression at his weak grin of triumph.

"Knew it..." he coughed. He raised a weakened voice to address his men. "Hear me, you cowards? She's bluffing!"

"You have no idea how glad I am to hear it."

Everyone turned to find Draco's men standing within the arch of the gate, bristling with weapons, their leader all the more conspicuous for his absence. Xena might not have known the one at the forefront, if he hadn't been so ugly as to be unforgettable: one of the men who had played earlier, and now wearing a suspiciously familiar suit of armor.

"And who are you?"

"Depoticus at your service," grinned the thug. "The men decided they were... unsatisfied, with the old leadership."

The warrior's body tensed. "Where's Draco?"

"In Tartarus where he belongs." Depoticus chuckled. "But don't worry. You'll be along soon to keep him company!"

He swept his arm forward and men poured into the courtyard as if a dam had burst, rounding up the stragglers, corraling them into the center of the yard. Xena stood frozen, watching her friends being herded along with the soldiers.

"Fool!" Cledarus spat. "Your so-called army's barely half the size of this laughingstock! You think you can hold an entire kingdom?" Blood trickled over his lips. "That maniac will have your head for this!"

"What Mineus don't know won't hurt him," the warlord laughed, strolling into the open training area. "You had your chance, fancy boy. Now we're gonna show you how it's done. And when we're through here, you know what?" He grinned at the prostrate commander, relishing his mastery of the moment. "I'll send your head back, as a present for the old boy. Call it a taste of things to come."

His eyes never left the officer, as he twitched his head behind him in a gesture of command.
"Grab her."

Xena exploded into motion an instant too late to escape, the pair of men attached to each of her limbs hard pressed to keep her contained. Their initial advantage was too much, and she continued to struggle even as they forced her to her knees, more men piling on.

"What in Hades is going on down there?" A shout, from one of the guard towers. "Hey, you! Drop that sword, or --"

The warning was cut off as one of the warlords casually fired a bolt, the unfortunate soldier plummeting from the tower; crossbow shattering against the side before his body met the earth with a wet thud. A frightened feminine yell came from above, and the archer turned a questioning look to his superior.

"Don't waste your ammo," the leader snickered, facing the tower. "You! Go tell your king that Depoticus the warlord is in charge, now! And if he doesn't like it, he can come down and fight me himself!"

The blonde warrior had stopped fighting her captors, who used the opportunity to tighten their grip upon her. Depoticus offered a benevolent smile.

"Remember me?"

Xena arched her eyebrow, sneering in the most blandly offensive manner she could muster. "Should I?" Joxer had turned paler than usual, and she nearly laughed aloud; the only one who really knew who she was...

"Didn't think so." Depoticus smirked. "Nobody ever remembers guys like me, you know. But hey, I don't mind." He folded mailed arms over his chest. "As long as they remember my deeds? That's enough."

"Oh?" the warrior purred seductively. "What's the big deal? Walking in and neatly tidying up without a fight? Threatening ladies and old men? Oooh," she mocked, eyes widening. "Quite the challenge."

He shook his head, unable to suppress a chuckle.

"Oh no, sweetheart. I'm not gonna play your game...you're gonna play mine." He gestured to the men. "Get her up there."

She forced herself to remain still as they dragged her toward the table, some part of her chuckling in ribald mockery. How predictable, the eternal warlord within mused; how mundane, and unimaginative, to resort to such crude measures this early. And how amusing, if she ignored the horror etched into the faces of the observers; from Eleas's helpless shock to Ephiny's outrage, and Solan...

Her struggles suddenly took on new desperation, but the men were prepared for such an effort, slamming her down on the bench; the ones at her arms bending her upper body backward until the back of her head connected solidly with the tabletop. Stars swam in her eyes and she tried again to rise up, barely able to see the warlord as he stepped into view.

"See, you may not remember me." Depoticus sneered down, lip curling to reveal crooked, yellowing teeth. "But I remember you. Yeah...I remember you real well."

She regarded him implacably through the fog. "You remember my favorite color?"
"Better than that," he laughed. "I remember what you used to be...and looking at you now makes me sick! You know, you and Xena are such hypocrites? You disgust me!"

"The feeling's mutual." She smiled, unwilling to concede an inch.

"But I know better than Draco." A note of audible anticipation crept into his voice. "Poor sap was too much in love with Xena to just kill her and get it over with, like you did. But me?" He brushed imaginary dust from his hands in a brutally efficient gesture. "I just like to win...and I don't care how."

He gestured and two men came forward, straining under the weight of the wine barrel. Callisto's eyes bulged, the men holding her redoubling their efforts as her body contorted in their grasp.

"Ah," the warlord chuckled as he walked to the other side of the table. "I see you remember the same thing I told all my friends. That charming little habit you always had about never using intoxicants...something about wishing to experience all the pain life has to offer?" He snapped his fingers.

"Show her what she's been missing, boys!"

A cheer rose as the two men upended the barrel. Depoticus yanked her head back, grabbing her jaw with his free hand and squeezing cruelly as a torrent of King Lias's best wine gushed over her horrified features, going up her nose, into her eyes. Strong alcohol stung at tender tissues, the rich taste almost overpowering as the unceasing stream poured over her sputtering features. Some far-off part of her coldly realized she could easily drown in this position, and she thrashed like a beached fish, even as she let the liquid flow down her unresisting gullet. Drink or drown, sink or swim --

Joxer watched in agony, unable to look away. Eleas was frantically biting her nails while the multitude of men assembled in the courtyard emitted shouts of joy or dismay; the only thing stopping Ephiny from giving into the burning urge to grab the nearest sword was the thought of Xenan's face as someone shakingly explained why his mother was gone...

Abruptly the barrel was empty, the last drops falling onto the warrior's gasping face. Depoticus let go her hair and the men flung her away, sending her stumbling and sprawling on the now slick, icy ground as they spread out in a circle. The blonde woman was blinking furiously, rubbing her eyes, shivering uncontrollably at the chill air cutting through the soaked fabric of her shirt.

One man was sufficiently emboldened by her condition, the shouts of his comrades, to step forth and land a kick to her stomach as she tried to rise, sending her stumbling into the man across the circle. He gleefully shoved her away and she careened helplessly from one man to the next, arms flailing as they bounced her between them like a child's ball, trying to keep her upright. Another stuck out a playful leg, sending her into the growing slush and muck created by their movements. The wind had picked up, hurling flurries of snow against the flickering torches; making the shadows on the walls dance in wild patterns.

"Bastards!" Luci was shouting, trembling with rage under the watchful spears of Depoticus's men. "You want to try for me, hah? You would not be so tough on one who is not the lady!"

One of the guards backhanded him into the ground with a mailed fist, quickly turning back so as not to miss any of the fun. Callisto was being hauled to her feet by a man on each arm as the first one stepped forward again, and they threw her at him like a disjointed puppet as he aimed a vicious kick at her stomach.
She seemed to sense the approaching blow, twisting aside at the last only to run straight into his fist. Falling to one knee, rolling limply away as his booted foot came down, burying itself a full inch in the mud; he yanked it free with a frustrated snarl, following as she rolled, forcing her toward a confederate who planted his own boot in the center of her back. The warrior arched in pain as both men pulled her aloft, shaking until her teeth rattled in her skull.

"Stop it!" Eleas shrieked, unable to hold back. "You're killing her!"

Hoots and jeers rose from the surrounding bandits.

"Don't worry," snarled one of the men. "We ain't gonna kill her for a long time!"

The man across from them grinned, cocking his fist as Callisto fell toward him with outstretched arms.

Ephiny cringed at the sound of flesh on bone, but the man was staggering back and she realized that a wildly flapping elbow had collided with his face. The occupying force doubled over and clutched their bellies, tears streaming down their cheeks as they howled with mirth and pointed at the stumbling woman and their hapless comrade. The stunned warrior seemed not to even notice what she had done, and this only seemed to further infuriate her foe, who rose to his feet with a bloody nose and a snarl that spoke of imminent vengeance.

A fist ripped through the air above her as she bent over backwards, hair brushing the ground. The thug wavered unsteadily on his feet, staring at her motionless form for an instant before her leg came up into his jaw; she turned in a somersault, coming to her feet and wobbling away with a look of surprise that almost exceeded her victim's.

"Enough playing, you morons!" Depoticus barked, frantically waving his sword. "Finish her!"

Three men rushed at Callisto from as many sides, flying away into the crowd with a triple impact as the blonde woman flipped onto her forearms and shoulders; feet whirling and connecting with each shocked face in rapid succession. A pair of bandits leapt forward and stabbed spears into the ground as she rolled away, rising up on both hands with a maniacal grin and lashing out one foot, breaking both weapons in two; as the men gaped an outslung leg slammed into their ankles, throwing them into the air, landing on their backs.

Eleas and Lilla both stared in amazement as the warrior rose awkwardly to her feet. Her body gently swayed in the breeze, head cocked as she listened for the next attack.

Another group rushed forward, coming to an uncertain halt as Callisto stumbled toward them. A sword flashed but she ducked underneath, spinning on one foot with an incoherent scream and sending the other into her attacker's chest. He flew back and collided with his now-screaming leader; both men stumbling over the prone body of Blutus, the captain giving another miserable shout of pain and grabbing his injured arm.

Callisto's body wove in circles too rapid for Eleas to follow, dodging two men wielding staves as they came at her from both sides. Somehow she stayed on her feet as she grabbed the ends of their weapons, her frenzied motions increasing in speed; the men fighting desperately to keep hold and finally losing, as the staffs were wrenched from their hands. She spun like a top and slammed the weapons into their necks, hurling the pieces of wood away, staggering to stay aloft as the men fell clutching their throats.

The two paralyzed bandits holding Joxer finally moved, hurling him to the ground, running to join the fray. Quickly Looking around, he saw the men holding Solan watching the increasingly furious
battle; holding his breath as he crept up behind, tapping one on the shoulder.

The thug turned his head, as a helmet collided with it.

Joxer landed on top as the dazed man's captive wriggled free, bringing his helmet down with an incoherent yell of fear and enthusiasm. Solan grabbed up a double handful of mud and snow, scrambling forward as Joxer was thrown off, grinding his own cargo into the bandit's face.

The centaurs had likewise escaped their guards and headed straight for the rack of bow and arrow, trampling any men in their path. Diana's men seized the moment and surged into motion, Agathemon leading the charge as they routed the demoralized invaders.

"Down there --" Cilla panted, pointing down in the training yard. Gabrielle took one look and nearly dropped her staff: Two men were staggering away as Callisto swept over them, grabbing each by the index finger and whirling about, the snap of breaking bone reaching her even at this distance.

She took in the rest of the yard in a single glance and turned a panicky look to the maid, grabbing her shoulders.

"What's the fastest way down!" The bard glanced around and found the answer, running to the door that led to the stairs. Cilla followed closely behind and they skidded to a halt, Gabrielle staring in dismay at the staircase that stretched for what looked like a full seven leagues. No time --

The maid's mouth fell open as Gabrielle leapt into the tower's center, staff held firmly in both hands. One end caught the raised stone wall on one side and she held on for dear life, falling at an angle until the other end met the opposite wall; hanging air for a moment before gathering her strength, spinning hard to the left, momentum sending her spiraling down the length of the tower, accompanied by the shriek of wood and stone. Cilla stared in disbelief over the side of the wall, watching the bard grow smaller; finally hitting the ground far below, staggering out of sight.

Gabrielle emerged from the base of the tower, fighting nausea and dizziness as she regained her balance. She ducked reflexively, bringing up her staff as a bandit flew past, before realizing he hadn't even seen her; he turned half about as he ran, a look of sheer terror on his face, and Daelus stuck out an equine forelimb that sent him sliding on his face in the snow.

Solan and Joxer had retreated to the corner, huddled next to Eleas as a grim-faced Ephiny defended the group against a pair of bandits. Her sword sliced cleanly through one man's stomach as she brought down the other with a vicious kick to mid-thigh; he scrambled to his feet, hastily backing away from the heavily breathing Amazon, and she lowered her weapon with a smirk as he turned to run.

An Amazon war staff caught the bandit under the chin, sending him spinning in a lofty arc that rivaled any of Xena's before ending much less gracefully in a crushed, limp heap. Ephiny's eyes met Gabrielle's, and both women nodded briefly before turning their attention to the rest of the courtyard.

The handful of remaining bandits had either turned and fled at the prospect of taking on two Amazons when one had been such a handful or been herded into the corner by Diana's forces, now led by Aegathemon and Daelus. Closer to the wall, Kaleipus kept a watchful eye on them and his back to the wall; bow drawn and nocked as he looked about in a frantic effort to locate Solan.

Depoticus was scrambling away as Callisto hurled herself at him with an ecstatic whoop, head colliding with his chest before she fell to the ground, instantly bouncing up like a puppet on
strings. He staggered back with a cough, desperately waving his sword; her arms snapped wide, hands shaped into claws, upper body bobbing about with her feet rooted to the spot. She cocked her head and gave a lopsided grin, stifling a loud hiccup; fingers wiggling in blatant invitation.

He let out a furious scream, rushing forward as he brought down his sword.

The warrior's hands shot up, brought the blade to a halt; eyes fighting to stay focused as she tore the weapon from his grip, flinging it aside. Suddenly she was a gyrating storm, nearly rising from the earth as she spun round him; a series of fists and elbows impacting his skull with such terrifying rapidity they seemed to resound as a single long crack!, her repeated blows the only thing keeping him upright.

Agathemon had rushed to the aid of the fallen Blutus, and the two officers joined the stunned onlookers as the blonde woman flipped onto her hands again, wrapping her legs around her opponent's throat, taking him down in a roll that bent him backwards almost in half. His upper body went face-first into the snow-covered earth and Callisto rose with a maniacal yell, sending her fingers stabbing into his neck.

A muffled scream came from the warlord and he convulsed underneath, almost throwing her off. She rolled to her feet as he staggered upright, weaving and stumbling almost as badly; before he could react she fell against him, blocking one wildly flung arm, wrapping her own around it, yanking him forward as her other fist smashed into his face.

She leapt upon him again as he went down, fingers jabbing from a different angle. The resulting screams and spasms were far more spectacular this time, and the bard found herself unable to know whether to laugh, cry or scream: The blonde woman wore an almost comical look of confusion and frustration as she fought to stay atop the writhing warlord, repeatedly stabbing at his neck, only bringing forth more horrible screams and convulsions, until finally she got it right.

Depoticus arched hard enough to throw her off again; freezing in a semicircle, toppling over into the snow. A crimson pool began to form about his head as he lay there, twitching.

"NO!" Gabrielle's paralysis finally broke and she ran forward as Callisto staggered to her feet.

The blonde warrior spun aside at the last instant, and the bard found herself suddenly facing a tornado of motion; staff moving faster than she'd ever dreamed possible, barely able to counter the unceasing torrent of kicks and punches. A howl of wind gusted through the yard, snow flying thicker; every observer frozen in place.

"Stop it!" the bard yelled. She tried a kick at the other woman's knee; lightning hands grabbed the staff and twisted, foot slamming into her leg, sending her and her staff hurtling to one side. Barely, she relaxed and let it turn into a cartwheel; shaking off the dizziness in time to see the other woman thundering towards her with all the grace of a charging elephant, her joyful roar seeming to shake the walls around them.

Gabrielle stumbled back, avoiding a flurry of punches by luck more than grace, throwing a desperate one of her own. A surge of panic rose in her as an iron hand encircled her wrist, forearm slamming into the crook of her elbow, bending back her arm. She swallowed a scream as she relaxed and fell back; forcing the other woman to follow as their bodies rolled together. Ephiny was circling them in short, quick steps, her tight sword grip taking its toll on muscle and tendon; forearms singing with agony, as if someone had filled them with molten lead.

"STOP IT!"
One foot lashed out and connected with the side of Callisto's head; Gabrielle could feel herself reacting automatically, lending further urgency to the cold, sick fear as she rolled over, snaking a forearm around the other woman's throat, jamming a knee into the small of her back. The warrior's other arm flailed madly and she trapped it in her own free hand, putting every ounce of strength into squeezing, snapping bone, crushing the windpipe --

"Hold!" The tip of Ephiny's sword hovered inches from Callisto's belly; she wasn't even sure who she was yelling at, but protocol demanded satisfaction. "You dare strike your queen?"

"Gggnnhhh..." The warrior's eyes wobbled crazily, moving independently as her head craned back in an attempt to see behind, body rotating within the bard's slowly loosening grasp. Straggly blonde hair fell across Gabrielle's face, sticky with drying wine; furiously blinking eyes opened, and the bard nearly screamed at the vivid, piercing blue, color of sky and sea...

"Gghhh...gug...aweh..." A slow, happy smile of recognition spread across the warrior's flushed features. "Grr...gbarrl...g'brll..."

She sagged against the chest of the wildly staring bard, snuggling into the thick fur, and every last onlooker's eyes bulged as she contentedly nuzzled the other woman's exposed throat. "Now y'look...like a real Am'zon..."

"Take it off!" Gabrielle yelled. She flung Xena away, standing on trembling legs. The blonde woman jerked her head up, confusion written on her face as she tried to rise, and the frustrated bard grabbed her by the arm. "Take it off, before --"

"Too late." Joxer was kneeling, one hand at the throat of the still-steaming body of Depoticus. He reached out a shaking hand to close the eyes of the corpse, staring almost accusingly at the spectators.

The army looked ready for a victorious cheer, but remained silent. Agathemon and Blutus appeared likewise shaken; the treacherous ex-lieutenant forgotten, while the traitorous Cledarus was still on his knees, staring aghast at the warlord's corpse. Ephiny's sword had fallen from suddenly nerveless fingers, Kaleipus and Solan immediately at her side and helplessly watching the raw, shocked look on the Amazon's face as she stared at Callisto; sprawled on the ground, incoherently singing in that strange foreign tongue.

Gabrielle grabbed her staff from where it had fallen, turning to her Regent with deadly calm.

"Put her to bed."

Ephiny swallowed. "Gab--"

"PUT HER TO BED, DAMMIT!"

The assembled observers flinched as one, and the Amazon stared at her queen before dutifully striding forward, hauling the blonde woman upright. The warrior slumped against her, reeking of wine, incomprehensible words trailing into hiccups and finally silent, shaking sobs.

Agathemon knelt by Blutus, helping the captain to his feet as they watched Ephiny sling her unresisting cargo over both shoulders with a grunt, heading for the tower with the bard following close behind. The women disappeared inside, and both men turned as one to the traitorous lieutenant, who coughed weakly as he glared back.

"Well, Cledarus." The captain flexed his good hand until the knuckles cracked. "Anything you'd like to say?"
"Gab, I told you everything I saw!" Joxer stammered as he followed the bard down the hall, wincing every time her staff hit the stone floor. "I still don't see what --"

"Will you shut up and let me think?" Gabrielle brought her staff down harder for emphasis.

Joxer ground to a miserable stop, unable even to be distracted by the sight of the bard's hips rotating enticingly under her brief skirt. Everything had been going fine, and then somehow, suddenly it all went wrong so fast he was only now beginning to react; shivering from emotion and wet clothes, imagining the muddy tracks they were leaving on the floor as they approached Diana's bedroom. The bard rapped on the door so loudly he winced, infinite moments ticking by, repeating the process.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably, ready to speak when the door cracked open.

"Gabrielle?" The pitch and diction were enough to identify Diana. "What is it? What can I --"

The bard shoved forward, pulling him behind as she stalked past the princess. Meg was sitting up in bed, blinking sleep and confusion from her eyes, and the cook abruptly froze at the sight of Joxer.

Diana shut the door and leveled a grim, disapproving look at Gabrielle. The bard took a deep breath, measuring her words carefully.

"I think we might have a problem."
Chapter Summary

Checking in on various people, some for the first time; revealing a few more details, getting all our ducks in a row; lining up the last of the dominoes, hovering overhead with finger poised. "For who can withstand the raging flood?"

Truth is stranger than fiction because fiction has to make sense.

*Mark Twain*

Oh come on, Robbins, that's enough! If you can't play the piano, why don't you just watch TV?

*Tom Robbins, Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

Pungenday

Pallid dawn crept over Treus, the sun hesitating at the horizon, vanishing in a cloudbreak before it could ascend over the trees. Within the city limits the streets were impassable, occupants stranded inside homes and businesses by the night's accumulation of snow, the gusts of wind that piled drifts higher than most doorways. A few hardy souls braved the the elements to establish lines of communication, arranging for the transport of supplies to the aged and infirm; those stranded within, discussing in hushed tones the sketchy details that had been trickling from the castle. Inside was colder than ever, the fires in each room having been banked to conserve wood for the main furnace, the inhabitants pulling extra blankets from storage, attempting to venture outside in an effort to clear the roads. In this last they were only partially successful, managing to open a path to the front gate before succumbing to the chill, fleeing back inside; and in less than three candlemarks the falling snow had obliterated their efforts, slowing to a flurry by first bells.

Xena's first thought was that her sleep had been dreamless, before cautious optimism was swept away on a wave of nausea. Dry heaves and retching tapered away with exquisite slowness as she realized she was lying on her belly on some cold, hard surface. Her entire being seemed comprised of an infinite number of tiny pieces, throbbing inside and out; her skin flayed open, the slight breeze simultaneously soothing and causing further pain to flare, erupt and not quite die away.

A soft, cracked moan came from her throat, as she realized her eyes weren't opening.

"Shh..." Ephiny's voice was low but unmistakable. Water ran over her lips, her head cradled in one hand from behind. "Don't try to talk."

She cut off a whimper at the cool liquid flowing over her swollen tongue. A multitude of individual aches were beginning to filter their way through the all-encompassing agony that
suffused her as she struggled to open her eyes; feebly licking her lips, emitting a dry, hacking cough.

"Wa..." She pushed away the waterskin, trying to sit up. "...hap'n... wher'm I..."

"How about some tea first. Okay?"

Xena rolled onto her side with a groan, feeling frigid stone under her arms and feet. Somewhere a door opened; Ephiny briefly speaking with someone outside. Somewhere else she'd lost her boots, but the leather pants and shirt were still there, now stiff with dried wine.

The Amazon was already back, helping her sit up as she clutched her stomach, scalding tears beginning to leak between tightly sealed eyelids.

"Hey..." Ephiny's voice was tinged with alarm. "What is it? What's wrong?"

The warrior went deathly pale, a wrenching wave of sickness nearly turning her inside out. She fought the urge to sink against the Amazon in a crying fit as her forehead was dabbed with a damp cloth; wiping away sticky residue and hot tears as hazy memories became increasingly, alarmingly clear.

"Trust me, it's not that bad..." Ephiny continued her gentle ministrations as she remembered her friend's icy rage, even after talking half the night with the princess. The bard had stopped briefly afterward to check on them -- luckily, during a moment when the exhausted Amazon hadn't fallen asleep -- and nodded a brief greeting, coldly regarding the figure lying prone on the floor, head lolling in the sunken tub. Gabrielle's face had softened as she knelt beside the fallen woman, only to become a tortured mask of indecision; reaching out only to freeze, fear and loathing rippling her features as one hand curled into a fist.

Ephiny found herself considerably relieved when the bard immediately thereafter took her leave, only offset by her growing unease regarding her friend's state of mind. More frightening, possibly, was her own lack of worry regarding Callisto, even after last night's chaotic proceedings. Clearly there were unresolved issues between the two women, not to mention the difficulty Ephiny was having in justifying her acceptance, however hesitant. But she would not relinquish her oath, and certainly not when Gabrielle needed her most.

As for the safety of herself and her son if they remained, some internal enemies had been revealed, the laborious process of dealing with them in a civilized fashion had begun. And one look out the window as the sun rose was enough to convince her there would be no significant external threat without divine intervention. The snow would make normal routines more difficult, but the military security it offered was undeniable. Moving troops and equipment through those mountainous drifts would cost an enemy precious time, during which their approach could be easily spotted.

"Come on," she murmured, stroking the tightly clenched brow. "You're still in one piece, you don't have any strange new tattoos..."

"No jokes!" Xena gasped. Every last cut, bruise and scrape was in full bloom, adding voice to the chorus of agony.

Ephiny held the waterskin to her lips again; pulling away when the desperate swallows showed no sign of stopping.

"Callisto, if I didn't laugh I'd cry." The warrior silently quivered in her arms as Ephiny breathed in the faint scent of wine, the underlying musk of the other woman's body. Eleas was sitting up on the
bed, brushing aside tousled hair as she reached for her glasses, and Ephiny belatedly remembered
the adjudicator joining them just before dawn, having talked herself hoarse with Gabrielle and the
princess.

"I could have killed her..." Callisto's voice was hollow and broken. The Amazon resisted the urge
to wring her stubborn neck.

"Look at me." The warrior tried to pull away and Ephiny grabbed her jaw, wrenching her around.
"Damn it, look at me --"

Her jaw went slack as she released her grasp, scrambling to her feet, hastily backing away. Eleas
was saying something in her usual frantic tones but Ephiny's ears were full of a dim roar, every
thought and word fled from her consciousness as those impossibly azure eyes continued to stare
back at her with dazed incomprehension.

The adjudicator managed to don her glasses without losing an eye and scrambled out of bed,
looking back and forth. "Ephiny, what is it? What --"

"What have you done?" Ephiny hardly recognized her own voice for the fear before her anger
fanned to white heat. In a heartbeat she was at the warrior's throat, grabbing her collar, hauling the
woman to her feet like a doll. "What have you done with her, damn you!"

"Ephiny, stop it!" Eleas was trying to pull her off. She practically flung the other woman away,
forcing back her rage.

"Ask her," she hissed, stabbing a finger of accusation. "Go on! Ask her why that happened!"

"Wha..." The warrior caught herself on the bedside vanity, swallowing heavily, clutching her head
as she turned round. In the mirror and over her shoulder she could see the adjudicator's confusion,
the Amazon's smoldering anger, and --

Eleas watched with growing trepidation as the warrior stared into the glass, hands rising to her face
and slowly running over the skin as if to assure herself of its solidity. Callisto turned toward them,
muffling a giggle that turned to a quivering moan; sinking to her knees, trembling with suppressed
nausea.

The Amazon strode forward and glared down, silently demanding explanation.

"Ephiny," came the adjudicator's plaintive request, "would you please tell me what's going on?"

"What did you do to her?" Ephiny's shoulders tensed with the desire to simply beat a confession out
of the other woman.

Callisto slowly lifted her gaze, pale blue eyes heavy with pain.

"I told you." The words rasped harshly, ending in a weak cough. "I killed her."

"Yes," the Amazon growled, clenching one fist. "And you're going to tell me exactly how it
happened."

The warrior's giggle was like a dull knife as she tried again to stand, rivulets of hair falling with her
movements, partially obscuring her features.

"I did...nothing." Callisto sank to the floor again, looking painfully thin and weak despite the well-
defined muscles. "She was drowning in quicksand. She actually begged me...pleaded for me to
help her, and I..." A sob caught in her throat, and she spat the last words. "I sat there, and watched her die. And I called it justice!"

A loud knock resulted in a guilty start from the others, and Ephiny cleared her throat before answering. "Enter!"

Genipher swept in, disgustingly radiant, carrying a steaming mug in one hand; hair was still damp from the bath. The Amazon abruptly remembered her son.

"Where's Xenan?"

"The stables," Genipher reassured her. "We woke up around dawn, talked for a while...we were wondering where you were when Salmoneous came looking for me. I said I fell asleep talking to you, and he said I should find you. Let you know your son was all right --"

"Thank you." Ephiny didn't trust her voice for anything more. The younger woman's smile faded as she looked down at the kneeling blonde figure.

"I passed one of the maids on my way. She said this was for Callisto?"

Xena accepted the tea with a foul look, inhaling deeply. The bitter aroma stung her nostrils, and she took a tentative sip, offering a nod of approval.

She pulled herself upright, wobbling on precarious footing. Genipher sprang to help but the warrior waved her away, staggering to the window and throwing it wide.

Chill wind hit her full in the face as she leaned heavily against the stone. Every part of her felt ripped from another, but the alcohol's effects were fading by the moment. The snow would hide the mangled bodies left by her feline friend, at least for a while, but beyond this simple observation her mind felt as clean and unspoiled as the pristine expanse that blanketed the countryside. She was just plain tired; of thinking, of planning, even existing...

Eleas and Ephiny were standing together, heads bowed in murmured discussion. The Amazon turned a guilty glance toward Xena as she sensed the warrior's gaze.

"Genipher. Would you let Xenan know I'll be right down?"

"Of course," the woman eagerly returned, already brightening at the prospect. She cast another nervous glance at the silent figure standing by the window. "I can stay and watch him, if noone else is around --"

"Thank you." Ephiny escorted the young woman out as graciously and quickly as possible, turning back to see Eleas sitting gingerly on the edge of her chair, gaze occasionally darting over to the window.

"Come on." The Amazon addressed Callisto directly. "Let's get you cleaned up."

The warrior ignored her, draining the tea to its dregs as she stared outside; squinting against the glare of reflected sunlight. Ephiny suppressed another growl.

"Move it, woman. Don't make me strip you myself."

"You wish," came the barely audible mutter. Eleas let out a nervous laugh that died away as both women turned an incredulous gaze upon her.
Ephiny sighed heavily.

"Just trying to help. Gabrielle's been up all night with Diana, the sun's been up for hours, and they're going to have plenty of questions. But if you want to go in front of them looking like you just crawled out of a barrel --"

"Fine," the warrior growled, tossing the empty mug over her shoulder. Ephiny caught it by reflex, a retort springing to her lips and dying.

Eleas was frowning, wiping her glasses on her robe.

"What's that?"

A sigh of exasperation. "What?"

Eleas pointed hesitantly. "That."

Two pairs of eyes followed the finger, down to one bare foot.

Ephiny frowned. "Looks like a chakram."

Callisto's eyes narrowed as the women knelt to look closer. The Amazon gently rubbed; the circle was dark green, almost black, and didn't smudge.

"That hurt?"

The warrior didn't answer, crouching to get a better look, reaching out to touch them herself. Both women gasped, and she turned her head with no little annoyance.

"Now what --"

Her gaze followed their frozen eyes down her arm to her wrist. A tendril of dread curled around her heart as she reached out a trembling hand, pulling back the sleeve.

Both Amazon and adjudicator drew a hiss of breath that Xena barely heard as the fabric crept up her arm, revealing ever more flowery geometrics spiraling about her forearm, a multitude of dots and lines and complex angles. She sprang to her feet, shoving them aside, stumbling to the vanity; setting the side mirrors at an angle before turning around, hauling the shirt up with a look of desperation, craning her neck to stare over her shoulder.

The two women stopped in their tracks, and a gutter curse died in the Amazon's throat. An intricate web stretched from Callisto's neck to her hips, spreading across both shoulder blades like a butterfly's wings. The warrior's attention was riveted in the mirror as they took in the jagged black sun around her navel, more lines and dots snaking down past her waistline. She tore off the shirt and threw it away, whirling around; gaping at the intricate patterns that adorned her as though burned into her flesh.

"Oh, my word." Eleas sounded as lightheaded as Ephiny felt. For the first time, the Amazon found herself genuinely afraid.

"Okay...maybe I spoke too soon." She bit back nervous laughter; trying not to stare at the exposed breasts, more naked from the surrounding decoration. "It doesn't look like a tattoo. Maybe it'll wash --"

All three women whirled as the door slammed open. Gabrielle strode in, wearing an annoyed look,
oblivious to the guilty silence.

"What's taking so long? Diana's running out of excuses! If we don't --"

The bard came to a halt, mouth hanging ajar as a topless Callisto stared helplessly back; blonde hair falling past her shoulders, barely obscuring her chest. Ephiny swallowed a thousand possible greetings, but Gabrielle's annoyance had already faded to deceptive calm.

"Ah, of course. How silly of me." A laugh that would have been good-natured on any other day now dripped with venom. "We're trying to keep everyone calm and organized, and you're up here playing Paint the Warrior."

Eleas saw Callisto's jaw tighten, but the warrior sounded calm. "Gabrielle, it just happened. I don't know why, any more than they do --"

"Oh, sure." The bard nodded understandingly, the only visible sign of turmoil the white-knuckled grip on her staff, the tautness in her voice. "Everything just happens, for no reason. Right?" The warrior opened her mouth to protest, but Gabrielle was having none of it. "They're down there practically ready to burn you at the stake, and you go and pull something like this?"

Xena gently swayed on her feet, blindly reaching out for support; hearing Eleas's muffled squeak of terror as the other woman stumbled away.

"Stop yelling..."

"You attacked me!" Gabrielle shot back, emerald eyes blazing. "I think I've got a right to be a little upset!"

"I didn't know it was you!" Xena's arms rose to cover inexplicably stiffening nipples. Gabrielle shook her head, rubbing her temple with a pained wince.

"Never mind...I don't want to know. Just get presentable and get down there," She swiveled on one heel and stormed out, hurling the final words over her shoulder. "Diana's got too many other problems to be wasting time worrying about you."

The adjudicator had relaxed enough to think about breathing when Gabrielle reached back with a cold glare, grabbed the handle of the door and slammed it to, shaking the castle to its foundation. The women winced as one, echoes dying away over the sound of the bard's footsteps fading away; and Eleas drew a pained breath at the look on Callisto's face, as the warrior knelt and gathered up her shirt with trembling hands.

"And you're certain that there's no part of your statements you wish to change or retract?"

Blutus held himself stiffly upright, injured arm in a sling at his side as he leveled a frosty glare at Diana.

"Positive."

Gabrielle was fidgeting in the chair beside her, and the princess realized the testimony -- which seemed to exonerate Xena of any wrongdoing -- had only increased the bard's agitation. She still hadn't entirely forgiven last night's intrusion; her; there had been much in the way of uncomfortable looks during the ensuing discussion, and the subsequent discussion had only worsened Gabrielle's stress and confusion, to the point where Diana felt merely remaining in the bard's presence was causing it to rub off. She'd not even noticed Meg and Joxer slipping out of the bedroom until the
others were gone, suddenly feeling the chill as she hastened to her father's bedroom.

Lias was sound asleep, as was his wont these days even at such a late hour; and tears had threatened to return as she looked down at his frail body.

"She'll make a great Queen one day...as you will. Very soon, Diana..."

Oh, Papa... The wave of crushing misery would have been too much if it had not become so achingly familiar. She truly had been a child, blinded by innocence, her father's desire to protect her; so foolish to think she'd ever experienced true pain, in her sheltered privilege. So naive to think that with her marriage to Philemon, that his brother would leave them in peace...to expect she would ever rule unchallenged, or that such an outcome would even be desirable.

She returned to the present, dismissing Blutus from the stand with a polite nod. The senior officer had been at the tail end of a long line of witnesses who had all more or less confirmed his story; Agathemon with the grudging respectfulness, while the remaining soldiers had either neutrally related their version of the events or sung Callisto's praises as warrior, healer and diplomat, sometimes in the same breath. Diana suspected the witnesses crammed into the tiny conference room had long ago decided there were more important matters to discuss, such as how to weather out the storm with as few casualties as possible, but she wanted to make sure their concerns were addressed -- and, gods help her, that her decisions weren't questioned. There would be plenty of that later, from both the masses and her friends.

"Would anyone else like to speak on this matter?"

There were a few scattered mutters and frowns, but these were quickly hushed by those who preferred to move on to more urgent matters. Diana surveyed the room briefly. "Very well. We can use some help clearing the main road...there's plenty of wood, but our water supply is low. Yes, Cilla?"

The maid stood up from her seat in the front row, clutching nervously at her skirts. "Begging your pardon, majesty. Briyana and I've put all the children over near the hospice. Those..." She fumbled for a word. "Where those women set up camp. We thought it'd be safer for everyone."

Diana nodded; all the women and children in one easily defensible spot, and open enough so everyone could serve as lookouts. "Find out if any of them have experience as healers. We can always use more hands. Agathemon?"

The burly soldier stepped forward. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I hear Salmoneous has been insisting he needs to leave, though you told him it was quite impossible?"

"Yes ma'am, 'til we took him up in one of the towers to see for himself. He's still fussing, but they got him calmed down."

"Excellent." The princess took another drink from her mug, no longer able to put off her decision. "Blutus?"

The captain stiffened.

"I believe my husband is no longer safer behind closed doors. Please inform him he is free to leave his chambers. And that I wish him to meet me in the garden this evening, if he's willing."
Blutus's eyes widened just a fraction before he whipped off a snappy salute. "Yes, ma'am!"

"I don't know what you're all so damned happy about," groused another man; Gabrielle recognized him as the one she had argued with, during the previous meeting. "That little we dug out's already filled. We're just wasting time!"

"I'll go out and dig myself if I have to." Diana drained the contents of her mug, setting it back on the table with an authoritative thud. "We can't feed ourselves forever, and we have shelter and medicine that others need. Being able to communicate should put people at ease."

The troublemaker didn't appear wholly convinced, but was dissuaded from further grumbling. She reflexively reached for another swallow, to calm the jitters in her stomach, before remembering the mug was empty, her fingers drumming restlessly on the side. Maybe running out of this stuff wouldn't be so horrible; too much of anything couldn't possibly be good, and she was starting to feel rather dependent on it.

"All right, then." She offered a confident smile. "If that's all --"

"What about my daughter?" one of the women cried out, climbing to her feet. "If it was your girl missing, you'd have your whole army out looking for her --"

"Don't say such things!" Her husband clutched her hands, pulling her back into her chair where she sat moaning, rocking back and forth. He shot Diana a look of trepidation. "I'm sorry, your highness. She's very upset. I know you're doing all you can...

Diana nodded in exhaustion as the man escorted his wife out of the room, murmuring reassurances to his blubbering wife. She cradled her head in one hand as she rose from her chair.

"'Scuse me, yer majesty." A guard gestured at the window. "Tower watch says there's some Amazons outside?"

Gabrielle and Diana both gave a little jump. The bard quickly grabbed her staff from under her chair and followed behind as the princess strode over to the window with the rest of the room followed behind, flinging the shutters open to reveal rolling hills stretching away toward the forest.

The pristine white landscape was marred only by a line of tracks, leading from the forest to where the Amazons now stood just outside the castle walls, a scant stone's throw beneath the east window. The women warriors were in full battle regalia, sparking in Gabrielle the recollection of the fierce duel that had briefly made Xena their Queen. A brief shiver of premonition as she glanced behind her, seeing Ephiny and Callisto at the door wearing chagrined looks.

"Greetings again!" the princess called. "How in the world did you make it through?"

Velasca stepped forward, pulling off her mask, indicating a pair of broad woven discs at her shoulder.

"Big shoes," came the sardonic reply. She didn't sound as though she were joking, but Diana offered a warm smile.

"You must be cold," the princess remarked. "Won't you come inside?"

The Amazon leader's icy mask never wavered. "This is a formal request for safe passage for my Amazons through your borders. And a demand that you declare neutrality, should the centaurs request aid or comfort."
Gabrielle gave a barely visible start. Diana grasped her hand, squeezing in reassurance or warning.

"I thought we were going to discuss this first." The princess's eyes narrowed, and the Amazon bristled.

"You have ignored us since our arrival. From the reports I've received, it appears you prefer to ally with beasts rather than...your own kind."

"Excuse me," Gabrielle interjected, stepping forward and fighting to keep her voice steady. "Only last night, Amazons and centaurs both helped to defend this kingdom. Why should Diana be forced to take sides, if others can't peacefully resolve their differences?"

"And who are you?" One eyebrow rose with impudent laziness.

"My name is Gabrielle," the bard calmly replied. "I inherited right of caste from Terreis. What happened to Queen Melosa?"

Velasca's lip briefly curled. "I offered royal challenge."

"She defeated Melosa in combat," Ephiny murmured quietly in the bard's ear.

"Fair combat." Velasca sounded almost bored, as if the facts merited no further discussion. "The tribunal declared so. You forget that at your convenience."

She cocked an eyebrow at the bard.

"I've heard of you, Gabrielle," she continued. "Your actions were commendable when you risked your life for Terreis -- even worthy of an Amazon. But she made a mistake." A wheedling note of persuasion entered her voice, masquerading as reason. "You lack the training and birthright to claim the throne. A simple village girl could never lead the Amazons to their rightful destiny."

"What destiny is that?" countered the bard. "The one where Amazons dishonor their treaties by sending them up in flames?"

One of the smaller, younger ones on the far end of the line winced noticeably, peering intently up at Gabrielle through her mask. Velasca contained herself with an effort.

"As I was saying," she purred, silky and dangerous. "You're far too naive...too trusting. Ephiny trusted the enemy. Look and see where it got her."

"And that makes her the enemy?" Gabrielle stood straighter, glaring daggers. Her voice rang out clearly over the battlements. "No, Velasca. It's you who dishonor all the good done by Queen Melosa, and women like her. Women who aren't afraid of the possibilities of peace."

"How dare you?" Velasca hissed. The friendly mask disappeared, her eyes blazing with fury. "Who consort with one who married the enemy, bore his child and abandoned our people? After you abandoned them yourself, gallivanting over the known world with Xena? Helping everyone but your own!"

The bard was about to retort when the young Amazon on the end yanked off her mask, pointed a trembling finger at the bard.

"Where'd you get those furs?" The girl's voice cracked with fear as every eye suddenly upon her. She remained wholly focused on Gabrielle; frozen, as the girl broke formation to stand beside her leader. "Talk to me, now!"
"What in Hades --" Velasca whirled and clapped a hand on the girl spinning her about. "I don't remember anyone appointing you Queen, little girl. And don't give me any of that crap about how they did it in your tribe."

"But --" The girl dropped to one knee, bowing her head. "Forgive me, my Queen."

"That's better," Velasca smiled coldly, dismissing the brief insubordination. "Now then, Amarice. Would you like to explain yourself?"

"My queen --" The girl scrambled to her feet, pointing up at the window, her voice dropping to a whisper.

Gabrielle felt her ears twitch, her skin crawling as the discussion continued for interminable moments, and bit the inside of her cheek. She'd gone and put her foot in it for sure, but she didn't dare back down now; feel Xena's eyes were on her, along with everyone else's, and Velasca would ruthlessly exploit any sign of weakness. The girl was still pointing up, urgency audible even if her words were not, and she steeled herself for the worst as both Amazons turned to her; Amarice with a nervous look of angry determination, Velasca with a grim smile of victory.

The younger Amazon stepped forward and leveled an accusing finger. The tremor was gone from her voice, a certainty that brooked no argument.

"You killed my sister."

Gabrielle blanched despite her preliminary suspicions.

"Artemis knows I didn't kill that girl --"

"Yeah, right!" yelled a stocky brunette. "You've got a personal relationship with the goddess?"

Velasca made a silencing gesture, never taking her eyes from Gabrielle.

"I believe nothing you say!" The girl spat, as though her mouth would never be clean. "You traveled with one who murdered countless more! Why didn't you ever bring Xena to Amazon justice?"

Xena's vision went gray. She might have fallen if Ephiny hadn't been beside her.

"A little redhead?"

"Yeah." The blonde's voice wasn't worried, but Xena could taste her fear with an anticipation that filled her veins. She paused to savor the moment, calculating how best to deliver the blow.

"She didn't fall." The briefest heartbeat as she saw realization in their eyes; unable to restrain the tiny, savage glee. "I pushed her."

The bard's laugh was harsh and cynical. "She's beyond anyone's justice now."

"And it's your fault she never got what was coming to her!" Amarice's features were flushed with cold and anger. Gabrielle didn't budge.

"You think the Amazons are the only ones who suffered at her hands?" The bard leaned further out the window, raising her voice. "Xena...is dead! And even if she was alive, I don't care how much so-called 'justice' you throw at her. It's not going to bring back the dead!"
"Don't talk to me about the dead," Amarice snarled. "I've seen things that'd stop your heart from fright...but the stories my mother told me were worse. How the Warrior Princess befriended our queen, gained her trust...and then butchered her like an animal!" she yelled suddenly, unable to hold back. "The most promising young leaders, the brightest lights of the Nation...a whole tribe, slaughtered in minutes! And you --" She choked back a gasp, looking far younger. "You befriended that monster?"

"No," Gabrielle whispered, fingers numb on her staff. "I didn't know..."

Amarice shook her head, unable for a moment to fully articulate her outrage. "You --" she sputtered. "I'm gonna kill you! And when I'm done I'm gonna give her a medal --" she gestured angrily at Callisto, pale and silent -- "for doing what someone else should have done a long time ago!"

Velasca stepped forward, resting a calming hand on Amarice's shoulder and addressing the bard.

"Gabrielle, you are responsible for Xena escaping Amazon justice. The Warrior Princess reduced a once mighty Nation to pitiful, scattered remnants...to the point where we struggle for mere existence at the mercy of our enemies. Such a crime is inexcusable." She smiled inside at the fear in her adversary's eyes, keeping her voice stern and commanding as befit a ruler.

"Princess Diana, you have until sunrise tomorrow to hand this woman over to stand trial. Do so, and we will leave peacefully. We have no quarrel with you."

"And if I refuse?" The princess's face was a mask of stone, her voice only a shade less frigid.

Velasca allowed herself the smile. "Then we take her. By force, if need be." Amarice was still staring up at Gabrielle, features raw from the chill wind, and the chieftain's arm settled about her shoulders as she drew the young woman away, glancing back up at the window.

"Half our warriors are camped in your forest, so I wouldn't advise trying to sneak her out. Remember!" she called out as the small party donned their odd footwear. "By sunrise, or I make no guarantees for your safety. We battle the centaurs tomorrow...with or without you."

She put her fingers to her mouth and emitted a shrill whistle. The Amazons turned as one, striding down the hillside with bowed legs to accommodate their snowshoes.

Diana pulled a stunned Gabrielle back inside, slamming the window shut with a resounding crash.

"Meeting adjourned."

"Where are you going?" one of the farmers managed to ask. The princess stopped in her tracks.

"To talk to my husband." She turned and leveled a glare at him, and Gabrielle felt her stomach tearing itself to shreds at the images evoked by the sight of an angry Xena. Diana's tone became even colder, sarcasm dripping from the words. "Does that meet with your approval?" The man quailed under her wrath, actually stepping back a few paces, and even Blutus flinched at the venom in her voice.

"Good." And with that the princess turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door even harder than she had the window.

"And I say we move now!" Thraxus glared across the table at his cowardly compatriots as they shuffled their hooves; half of them could barely look him in the eye. "Kaleipus has shown his true
colors! What kind of a leader would abandon his people when they most need him?"

"And I say you're a fool," Inanos declared with cold finality. A spindly blonde palomino with a perpetually dour, pinched expression that caused nightmares in children, he was one of the few with the backbone to stand up to Thraxus despite the lieutenant's superior strength and size, and the other bulls never would have joined in without his support. Thraxus wondered, too, if he hadn't made a mistake in approaching the other centaur so soon, but that worry quashed itself immediately. There was no going back.

"Going up against the Amazons before we have the numbers to win is suicide," Inanos continued, emphasizing his own calmness like the cocky son of a Bacchae he was. "With Treus in the way, all these damn men around? If you want us to risk our lives, we can't afford to waste them. The others will never --" He sighed, changing topics in that irritating way he had.

"You should have made them leave the boy."

"What?" Thraxus knew his desire for victory was the only thing keeping him from reaching out and throttling his adversary, the depth of rage he felt bringing a twinge of sickness to even his battle-hardened soul. It was not at all a pleasant thing to feel when your brothers were all you had in this world, and his resentment only grew at feeling backed into a corner. "Why?"

"Because we need him more than that damned Amazon does!" The surge of anger astonished Thraxus more than the statement itself, or even the realization that Inanos was probably right; one of their kind was easily worth a hundred of those miserable two-legs, and at that age there was still a chance Xenan could adapt to a normal life among his own. But it was more startling to see that mask of control slip. Gods help him if he should let any weakness show its face, or they'd lose what little respect they had for him.

"I like to see you convince her to leave him behind," Thraxus snorted. "We barely have enough food for this winter with the few children we've got! What makes him so special?"

"He's a prince, you idiot." The insult was more brutal in its nonchalance than any yell, and the other centaurs unconsciously shied away, anticipating imminent bloodshed.

Inanos merely continued with quiet sarcasm, as though to a child. "Don't you remember? It was Kaleipus's son that married that damn Amazon. That boy is his grandson!"

"That's right!" burst out another, snapping his fingers. "Phantes, was his name. Went and got himself killed by the two-legs as a reward!" He spat into the fire, a fine mist of steam rising and vanishing.

"So we get our hands on the boy," Inanos concluded softly, glancing around the circle, "get Kaleipus out of the way and install the boy as a puppet while we control the real power behind the throne. If you don't think those bulls will fall in line once they've got a true prince of royal blood to rally behind, you're a bigger fool than I thought."

His eyes shone savagely by the light of the fire. "Once our forces are united, we'll wipe those Amazons out so fast they won't know what hit them. We'll control almost a complete circle around Treus. Then we can sit back and let them and Liberium whittle each other down to size. And if they don't wipe each other out? It'll buy us the time we need. Train the next generation of warriors..."

Thraxus swallowed, feeling his stomachs flutter. Such grandiose conspiracies were beyond his ken,
and he wondered for how long the other centaur had been plotting the details, and with whom. He was on the verge of excusing himself when he heard the same sound the rest were hearing; clatter of hooves, almost drowning out frantic shouts as a young centaur burst from the underbrush.

"Amazons --" He gulped for air as the others leapt to their feet. "They've got the castle surrounded - - they almost saw me!"

"Looks like the decision's been made," Inanos chuckled humorlessly. He clapped a stunned Thraxus on the shoulder, turning to the first centaur who had spoken.

"Bulinus, take the archers, and remember! Stay on this side of the plains, or those Amazons will spot you in an instant. If they try to fall back, let them get to the plains before you take them on, and stay away from those trees! Understood?"

A round of salutes greeted this pronouncement and the centaurs surged to their feet, wheeling and tearing out of the hut. Thraxus was utterly at a loss for words, and he suddenly froze at the sight of a drawn dagger casually carving off bits of fingernail.

"I hope you weren't planning on deserting us in our time of need." Inanos impaled him with a nonchalant stare. "We're going to need all the warriors we can get. But if you even think about running out on me..." He smiled and sheathed the dagger, gently patting the soft leather scabbard as if to reassure himself of its presence. "Someone's got to take the blame if anything goes wrong, and you've been the one making the most noise."

The smile grew more cruel as he watched the horror dawning in Thraxus's eyes, and his voice dropped to a whisper.

"In the blink of an eye, my friend...I can pin all this trouble on you. Best watch your step."

"Mother?" The dark-haired young man glanced around the deserted dining room, finally sighting the older woman seated behind the bar. "There you are," he called, shaking snow from his shoulders and hair. "Don't worry. Even if we starve, we'll have plenty of firewood!"

The woman smiled as she drank deeply from her mug. He frowned at both the look on her face, and the strong smell that issued from within.

"Isn't that your special honeyed ale?" His frown grew deeper at the quiet nod, premature lines of concern etched on his face. "Isn't that the last barrel?"

She smiled sadly. "I doubt we'll see enough business the rest of the season. Besides, I wanted some."

The young man's shoulders sagged as he pulled up a stool. "I know you're upset, but three days should be more than enough. Even in this weather. We just have to assume the shipments won't get through."

"I know," she sighed, staring into the tiny fire that flickered in the hearth. "It's not that...I just can't get my mind off Xena." She laughed softly as his eyes registered understanding. "Don't you think it's strange? That with things this bad, I worry more about her?"

He shook his head, looking down at the polished, worn wood atop the bar. "I still can't believe it. Seeing her like that was weird enough. But after Gabrielle told me what happened..." A nervous shiver. "I don't think I could do it. If I was her."
"Gabrielle's stronger than she looks." She took another drink, wiping foam from her lips with a weary smile. "And if anyone can handle that kind of mess it's your sister."

Toris nodded, allowing himself to be partially convinced. Destroyer of Nations she might be, but Xena was still his little sister, in both size and years; if only marginally so in the former.

He shivered as he rose, throwing caution to the wind, another log onto the fire. "You don't suppose --"

"Ssh!" His mother cocked her head, and now Toris heard it too; the creaking of wood, loud groans of exertion just outside. He peered out the window, hand on his sword, starting at the resounding knock.

"Cyrene?" The voice was muffled by wind and the thick oaken door; male, strong and hearty despite its worried tone. Toris shook his head in frustration.

"Stay there." Cyrene rose with a determined look, grabbing a pan from over the fireplace and striding to the door. Any honest citizens were in bed at this hour, and she couldn't imagine anyone mad enough to brave a storm of this magnitude when her own shelves were as bare as anyone else's. Mother and son exchanged suspicious glances, and she pulled the door ajar before he could utter a word of protest.

"Cyrene?" the enormous mountain of snow repeated. It shivered, sending the outer layer of snow flying away to reveal an equally enormous man with shoulder-length blonde hair, carrying someone in the curve of one arm. He offered a hand which she reflexively accepted; his grip was ungodly strong, the tentative smile making him appear younger than his obvious years.

"Gods, Herc!" Another blonde head pushed past the first, and a smaller man skipped over to the fire, dancing from one foot to the other as he frantically rubbed and blew at his hands. "Don't let all the hot air out!"

Toris narrowed his eyes, keeping against the wall and in the shadows as his mother shut the door. She turned to the first man.

"You know my name, but I don't believe we've been introduced."

The man noticed the iron pan in her other hand, and an abashed look crept over those handsome features.

"Sorry. I'm called Hercules. This is my friend Iolaus, and --"

"Aw we theah yet?"

Cyrene gasped aloud as the figure raised its head from the man's chest. The voice was all wrong, but the face --

Hercules set the woman down, helping her stand, and she addressed the stunned inkeeper.

"You must be Xena's motheh." She bowed deeply. "It's an honoh to meet you. I am cawwed Weah, and it is my supweme honoh to sewve the goddess Hestia."

"Iolaus and I were in the area," the big man offered, removing layers of cloaks and furs, "visiting my family, for a surprise --" He gave his friend a meaningful look. "Birthday party. We heard Xena had been captured and was being auctioned off to some enemy of hers. It took a while to figure out what was going on." A small chuckle escaped his serious demeanor. "The guys who kidnapped
Leah were as surprised as us when they found out --" He hissed with pain as sensation returned to his fingers. "But it was an easy getaway, since they were more upset with the fellow who tried to sell her to them."

The dark-haired woman nodded, looking quite serious. "Appawentwy, I beah a stwiking wesembwance to yoah daughtah."

Not anymore, Toris thought to himself. He stepped into the light, nodding casually, trying not to appear eager to reach for his blade. The woman who wasn't Xena was removing her own furs, revealing an extremely impractical and virginally white dress that Cyrene was sure her daughter wouldn't have been caught dead in.

"Anyway," the big man concluded, "to make a long story short, we ran into your friend Phules. He was trapped on the other side of the pass --"

"Is he all right?" Cyrene's concern for her much needed supplies paled next to the thought of that sweet old man being injured trying to get them to her; but the big man sounded as if it were his job to be reassuring.

"He's fine. But he was deathly afraid you'd hunt him down, if he didn't get your goods to you on time. So we brought his wagon with us."

"He means he brought it," the smaller man chuckled, stamping vigorously as he tucked his hands under his armpits for warmth. Cyrene choked on her ale, and Toris rubbed a clear spot in the fogged window, staring outside as Iolaus continued to ramble on.

"You're far too modest, Herc. Don't I keep telling you? There's no shame in admitting I'm the better tracker, better scout, better cook..."

Toris looked at their guest with renewed respect. "You pulled that wagon through the pass by yourself? With no horses?"

The big man shrugged it off, looking embarrassed, and Toris felt his jaw drop.

"You really are Hercules! My sister's told us all about you --"

"Actually...that's part of why we're here."

The demigod looked extremely uncomfortable, as did his companion. The woman lay a gentle hand on the innkeeper's arm.

"I weft the tempwe of Hestia foah a weason, Cywene. I foahsaw gweat signs, tewwibwe and feawsome poawtents beyond my compwehension...which twoubwed me gweatwy. The othah pwiestesses could not hewp me. Aww I knew was that I must weave and go out into the wouhd, and the goddess would in time weveaw the twuth. I have weawned many things in wecent days, not aww of them pweasant --" An inexplicable blush, and Cyrene noticed Iolaus looking pointedly away.

She gazed with wonder into the priestess's eyes as Leah's demeanor grew even more somber.

"I'm afwaid we bring gwave tidings...of yoah daughtah."

"You mean --" She broke off, waiting for confirmation. But the sad eyes and hung faces were enough.
"Maybe I'd better tell you all a few things first. But it's rather a long story." She patted the woman's shoulder, gesturing for them to sit by the fire.

"Would anyone care for an ale?"

So. Solari let the syllable ooze from her fingers. *Still think the new girl's got some good ideas?*

You *don't have to rub it in*, Eponin shot back with a glare. Velasca had ordered them kept apart both on and off duty, but they'd finally found an unguarded moment to take advantage of; the weaponsmaster had been one of the party to approach the castle, remaining silent only by reminding herself that the first sign of trouble would undo all the effort they'd gone through to get someone into Velasca's trusted command. Currently she was relating the grim events of this afternoon to Solari over a meal of hot tea and cold mutton, while the other Amazon casually sharpened her sword. Both women were huddled deep into the snow at the base of a large hill near the edge of the forest, upwind about an arrow's flight from the castle.

*She's got plenty of good ideas*, Eponin went on. *I just don't think this was one of them.*

Solari glared, as though it were Eponin's fault she didn't have three hands. She inspected the gleaming brass hilt with a critical eye; an unknowing observer might have thought her vulnerable, but she was keeping a sharp ear out for eavesdroppers. Satisfied with the blade's condition, she nonetheless kept a grip on the hilt; signing in the silent language with one hand, in simultaneous gesture of contempt for the skill and demonstration of her own proficiency.

*Velasca doesn't care about the tribe. She's just using the new girl to look good.*

The weaponsmaster offered a pessimistic frown and abandoned silence for clarity, keeping her voice low.

"I just can't stop thinking about Gabrielle. You should have seen the look on her face. Even before Amarice said anything...it was like she was all alone up there." Her mouth twisted as though she tasted something foul. "And I had to sit there and listen to that--"

"Believe me, I know." Solari's disgust was palpable, but she didn't let it disrupt her concentration as she raised the blade and sighted down its length. Satisfied with its condition, she stood and slid it back into its scabbard, taking the opportunity while standing to take a quick look around. It could only be a matter of moments before someone noticed one or the other of them missing.

She hunkered down in the snow again, retreating to the terse but effective silent gestures. *What do you think?*

"Gabrielle?" Eponin breathed quietly. A nod in reply.

*She's scared*, Eponin signed bluntly. *But she didn't kill that girl.*

Solari hunkered down beside her, looking uncharacteristically concerned. *You think she's in over her head?*

*I think she could use our help.* Eponin sighed, popping a bit of snow into her mouth, letting it melt thoroughly before swallowing. *I know we could use hers.* Both women knew Velasca's personal guard was far from the only thing keeping the woman on the throne. As far as Eponin was concerned, what the Nation needed now was the wisdom and patience that had kept Gabrielle alive in the face of what should have been certain death.
She shivered at the recollection of Amarice's words; she'd nearly gotten over her vague uneasiness of Xena, even looked forward to seeing her again. Now, maybe it was for the better that they wouldn't meet again in this lifetime. Bad as the stories were about Callisto...

"What about you?" she whispered, looking Solari in the eye. "You think Gabrielle knew all that about Xena?"

"Doesn't matter," came the blunt response. "Dead's dead."

"Yeah," Eponin muttered. "Sure is."

Both women remained lost in thought until Solari broke the silence once more.

"So what are we gonna do?"

"Was hoping you'd figured that out." But Eponin was smiling for the first time in ages, even if it was a grim one. "If Gabrielle's managed to stay alive this long without us..." She shook her head in admiration. "We need to get some kind of message to her. Even if it's just that we're out here, and we're on her side. And if we can get a message inside, we might as well get a person in there too. Maybe give her a hand."

Solari gave a skeptical snort. "How are we gonna get past the guards? Velasca doesn't trust either of us as far as she could throw us."

"Wrong." Eponin stood up just slowly enough not to alarm the other woman. "She trusts me less."

Solari's last conscious thought as the chobo descended on her skull was: I'm gonna get you for this, Ep.

"Are you sure, my dear?"

Diana ignored the furtive stares of the healer, squeezing her father's hand as she swallowed the lump in her throat. "I won't have you sleeping in that cold, drafty room a moment longer, and that's final. Besides, you'll be much safer here."

The creases in Lias's face smoothed as she stroked his brow.

"Bless you, my darling," he murmured, leaning into the pillow. "I don't want to be any trouble. I'm just so tired..."

"I know, Papa." To stay another moment would be to risk certain tears, and she pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead. "I'll come again as soon as I can, I promise."

"And you'll..." Lias gave an enormous yawn as he settled into the pillows. "You'll bring my granddaughter? I so miss seeing her face in the morning..."

"Of course, Papa." She pulled in a deep breath as she rose, suddenly glad she hadn't taken the time to find something warmer that only would have made her feel more confined. It was no wonder that Xena wore men's clothes; as if the numerous other practical disadvantages to her wardrobe weren't bad enough, she'd recently noticed that of the thousands of items she owned, not a single cursed one had pockets. As if women didn't have anything important to carry!

"Make sure he's kept near the fire," she offered. She nearly cursed her presumptuousness, telling a healer how to do their job, but the woman didn't appear offended. Thankfully, she refrained from
offering overt sympathy.

Diana took her leave in a quiet swirl of skirts, already hearing the murmur of conversation rising in her wake as she passed under the great arch and into the courtyard. Here she had played as a child, out in the open air but still surrounded by walls; here she'd received her first kiss from a servant boy, long since departed when his family moved on in search of greener pastures. Here, she had innocently asked why she wasn't allowed to play outside, and while the exact words had faded from her memory she could still feel the keen disappointment, the unwelcome sense of exclusion. Up there was the alcove she'd found to hide in, which no governess had ever discovered; through here the hall opened on the inner garden, whose fountain was still undergoing repairs.

_I could always sell more jewelry_, she mused, stopping before the fountain. The setting sun was peeking through the clouds that had obscured its light all day, blazing orange spilling from the heavens to scatter across the ice that had formed on the water's surface. It hurt her eyes, yet she couldn't look away as she felt that child's secret glee, anticipation of outlandish visions to follow.

"Diana?"

She looked up quickly, blinded by purple blotches dancing across her sight. A pang ran through her heart at the hesitance in her husband's voice as her vision slowly returned. He was standing under the archway, their sleeping daughter cradled in his arms and swaddled in multiple layers of blanket; his beard was thicker than ever, and she swallowed as he slowly approached and sat beside her. Her hand reached out to touch his face, stroking the soft hair that covered his cheeks and chin.

"It makes you look older." Her voice was suddenly thick with quiet grief and Philemon freed one arm, taking her hand in his own.

"She's missed you." He glanced down at the sleeping baby girl nestled between them, emotion clogging his own voice. "I've missed you."

"And I've missed you."

Neither spoke as they watched the sun's rays darken to red and deep purple. The trees here were beginning to grow past their stone confines; roots running wild cracks through the enormous blocks in an echo of the surrounding flowers and shrubs.

"I've been worried about you."

She kept looking at the foliage, concentrating on the sound of his words.

"You know, I think more people have said hello to me since I left my room than since we've been married? I guess I have more friends here I thought." A note of quiet pride. "They've truly accepted you as queen."

"And what if I don't want to be queen?"

Philemon unconsciously adjusted his grasp to compensate as the child shifted in her sleep.

"It wouldn't matter to me." It was a refreshing realization, one he'd come to over the course of his confinement, and one that made more sense the longer he thought on it. "I don't think it would matter to anyone else. You'll still be important to them, and I know you won't want to stop trying to help them." He took a deep breath. "You've changed."

"I don't feel..." She looked down at the juncture of their hands, the curve of their daughter's cheek in the fading light. "I don't think I've changed that much."
"I don't mind." Her glance was startled, but their hands remained entwined. "All the stories...they've been good ones. If they're afraid, it's as much for you as for themselves..." The words trailed away, a wistful smile crossing his lips. "You know, you're a lot like Gabrielle?"

"How's that?"

"You love everyone." It was that simple. "Even those that denounce you, that spit on your name...even the ones that try to kill you."

"I wouldn't go that far." But the rueful smile was genuine.

"You could have a mob ready to burn you at the stake, and you'd forgive them." The quiet admiration in his tone lessened the sting of the words, her foolhardiness transformed into the most courageous of deeds. Now it was he who looked away.

"I said some shameful things recently." The protest died on her lips as his gaze rose to meet her. "But I hope nothing I've done has brought shame to you or our family..."

"No!" Her hand held him in its surprisingly strong grasp, the intensity of her gaze ensuring his attention. "Philemon, I never suspected you. I was telling the truth. I only wanted to protect you...and her."

The sun was nearly gone, their faces drawing closer as they strained to see one another in the dimming light.

"But I should have remembered," she concluded softly, looking down at their daughter. "You can't protect people by trying to shelter them from every hurt the world has to offer."

He nodded, a flare of guilt in his eyes. "I certainly did enough of that. Those first few months --"

"Stop that." She lay a finger across his lips for emphasis, cradling his face. "I was so afraid you'd be angry or upset if I wasn't the quiet, normal wife you expected...even when I should have known better, I couldn't bring myself to believe that you'd --" She swallowed heavily. "That you'd love me the way you used to."

He held her tight as she settled into his arms.

"Just give me a little time to get to know you again." The vapor of his words emerged into the air, disappearing with the wind. "I do love you, Diana. And I don't hate Meg."

She stiffened slightly before relaxing again. He held them both, as twilight descended.

"But there's so much else to do," came the murmured protest. "I need to talk to Gabrielle. We haven't interrogated that man who tried to kill me..." She snorted. "And if that wasn't enough, Nimor the cloth merchant is stranded here too --"

"Oh gods," Philemon snickered.

"And in the middle of all this, he reminded me I still hadn't met with him about his 'waterway rights issues'. And I reminded him I sympathized but he wasn't going to win any favor with his neighbors if he kept dumping dyes in the river, and..." She trailed off, and he shook his head in admiration.

"We can talk about affairs of state any time. For now..." A soft kiss brushed her cheek, the prickling hair unexpectedly soft. "Let's just be a family."
"That's the problem," she sighed, even as she allowed herself to fully share the warmth of his body. Fragmented images of her father's face came to mind, from childhood memories to mere moments ago, and she held Philemon closer still, as if she could meld them into one. "There's so little time..."

"We'll make the time," he murmured into her hair. A single tear threatened to escape as he closed his eyes. "For our family...for all those who've had the courage to trust you...to believe in you." He nodded with conviction, hearing the truth in his words even as he finally gave voice to it. "You're not the only one who's changed, Diana. We're not alone. This is our home...and we're going to fight for it."

Joxer didn't know how long he'd been sitting; long enough for his legs to go numb, not long enough for the pain to fade. Meg had tried to stop him from leaving but quailed before the look in his eye, and he'd stormed his way out the back gate and down to the river, throwing himself to the ground in an exhausted, quivering mess. Not a wink of sleep, and all they'd done all night was talk about Xena, every damn thing about Xena while he sat there, contributing nothing; one minute unable to bear the sight of Meg as she sat there ignoring him, nervously plucking the blankets, in the next unable to look away.

He'd been vaguely aware at some point of raised female voices around the near side of the castle, but not even their extreme emotion penetrated the writhing mass of thought that threatened to burst forth in a torrent from his skull. Every time he had his emotions under control the horrid sounds would start to come out again, and that was worse than the silences in between. He was already shivering uncontrollably, so it was difficult to tell quite when the cold began to sink into his bones, but by the time he noticed enough to care a blanket of darkness had fallen over his surroundings, leaving him feeling drained and hollow.

Thank the gods he hadn't been crying, or his face would have frozen off by now. What in Hades was he so upset about anyway? It wasn't as though he hadn't known the kind of person she was; but that was the last straw, and now the tears came as he continued to castigate himself. If she was so bad, if she was irredeemable evil, that only made him --

"Joxer?"

He sank further into himself. Meg's voice was raised against the wind, the heartfelt plea leaving no doubt he'd already been spotted. Her footsteps crunched through the snow, stopping just behind him.

"Jox, I'm sorry --"

"Leave me alone," he croaked. The weak tone sounded despicable. "Please."

"I can't!" She sounded close to tears herself, fighting desperation.

"I ain't never -- I never begged nobody in my life for this, but I'm beggin' you. Please...don't make me go." He couldn't bring himself to answer as he felt her sink down beside him, her fear of touching him filling the gap between them. "I love you..."

"You've got a pretty funny way of showing it." The bitter laugh resounded in the air. Why wouldn't she leave, before he only hurt her again?

"That ain't fair!" He welcomed her anger; anything was better than that horrid weakness, and if she was angry at least she wasn't crying. But the storm never came, and his agitation increased as the moments ticked away and she remained silent. He wanted to run; beat her mercilessly before
throwing her to the ground, taking her as she'd goaded him into the other night, pleasure far outweighing shame at the depths of cruelty she'd extracted from him. To fall sobbing into her arms, or offer solace in return. To love her and never let go.

"Course I prob'ly deserve it." The anger fled, muted to dull depression. "That's ol' Meg...anyone for a dinar. Wouldn't blame ya a bit."

"Stop it," he managed.

"Uh-uh." She regained some strength, her tone sharpening. "You really want me to, I'll go away forever. I'll never stop lovin' you, but if that's what it takes to make you happy -- you got it. But first? You're gonna listen."

He turned to her, ready to let the anger spill out, but lost his resolve. She was as ill dressed for the weather as he was, equally red from misery and the cold; and he'd never been any good at talking anyway.

"Diana's my friend." The unexpected calm almost made him look up. "See, I don't really like women. Dunno why, but...I never had any real girl friends, 'til her. An' I grew up with five brothers, no sisters, an'." A quiet resolve entered as she gathered the reins on her diction. "So she's my sister too. And yes, we --" She fumbled to find a suitable euphemism. "We slept together. But she loves Philemon, and I --" A nervous swallow, nearly succumbing to tears. "I love you...dammit, Jox, I love you so much I'd be a whole 'nother person, I'd do anything for you! You know how much that scares me?"

He nodded, silent.

"Is that what you want?" Her grief couldn't disguise the subtle apprehension. "I can be anybody, y'know. But if you want me...gotta take the whole package."

He found the courage to look, but his eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness.

"Gab ever tell you why I left home?"

The unexpected question caught him off guard, his response automatic. "Yeah." He didn't want to broach the subject, but she seemed to be waiting. "She said one of your mom's boyfriends...liked you too much."

"Yeah." A heavy sigh of exasperation. "God...I hate it when I get like this. I don't wantcha to think I'm blamin' my screwups on an unhappy childhood, 'cause I really hate that crap. Anyway, he just wanted under my skirts, but he never got there." She paused to consider.

"Who was your first?"

"My first what --" He was suddenly glad of the darkness as the familiar heat suffused his skin. "Well, I, uh...I watched my sisters all the time, you know, um...bathing. The first girl I fell in love with, my dad brought her back from, uh, from raiding some village somewhere, and --" He coughed weakly. "But I guess you want to know --"

"Yeah." Her voice was softer. "Was it..." She gathered her resolve. "Was it nice?"

He felt a lump in his throat at the unexpected memory. "Yeah."

"Good." The steel edge brought Xena to mind, and somehow the thought didn't hurt. "You deserve it." A faint trace of the old bawdiness. "So who was it?"
"Um..." The blush grew hotter still. "One of my dad's mistresses."

A weak chuckle. "Shoulda known." He nearly thought she'd forgotten the discussion until she spoke again. "Guess that's one reason it was so good."

"What?" He laughed inadvertently. "That I did it and he never found out?"

"Maybe." The answering grin was audible before she grew serious once more. "I'm just...glad ya had a good time."

He swallowed trepidation, expecting the worst. "You didn't?"

"No, I...yeah, I did." He wished more than anything to see her face at that moment. "Lotta people'd say I shouldn'ta, though."

"Why?"

"'Cause it was my brother."

"'Oh." The raving storms of emotion he'd already weathered almost made this a completely unshocking revelation even as it fully sank in. "Yeah, I...can see how that would upset some people." His laugh was more cynical now. "Gee, you'd think they'd just be happy you weren't doing it with a centaur."

"Uh..." Joxer swore he could hear the blush. "That was later."

He chuckled, only a little surprised and increasingly unoffended. "So..."

"Yeah." She sounded as though she'd moved even closer. "So...I was always real tall and, uh...well developed. Every boy in the village wanted the same thing, but my ma's boyfriend had a real temper. That kept most of 'em from doin' too much. But they'd always mess with me...they'd think I was some big tough girl, so I had to learn how ta fight back. An' I can scrap pretty good, but I ain't no Xena. When he put the moves on me it was the last straw...I was so sick of that place, I da killed someone if I stayed."

Her voice lowered, as if fearful of being overheard.

"So I threw some food and clothes in a blanket and took off. It was summer, nothin' like this...'bout this timea night. I make it to the forest, and stop to rest when I hear someone yellin' my name. So I hide my stuff...wasn't time to hide me, bein' so big and all. So I'm tryin' to look innocent when Thaddy shows up --"

"Thaddy?"

"Thaedrus," she clarified. "We all had real names, but hardly anybody used 'em...heck, I don't even remember mine anymore. So many kids runnin' in an' out, we all had trouble keepin' track." She paused to collect her thoughts.

"He was oldest, but he wasn't the biggest...actually he was kinda soft in the head, if ya know what I mean. But he always stuck up for me, when the others gave me a hard time..." He could hear her struggle for control over her speech patterns, resulting in something not quite like her imitation of the princess.

"He saw me, started yelling for me not to leave...he was just scared, but when he grabbed me I got so mad I...I really laid into him, an' then I was so scared..."
"Don't touch me!" His body shook with sobs as he cradled his arm at his side. For one awful moment she thought he was afraid, but the look in his eyes became apparent, disgust aimed inward.

"You didn't mean it," she insisted, trying to keep him from moving. "It's okay. I know you'd never --"

"I just tried to!" he yelled, grief and self-loathing warring on his face. "Gods help me, as much as I love you I just tried to -- you aren't safe around me! I'm as bad as those bastards --"

"Stop it!" Her volume and urgency matched his and she held him against her, insistently squeezing the struggles and sobs from his quivering form.

"You ain't nothin' like them," she breathed, gently stroking his hair. She wasn't sure when it became something else, the smell of his sweat abruptly and excitingly new to her senses; her other hand drifted down the enticing valley of the neck of his shirt, exposing more of the tanned and oaken muscles. She could see that flicker of desire underneath the fear, and it only fueled her own needs; to touch him, to show the love that was so hard to speak aloud.

Before he could stop her she'd cradled the back of his head in one hand, unconsciously emulating the blacksmith when his wife brought a cool drink. Trying not to rush, their lips met in an awkward mingling that threatened to overwhelm her with raw, simple emotion.

He uttered a strange half-sob and tried to pull away again. Her strength was too much, and she held on for dear life; pulling his uninjured arm around her as they lost themselves in each other.

"I...left him there asleep." At some point, Meg's hand had tentatively crept into his. Joxer couldn't bring himself to pull away.

"I felt so guilty...I didn't want him to think I did it just to get away, or because I felt sorry for him. I did it 'cause I wanted to. Just wanted him to feel good, too..."

She gave a cynical chuckle. "So of course the first thing I do when I get to the big city is start freakin' out thinkin' I'm pregnant, 'cause I thought you got pregnant every time you did it. 'Specially the first time. When I figured out that wasn't true, I kinda went a little nuts..." A heavy sigh. "I went a lot nuts. I was really ticked at myself for swallowin' everything they fed me...figured if that was a lie, so was everything else. I..." She swallowed. "Did a lot of stupid things. Stuff I ain't real proud of."

He gave her hand a squeeze, wishing there was something he could say.

"But you gotta understand, Jox...when I started workin' the streets it was bad. I mean real bad. And I thought, there's gotta be a better way. So as soon as I could afford it, I got my own place. Never made a girl stay that didn't want to. Let 'em keep more'n anyone else, made sure they went to the healers..." A note of pride. "Nobody this side of Athens could hold a candle to us for repeat business. Our competition was so mad they went ta all the big shots that liked ta fool around on the
side, tryin' ta shut me down. An' every other woman in town treated me like dirt...but I was kinda used to that by then."

"I --" Joxer felt her fingers on his lips again, growing numb from cold.

"Lemme finish," she said quietly. "Just one more thing. I promise...okay?"

He nodded dumbly.

"I think onea the reasons Gab treats you so bad is 'cause you remind her of where she came from. Sure she can read an' write, an' she can kick butt... then she looks at you, an' all she sees is some dumb peasant, like the ones she left behind." Her calm, quiet joy shone through the tears. "But there ain't no such thing as royal blood. Joxer -- you're the most noble guy I ever met."

Gabrielle had stood outside the bedroom long enough to lose track of time, finally working up the nerve to slip inside at the sound of approaching guards. Shutting the door as silently as possible, surveying her dim surroundings, she wished for an instant she could call out Xena's name; but others might be listening, and by now she should certainly know better.

As it turned out, she needn't have worried: Through the double doors to the balcony she could faintly see the warrior, standing on the edge and balanced atop the narrow stone railing; hands slightly raised, head bowed low. Her heart gave a brief spasm as she watched the slow, deliberate motions, both like and unlike anything she'd seen before in Xena's routines. The blonde figure turned, the light from a nearby window catching her face, and the warrior froze as their gazes met.

Gabrielle found herself turning away, hearing light feet on stone before the click of the window latch. How long could she bring herself to wait...

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I could ask you the same thing." Gabrielle kept her voice neutral despite the pang of guilt at that quiet plea, hearing only a nervous exhalation in return. She turned around, silently offering her waterskin without looking, feeling it hesitantly accepted.

"I don't want to talk about what we should have done," she continued. "I want to know what we're going to do."

"Do?" The warrior laughed shakily, guzzling half the skin, wiping her mouth on her sleeve. "I've been too busy just trying to calm down! Trying to figure out who's behind all this mess! You think I've got all the answers?"

Gabrielle found the courage to raise her gaze, but the warrior wasn't looking even remotely in her direction. Another unbidden memory surfaced; Callisto gazing longingly, lovingly into her eyes as she held a dagger's point to her throat, graceful fingers running over her chin...

"I don't understand you..." Callisto's voice was gently mocking, and yet on some level her puzzlement seemed genuine. "After all I did...you still can't kill me?"

"I won't take a life." Gabrielle swallowed her fear, remembering the promise she'd extracted from Xena; she couldn't demand of the warrior that which she was unable to provide. "And if I ever did...she thought in bitter silence, "I'll never be the the monster you are..."Even yours. I'd rather die."
"Oh, but you will." The blonde woman's tone dropped to a sibilant hiss and the bard closed her eyes in resignation, lifting her chin as that sharp, cold metal caressed the pulsing vein in her neck. At least she'd die with courage, the same way Xena would.

"Get it over with."

"Oh, no..." The momentary surge of anger gave way to a brief giggle. "No, no, no...I'm going to make a grand show of your death." Gabrielle's heart quailed at the depths of her fear, and she briefly entertained the notion of leaning forward and impaling herself on the blade; anything would be better than the gleeful plans dancing in those soft, brown eyes. "And I'll need an audience who'll truly appreciate it."

"I'm sorry..." Another high-pitched giggle threatened to erupt and Xena cut it off. "You don't need me yelling at you...I just --" The empty waterskin slipped through her fingers and fell to the floor as she wrung her hands, unable to articulate her need.

"What you need is to relax!" The bard waved aside the concern, pretending casualness she didn't feel. "At least sit down. You've been on your feet all day --"

"I don't deserve you, Gabrielle..." The warrior sank to the floor cradling her head in her hands. "If I ever had any secrets, it was only to protect you. I was always afraid something like this would happen..." Her voice was muffled, raw suffering all too apparent. "You've got a good heart, Gabrielle. It's pure, and it's honest...and no one should ever hurt you." A gasp of pain, or fear. "No one should ever hurt you..."

"It's okay..." She couldn't keep the mask up, and the tears were a healing balm on the wound she was opening in herself. Forgive me, Xena...

"Gabr...ell?" The warrior was attempting to stand, wincing as she tried to put pressure on her injured leg; color draining from her face as she swayed on her feet. "I don'...feel s'good..."

Gabrielle's tear-streaked features were the last thing Xena saw, as her vision blurred and went dark.

Solan's footsteps echoed from the walls as he roamed the deserted castle, retracing his steps for the third time to ensure he'd remembered the route correctly. It had taken forever to find an opportunity to roam the grounds unaccompanied by adult supervision, and he was beginning to wonder how much longer he could stay missing, or if he might grow lonely enough before that to seek out companionship.

If he had been slightly more engrossed in his thoughts he might have missed the faint noises, but the distraction came at just the right time and he ducked under the table, pulling the cloth back behind him. Probably just one of the guards checking all the doors, but it never hurt a hero to be careful.

His brow furrowed at the sound of faint female grunts and a strange sliding. Solan cautiously peered under the edge of the tablecloth, freezing at the sight of a grim and sweating Gabrielle.

The bard opened the door leading downstairs, taking a deep breath. Gathering Callisto up by the legs, pulling the warrior behind; blonde head gently bouncing on each stair, as they descended into darkness.

bump...

bump...
bump...
Sleeping With the Enemy

Chapter Summary

Xena's dreams reach their climax (pun intended) and when she wakes up, reality sucks even harder. And in the meantime, the barbarians are at the gates...

Chapter Notes

No disclaimers if you're still here after all this nonsense. Enjoy, you sick puppy you.

Close your eyes, look deep in your soul
Step outside yourself and let your mind go
Frozen eyes stare deep in your mind as you die
Close your eyes and forget your name
Step outside yourself and let your thoughts drain
As you go insane...

*Slayer, "Seasons In the Abyss"

In the depths of a mind insane
Fantasy and reality are the same.

*Slayer, "Dead Skin Mask"

Hatred keeps me alive
Angriness keeps me alive
Weakness keeps me alive
Guilt keeps me alive at the bottom.

*Tool, "Bottom"

Prickle-Prickle

Gabrielle took a deep breath and pushed away from Xena's body. The warrior's smoldering blue eyes were filled with fury and despair, but the feverish glint brought to mind the battle lust she had seen her friend work through time and again. She remembered what Xena had told her about the effects of combat on her body and soul; feeling a stab of fear as she recognized that same hunger in herself.

Xena closed her eyes in mute surrender, sagging in her chains as the will to fight drained away. Callisto had already won. Gabrielle knew Xena wanted her, and part of her rose in dark welcome of that desire.
The bard's tongue crept self-consciously over her lips, touching them lightly to Xena's, their sole point of contact. The warrior moaned at the feather-light caress, her chains rattling against the rock wall as she shivered. Callisto leaned forward with a sharp look of anticipation and Gabrielle closed her eyes, trying to block out her presence. Nothing was going to stop her, and she was determined that even if they were to die, she would wring what joy she could from the experience.

She began to kiss Xena; tenderly at first, then more forcefully as she raised one hand, resting it on the warrior's hip. Xena quivered under her touch, all hope of control swept away by the restraints, her own desire for the woman she loved. Gabrielle brushed away the raven-black hair that fell across her chest, exploring Xena's mouth; hesitant at first, passion growing with her lover's moans as the warrior continued to struggle against her chains.

The bard pulled away, with a look of barely controlled tension.

"Xena, please. You'll only hurt yourself."

A giggle rang in her ears, and she cursed her own pathetic weakness.

"Don't worry, she's enjoying it. And I like to see her struggle. It makes her much more appealing."

Callisto's hand trailed down the bard's exposed flank. "Now I know you'd prefer to take your time, but if you don't pick up the pace? I'm afraid I'll have to--"

"No!" Gabrielle felt a surge of shame, pressing against the warrior's softness before she could lose the nerve. Xena tore her eyes away only to find Callisto staring directly at them with a look of brutal satisfaction, a smile that mirrored her own helpless fury.

Gabrielle's eager mouth slipped over an already rock-hard nipple, hearing the answering gasp. She held herself motionless, savoring the salty taste of skin; the unwilling excitement in Xena's voice washing over her as she nursed contentedly.

Xena groaned as her body fought its agonizing, contradictory desires to press more closely against Gabrielle, to crawl backward right through the stone wall. She had to get away; she was so very close to giving Callisto exactly what she wanted.

Gabrielle, sensing her dilemma, slid both hands around Xena's back and drew the larger woman to her, teasing the captured nipple unmercifully with a tongue grown strong from years of talking; increasingly bold fingers exploring her body as she lavished rapt attention on everything within reach of her moist lips and aggressive tongue. Xena was completely at her mercy, twitching with every caress.

Callisto's eyes were alight with some unnamed emotion as she watched the two women. Suddenly she leaned forward, digging her fingernails deep in Gabrielle's thigh. The bard let out a hiss of surprise, pain and anger.

"Oh no, dear. It's not that easy." The intrusive fingers crawled upward, and Callisto relished their eyes upon her before speaking again, her tone oddly flat. "If you stop, I'll have her killed."

Gabrielle frantically clutched at Xena again as fresh agonies coursed in the warrior's veins. Hatred and love were one, tearing through and leaving her defenseless. Xena was her world; nothing else existed.

She nipped gingerly at the ring of flesh around the warrior's navel, one hand sliding down the bronzed and muscled belly to the thatch of hair below. Xena's hips arched toward her, eyes closed in shame as the bard's fingers entwined themselves in the darkened curls.
Callisto had moved to the other side of the two women, eyes riveted on them as she leaned in, running a graceful finger down the bard's haunches. Gabrielle tried to shut out the haunting laughter, wrapping her other arm tighter around Xena's waist; sliding her fingers through wet, hidden depths even as she felt Callisto's own hand mimicking her actions. Her hips jerked back into the hated touch and the warrior's musky scent rose to her nostrils, threatening to overwhelm her. She leaned back to see Xena's face as she teased her dripping entrance. The warrior's eyes were shut tight, body tense as a statue, and Gabrielle's heart nearly broke. She would not allow Callisto to ruin this moment for her; and she whispered her lover's name as she felt warmth engulf her.

Xena's wrists and ankles were slick with blood from her struggles against the manacles. She froze as Gabrielle's tongue slid down her abdomen, tracing the fine trail of hairs leading down from her navel. The bard inhaled deeply and gave up the fight to remain aloft, sinking into Xena's body, pressing her against the rough stone.

"Very good, princess." Callisto's voice was cold as ice, and she seemed to be referring to them both. "In fact, quite entertaining. But somehow, I find myself vaguely...unsatisfied." She leaned over, desperate hunger in her eyes.

"Seeing as how you're a bit tied up at the moment..." A bitter smile, without a trace of humor at her joke. "I think I'll take matters into my own hands."

Gabrielle wrapped her arms tighter as Callisto reached down, twisting her fingers in the bard's hair.

"No." Xena's voice sounded appallingly weak in her own ears. "You've had your fun." Her chest heaved for air as she strained at her bonds.

"Why, Xena! I'm surprised at how selfish you're being." Callisto leaned over, sliding her free hand between Gabrielle's legs in a languid, intimate caress.

The sound of the bard's groan was a knife in Xena's side. Callisto reached out to caress her cheek and she turned away, suppressing the urge to bite at her captor's hand.

"Oh, how precious!" The blonde woman's smile was honeysweet, her tone mocking. "What's the matter, princess, are we shy? Or can't you handle knowing how much she enjoyed that?"

She grabbed Xena's jaw, forcing her to turn back. The scent of Gabrielle's passion flooded the warrior's senses, and Xena felt her heart wrench as her friend's body stiffened.

"You've both inspired me." Callisto's face darkened as she pulled the bard's head back. "In fact, you've touched me. Deeply."

She drew closer to Xena, leaning in; the warrior unable to fight or pull away as their lips met in a gentle caress. Callisto drew back just enough to capture her enemy's eyes, breath warm on Xena's face.

"And to show my gratitude? I'm going to return the favor." The blonde warrior shivered with unspeakable feeling. "I'm going to make your little plaything scream with passion...and you won't be able to do a thing for her." A hint of playfulness returned.

"Some protector you are."

She traced her other hand along the arched neck, chuckling as Xena's struggles increased. Gabrielle twisted violently in her grasp, staring into horrified blue eyes.
"Well, she's obviously ready," Callisto snickered. She forced a knee between struggling thighs, a peal of amused laughter rising from her throat. "Oh, my.. I won't even have to tie her up, will I?"

She slowly slid her hands over exposed skin; raising her voice, to ensure Xena heard every word.

"Don't worry, dear. I promise I'll show her a good time. After all..." A diabolical smile. "I had a very good teacher."

Xena threw the back of her head into the wall, in a desperate attempt to escape. Blow after blow, the darkness too slow in coming as it finally descended; she could still hear moans and laboured breathing as Gabrielle was dragged over the edge, the sound of the bard screaming her name, even as she wondered which name that was. And the terrible knowledge that the screams were coming from her...

The cries died away, as Xena realized she actually was beating her head against a wall. She fell still, breath harsh and labored; she was shivering uncontrollably, drenched in sweat, clothes sticking to her skin. As she thrashed and fought to pull them loose she felt cool metal about her wrists, heard the clank of chains as she struggled. For an awful moment the nightmare was real, and she shuddered with the effort of containing helpless sobs.

Against every howling impulse she forced herself to relax, extending her senses as she attempted to take stock of the situation: She was sitting, arms chained slightly above to either side with barely an inch of slack in the restraints. Back pressed against cold stone, head aching as badly as the rest of her; but her legs were free, eyes were starting to adjust --

Flint sparked into existence, blinding her all over again. A faint rustling reached Xena, as her vision cleared.

Gabrielle sat on the opposite side of the tiny cell; staff at her side, a single candle dimly illuminating the area as she slowly raised her head. Xena's heart sank at the cold, appraising gaze, somehow finding a trace of the old flippancy.

"Was it something I said?"

"I don't have time for this!" The god of the forge, as always, was an awesome sight even to immortal eyes and despite his scarred features. Nearly nine feet tall and proportionally broad; beautifully formed as any of his fellows, apart from the deformity of his leg. He gave his best foul glare, trying to return his attention to the cluttered workbench.

"Neither do I." Hermes looked uncharacteristically grim. "I can think of plenty of things I'd rather be doing. But my orders are to get everyone to Olympus, and I mean yesterday. I'm authorized to use any means necessary. So we can do it the easy way, or --"

"Never mind." The forge lord heaved a melodramatic sigh, turning a plaintive expression on his fellow immortal. "Look, can't you at least give me a bit to clean up?"

"I really shouldn't," Hermes muttered. The wings on his helmet and sandals fluttered nervously as he considered. "All right, but you-know-who will have my head if he finds out. So if you're not there, I was never here. Got it?"

Hephaestus shook his head as the other god vanished into the air. His gnarled hands worked quickly and efficiently, cleaning and stowing tools and hazardous raw materials; thoughts wandering, as they tended to. Briefly, he wondered if he should hunt down his wandering wife, and quickly discarded the notion: No doubt she'd already received her invitation, and she was more
than capable of making the journey on her own. Nevertheless, the twinge of guilt was uncomfortably close to jealousy, given the inordinate amount of time she'd been spending with Ares.

"But Hephy-poo," she'd insisted, turning that irresistible pout on full force. "I swear, it's just talk! He's really bummed, and I'm givin' him a shoulder to cry on."

*And a better view of your bosom,* he'd thought, nevertheless holding his tongue. Anything that kept his brother from further mischief was a good thing, and he'd been cuckolded by far better gods, and men, to worry himself over his beloved's occasional philandering. She was probably telling the truth, but it never hurt to be too careful, in affairs of the heart.

He finished putting away the last of it, surveying the workroom. No telling how long he'd be away, and he could only hope it wouldn't be more than a mortal century. There were too many important projects on the burner -- in one case, literally -- to leave unattended, and he heaved another melancholy sigh; if it weren't for Aphrodite he would have been more than content to hole up in his workshop for eternity, never to see another immortal face. Shower him with praise for his efforts, they would; but Hera's shame at his disfigurement was a strong influence, as well as their instinctive discomfort, bordering on revulsion, for anything less than perfect.

But, there was no more staving off the inevitable. Hermes had forgone the traditional, flashy entrance and exit the Olympians were famous for, and that more than anything had convinced him of the gravity of the situation.

Hephaestus shut his eyes, steeling himself for the transition that was over almost before it began, those moments before and after almost worse than the infinite void between. This time was worse than any other, and he was on his knees on the marble floor of the Great Hall, body wracked with shudders as he regained his senses. Unsurprisingly no one came to his aid, which answered the question of whether his wife had arrived yet.

The dull buzz of conversation never wavered as he rose to his feet. Ares was standing to the side, apart from the others as usual, wearing his habitual almost-sneer. Hades and Demeter actually appeared to be getting along for once, or at least not at each others' throats, while a frighteningly sober Dionysus was engaged in heated discussion with a flustered Apollo, the god of the vine sounding more lucid than Hephaestus had heard him in centuries. Poseidon's watery form rose from the radiant pool in the room's center, having manifested less than half his usual size but no less impressive, his booming tones muted and respectful as he replied to a point made by Eris; Artemis stood with arms folded across her chest, her face pale and grim as Athena patiently explained something. The only missing party appeared to be his wife, and that faint scent reached his nostrils even as the thought occurred.

"Hephy!"

He returned her embrace with vigor, for once unmindful of his extended family's sly glances and snickers. It was oddly reassuring to know their juvenile obsessions remained constant even in such dire circumstance.

"What's shakin', babe?"

"I only just got here," he murmured. "It's certainly quieter than usual."

Aphrodite placed a hand on her hip, keeping the other possessively wrapped around her husband.

"So where's big daddy?"
"Apparently, Lord Zeus doesn't wish to be disturbed."

The sarcastic interjection came from Poseidon, and the other gods broke off their discussion to nod agreement, faces reflecting their own displeasure. A vague rumble rose from the elder god's chest, tiny bubbles rising through his transparence with the sound.

"My brother forgets he isn't the only one with a little seniority around here."

"Size queen," Artemis muttered, resulting in a chuckle and supportive wink from Dionysus.

The low snicker from Ares startled Hephaestus with its unexpected humor. "Oh, you're one to talk."

Apollo bristled and rose in defense of his sister's honor, but the war god was undeterred, sitting down on a chair that appeared just before he sank into it. He threw one leg over the other, cocking an eyebrow.

"Oh, sure. You love to sit around and blame me, but do I ever hear any of you admit to screwing up? You! Water boy!" Poseidon leveled a freezing glare, which Ares ignored only through years of practice. "You ever stop to think maybe that whole mess with the centaurs is your responsibility?"

Poseidon cleared his throat with a liquid rumble, looking uncomfortable. "The horse was a perfectly legitimate gift for mortals. It's not my fault if Ixion couldn't leave well enough alone."

"I gave him a fine design for version two," Hephaestus muttered resentfully under his breath. "But did he listen? Nooo..."

Aphrodite patted his chest with a sympathetic smile. "It was a groovy design, sweetie...millenniums ahead of its time." She stood on her toes, planting a kiss on his cheek. "Trust me, they ain't ready for it. Those mortals have got enough trouble with the love-sex thing as is. The last thing they need right now is centaurs with tits and two sets of thingamabobs that breed twenty-nine different ways."

"But --" Hephaestus stared at her in disbelief. "You were the one who gave me the idea! You said it would be good for them!"

"I did?" The love goddess scowled thoughtfully before her delicate features smoothed to a lascivious smile. "Must've been just after you rocked my world or something. C'mon, Heph...you know I can't be held responsible for what comes outta my mouth at times like that!"

She lowered her voice though she needn't have bothered; the other gods had predictably continued to bicker and they couldn't have had more privacy in their own bedroom. "Tell ya what. I found this great little out of the way moon you could use for beta testing --"

"And who's responsible for Ixion getting hold of that stone in the first place?" Demeter's tone was sharply accusing, drawing grim nods from more than a few. "Care to explain that one, dear brother?"

"All right, everyone." Hades looked and sounded bored, but everyone knew this was when he was most angry. "If we could think about being a little more constructive --"

"And you!" Ares turned his attention to the scowling lord of the underworld. "Pasty boy! You want to tell me what's so different about you going around populating half the known world? How come everybody starts whining conspiracy when I follow in your footsteps?"

Hades turned even paler. "You --"
"Oh, don't play innocent with me!" Ares snorted derisively. "A blind man could tell they're yours. At least you got two decent ones out of four."

"Ha!" Aphrodite crowed, grinning triumphantly at an astonished Artemis. "Told ya!" She gave Hades an encouraging wink. "I always said Joxer had your eyes -- Hey!" She blinked, frowning. "What's wrong with Jayce?"

Athena rolled her own eyes. "You'd think if these mortals learned nothing else they'd realize it's a bad idea to make war. Whenever their men go riding off to battle, the gods come and bed their women!"

"Like I said," Ares sneered. "You think you're any better! You all drink from the fur cup anyway."

Artemis gasped and her eyes threatened to pop out of her skull, but Ares didn't notice. "And while we're on the subject, if it weren't for me, you wouldn't even have your precious Amazons to fuss over. Those are my kids too, you know!"

"Don't remind me." Artemis turned a frigid glare on Aphrodite, who quickly held up her hands. "Don't look at me!" The love goddess curled a protective arm through her husband's, snuggling closer as she glared back at her sister. "Those are just mortal rumors. Go talk to that nymph, whatsername? Harmoania?"

"And until you stuck your nose in --" Ares leaned forward, hands on his knees as he glared up at Artemis. "They worshiped me as the god of war, as they rightfully should. But you had to get greedy!" He threw a sarcastic grin at Dionysus. "Don't know where things could have gone wrong. Maybe getting their butts whipped by a drunk --"

"Enough!"

Everyone fell silent as Zeus's presence filled the room. The king of the gods appeared exhausted, but his aura of command was still present, and even his siblings shrank from the anger that poured forth in waves.

"I am doing delicate work here. I can not concentrate with all of you bickering like the spoiled children you so obviously are!"

Ares rose with a glare, and Zeus turned a deceptively calm eye on him. "You should consider yourself lucky. A less understanding father might think you were trying to breed your own race of gods, in preparation to usurp his throne."

The enormous face was abruptly gone, and the immortals whirled about to find their king standing behind them casually stroking his beard, bushy eyebrows furrowed in concentration. Ares fell back into the chair with a frustrated groan.

"They're not gods, dad. They're not half-gods, they're not even demigods. I had to spread myself thin if I wanted more than one!" Aphrodite nodded sagely as he went on. "And if I had put all that power into Xena, you can bet she would have torn your boy a new hole or two. He only won because she was still recovering from the gauntlet --"

"ENOUGH!" Ares' retort died on his lips, and Zeus turned away, his errant son forgotten. His eye found Athena and he smiled fondly at her, approaching and placing his hands upon her shoulders.

"Daughter," he said softly. "Wise one. If any of my children might know what is happening, it
would be you. What do you see?"

"The worm," came the sad reply. The remaining Olympians gaped as she turned her gaze to them, reaching up to take hold of her father's hand. "It eats itself. An infinite feedback loop...a vortex for power." She swallowed. "A black box..."

He nodded grimly. "Xena's thoughts have been impenetrable ever since Callisto disappeared. Even Dahak can't see into her mind."

"Who is Day-hock?" Artemis pronounced the name as if she were biting into a rotten clam.

"Not much at the moment. Just some little pillar of fire..." Zeus frowned. "That could burn out of control. But we have more pressing concerns. There's no way to prove Callisto is still alive, or to prove she isn't...and with all the magical energy being drawn toward her body, I don't think it's a terribly unreasonable assumption."

"What's so special about this warrior?" grumbled Poseidon. "Bad enough we have to put up with Xena!"

"The blood of the gods may not run in her veins," The lord of Olympus looked every bit his age. "But Callisto is potentially every bit as important as Xena. You would do well to remember that."

As he raised his hand, the water that comprised Poseidon and the scrying pool became a shimmering portal, showing the single cell deep in the dungeon and its two inhabitants. The sea lord directed a puzzled glare down at his now glowing, reflective surface, and Aphrodite smothered a grin.

"And even if Callisto has nothing to do with this," Zeus concluded, "anything focusing that much energy isn't a good sign. If something goes terribly wrong that we can't contain, you're just as safe here as anywhere else." A shrug, and a sly wink. "In other words, not at all."

The barrage of questions that followed might have produced useful information, but it was as lost on Ares as he was in his memories. It had become so clear and obvious, least most of it: it was Xena who was responsible for his predicament, this sad and sorry state of affairs that had reduced the once mighty god of war to a puling emotional wreck. The most laughable thing was that this new Ares was indeed an improvement, in many ways that would have impressed the old one.

Unfortunately, they were more than offset by the newfound weaknesses. The first clue, if he hadn't been so blind to it at the time, was the gradual change in his physical appearance since Xena had left his side -- the 'dark side', as he'd come to think of it after that damned bard had used the phrase on untold occasions. It had been a mild shock to see the clothes he'd picked out for himself one morning, but he'd managed to recover himself sufficiently to change the white leather to black in the space of a thought before anyone noticed. A bigger one came when he realized he had no recollection of cutting his hair and trimming his beard, via blade or by his powers. True, these were only minor annoyances next to his obsession with Xena, but each victory she gained over him whether knowing or unknowing only made the physical and mental changes more severe; and by the time he'd realized the truth it had been too late. He'd done it to himself, at least in part, and it hadn't taken Aphrodite to point it out.

*I had no choice*, he reminded himself bitterly. Xena's rebellion had forced him to become more subtly skilled in his warfare, more smooth and polished in both appearance and approach. His growing sophistication in his courting of her; the increasing deviousness, the way he kept thinking out every little compulsion until it threatened to drive him mad. And it wasn't even all her fault; that damned bard could probably convince Zeus to vacate his throne.
Their petty mortal challenge had brought him closer to their level: He had learned, grown, even changed, and all because of love; what had started as wholly selfish now streaked through with sickening, uncontrollable fear for his daughter. No matter how much he yearned to have the Destroyer of Nations at his side, there was some part of him that couldn't bear to see her hurting or unhappy. And the thing that made her happiest was...Gabrielle.

Of course one could never discount boredom as a factor in immortal motivation. Every failure taught that the biggest reason he kept up the struggle, was the sheer joy of their conflict.

He glared at Hephaestus, thinking not for the first time that the forge god had to be lying about not being responsible for her chakram; returning endlessly to that infernal, meddling desire to do good. Should he try to help Xena and her irritating friend? Naturally, but of course while still pursuing his own goals. One of which was to win Xena over. But was he better off with her dead, or alive and free?

He laughed softly, knowing he never would have hesitated before.

_You've won, Xena._ He shook his head, feeling the sorrow and admiration that had him spinning his wheels. _I salute you...my warrior princess._

Gabrielle didn't blink, offering only stony silence as she stared back. The bard's face was indistinct in the flickering shadows, her position a mirror of Xena's but for her hands lying unchained and in her lap.

The warrior swallowed the growing nausea tugging at her guts, feeling a prickling numbness in her extremities; most likely aftereffects of whatever had been used to put her under. She tried to wrestle her disobedient thoughts into some semblance of order.

"Okay..." A cough and wince, at the echoing throb. "Looks like you wanna talk. So..." She shrugged as best she could. "Let's talk."

The bard made no reply, her breathing surprisingly calm and even. Xena had to quash another flicker of fear; she'd used the silent treatment herself on countless occasions, sitting back and allowing the interrogated to dig their own grave at her leisure. Sooner or later some manner of slip would be made, or they'd simply break down and start blubbering. It was essentially a contest of wills, and she was up against one of the few people who could give her a real fight.

"Fine." She made it as casual as possible, ignoring the protests from back and shoulders as she tried to find a less uncomfortable position. Faced with certain doom, she did what she did best: Thumbed her nose, and spat in its face.

"All right, Gabrielle...I'm Callisto." A deprecating chuckle. "Of course, I could be lying about that, too." She realized her breath was growing heavier, exerting deliberate effort to slow its pace. "So whatcha gonna do about it?"

If the bard's chest hadn't been moving, Xena might have sworn the woman was dead. She realized she was slowly grinding her teeth together, and had to force herself to stop.

"If I _was_ her, I wouldn't have any reason to live with Xena gone. All I wanted was oblivion, remember?" Something snarled inside her. "Callisto never cared whether you lived or died! Why would I start now?"

"You don't have to shout."
She stared at the young woman, a soft halo cast about her by the soft light of the candle. She still wore her brown skirt and top but sat stiffly, her hair falling in thin braids to either side of her face in the northern Amazon style, and Xena felt a chill cut to her bones. This was a ghost, come to pass judgment upon her...

"Nobody can hear you." The bard's voice was quiet, a little sad, but otherwise this could have been a normal conversation. "It's just you and me."

"Gabrielle, what are you doing?" She couldn't conceal that tiny undercurrent of fear as the bard's hand settled atop the staff at her side. Xena licked her lips, wishing she could rub the damned itch from her eyes; she was squinting and blinking like a bat in a dust storm, and the more she tried to force them open to see properly the harder they tried to squeeze shut.

Gabrielle hadn't moved a muscle, but the silence spoke louder than anything she could see. She leaned back against the wall, teeth bared in a quiet snarl.

"Okay...so you don't wanna talk." That struck a chord somewhere. "Or I'm supposed to be doing the talking..." She had to stop to breathe again, pounding heart nearly drowning out her own voice.

"Maybe..." She craned her neck in an unsuccessful attempt to keep her bruised shoulder from tensing up. "Come on -- don't tell me we haven't both been thinking about it. Maybe you don't think I'm her, but she might still be trying to get her body back. Or maybe she's already inside, fighting for control..."

That actually got a blink, and the barely heard sound of the bard's throat working before the silence engulfed it once more.

"Look, I don't care who you think I am, but let me help you!" Desperation turned to panic as the words rolled off her tongue in a flood. "Right now I could be out there organizing troops, treating the wounded, making sure this city doesn't get beaten to a pulp between the Amazons and the centaurs! And Mineus, we've got no idea of the size of his forces, he could be on his way here --"

Her eyes shut as she bit her tongue hard enough to draw tears and blood in equal amounts; waiting for thoughts and breath to slow until she could speak without yelling.

"Dammit, you know I'm no good at this..." She would not cry, she would open her own wrists before she inflicted that on either of them, but she couldn't conceal the overwhelming despair. "I can't read your mind! How'm I supposed to know what you want if you don't..."

She raised her head, seeing Gabrielle shiver before relapsing into immobility.

"You want me to figure it out myself." It was a short, clipped statement and simultaneous question. Xena nodded, a disdainful edge creeping into her voice. "Okey-dokey. Let's see now..."

Her cheeks puffed out in an audibly sarcastic exhalation as her tongue clicked thoughtfully against her teeth. "Oh yeah, now I remember why you don't trust me. Nothing and everything, right? Certainly a lotta wiggle room there, yes sir..." Her eyebrows rose like an eager child's before the false cheer dissolved.

"Right," she panted. Every breath was starting to hurt. "I understand...you've been under a lotta pressure lately." Her head lolled as she tried to stretch again, sickening memory threatening to tear her heart from her chest: tied to the cross, Caesar's casual cruelty ringing in her ears along with her screams; and the horror when that familiar memory dropped out from beneath her, the one who carried out his commands now wearing the face of her best friend...
She violently shook her head and only succeeded in increasing her stomach's unhappiness, nearly bumping the tender part of her skull again. Something else was trying to surface: green eyes blazing with passion as the bard rose to defend her against an angry mob, and an inner chuckle -- *Which time would that be, princess?*

"Gabrielle. When we were at the council meeting...you said I had a lot longer than Callisto to build up a reputation." She couldn't meet the bard's eyes; hell, she could barely keep her own open for the room's spinning. "What you saw today, the things you heard...was only a part of that. I lost ten years of my life to my hate, and I made the most of every minute." The bitterness threatened to erode her control but she waited it out, trying not to clamp down too hard; in her mind came a flash of Lao Ma's hands overflowing with sand, clenched fist spilling into emptiness while the other, relaxed hand remained nearly full.

"You asked that man how he could compare Callisto's actions to mine." A drop of water would be a thing to kill for right now, and she couldn't help licking her lips though it only made it worse. "Who killed more people, which was more brutal...the only difference between us is I lived long enough to feel guilty! Every one of those people still haunt my dreams...it would have taken forever to tell you half the things I did, and before I finished you'd have run off screaming!"

*Stop yelling,* the calm voice echoed in her head; it sounded like Callisto, herself, and vaguely like Gabrielle. Her nose was itching like mad -- *of course,* came the disgusted chuckle, and the offhand hope that she could get loose before she had to piss. *Stop taking it out on her...*

"That's not fair...I'm not saying you'd abandon me for telling you the truth. I could never think that little of you..." She still couldn't bring herself to open her eyes, her voice briefly echoing from the walls before being swallowed by the darkness. "But I told you I could never wash the blood from my hands. Every waking moment, every dream is a reminder...everything I do is colored by it, and no amount of good deeds can change that." Unbidden came the wondering of where Ephiny was but she kept going, deliberately abandoning any hope of rescue. *You're on your own, princess...*

"Now you know...the biggest reason I have for protecting the Amazons. Even if you could forgive what I did to them, I don't think I ever could. And it's not a smart move for the queen..."

*Dammit! You're as good as calling her a stupid kid...*

"Gabrielle..." She nearly wept at the utterance of the name. "Sometimes you're the only thing that keeps me going through all that damn guilt. Just when I'm sure nothing's worth it, somehow you -- you say just the right thing, or you do something special, or just smile at me and I -- " A dry, choking swallow. "I feel like I can do anything..."

*Very good, princess.*

The thin sneer nearly made her cry out, but she forced herself to slowly raise her eyes. For the briefest moment there was a reflection of her own misery and frustration, and then hope withered as that cold mask slipped over the bard's features once more.

"Okay," she breathed softly. The full measure of her plight was becoming all too apparent, while the numbness had unfortunately long fled from her limbs, leaving a thousand nasty throbbing pains in its wake. How long until sunrise? "You can't afford to --" A series of dry coughs made the craving for drink return stronger than ever, but the urge to throw up couldn't get much worse.

"Can't afford to make a mistake," she continued when she could get the words out. "Maybe I'm Callisto, and somehow I have all of Xena's memories..." She forced herself onward though every instinct shrank from fully exploring the implications. "Yeah, that would make sense. Only
problem...how do you tell the difference between the truth and a perfect lie?" And Callisto would do it too, just to spite her: the relief of oblivion would pale beside the potential for amusement, killing Xena's memory long after her body had turned to dust; she'd play the game out for years, a subtle torture that grew with every day until the bard was on her deathbed, and --

*How typical!* The mocking laugh resounded in her skull, blurring reality in its wake. *Of course, it would never occur to you that I could ever want a friend? That I could _be_ a friend? And with you gone and out of my misery, I might have had the chance* --

"And wouldn't that be so convenient?" Her entire body shuddered with the force of the contained scream, tears in her voice if not her eyes. "No matter what, I'm guilty! If she *is* still around, she's probably laughing her damn head off!"

Get a grip on yourself, came the little hysteria. Before it was too late.

"Let's say you're right." She dimly remembered the bard hadn't admitted to any particular theory, but forged ahead. "So I'm Callisto, what if I really *have* changed? What if --" She moved quickly, before she could lose her nerve. "What if killing Xena finally made it possible to put everything behind me? What if I want to be your friend, but I'm scared to death I'll never get the chance if you find out who I really am!"

Self-loathing and shame crawled under her skin; back and legs drained of warmth from the cold stone, helpless, childish fear making her sound more than ever like the warrior queen.

"I thought that was the whole point! You changed Xena, what about *me*?"

"Oh, you've changed, all right."

Her head jerked up but she barely felt the impact; wide eyed and gasping from the frigid condemnation as a tiny, almost impudent smile met her gaze.

Xena counted three very slowly, but her pulse insisted on disobedience. The temperature in the little cell seemed to have dropped to its knees.

"Are we talking just physical?" The cautious tone made no attempt to hide the scornful, rebellious undercurrent. "Or is this about more than my body?"

Silence.

"Mm...I see." She gave her head a casual, haughty toss, failing to clear a lock of hair from her eyes. It sort of spoiled the effect as she looked away, pointedly ignoring the bard in exaggeratedly courteous dismissal. "You only talk when you feel like it. But that's fine, you go right ahead...Ho-kay," she finished under her breath, eyes rolling. "Like you haven't changed."

"I told you --" Gabrielle sank back with an expectant glare, waiting for some smug retort or smile of victory, but the warrior's face was tinged with sadness. Xena's gaze drifted downward, the bard's following to the white knuckled grip on her own staff.

"We changed each other." Xena's tears were trying to break through the healthy crust of mad, but she was hurting too much to cry. "You taught me wisdom, I taught you weapons...you taught me trust, I taught suspicion...you taught me love, and I --" She broke off, unwilling to finish the thought. "Gabrielle, right now I'd be scared to teach you to use a sword!"

"If I've had to become a warrior..." The bard's voice was a low growl, barely recognizable. "It's only because you made me."
"Oh, that is such crap!" There was no way to take back the outburst, and she gave full vent to it. "That's just what Callisto tried to pull! 'Oh Xena, it's not my fault I enjoy killing and torturing innocent people, you made me what I am!'"

Fury clogged her throat, Callisto's derisive tones echoing in her ears. Her face contorted in anguish as she struggled for calm.

"How long has it been since you wrote in your scrolls? Or told one of your stories?"

"Why bother?" Gabrielle's laugh was hollow and bitter, and she shook her head. "Everybody turns to dust in the end. Scrolls turn to ashes..."

"Gabrielle, what is it?" That whiney, pleading note was coming to the fore again. "Please, talk to me --"

"My parents are dead."

Xena's mouth fell ajar at the matter-of-fact pronouncement, and she fumbled for an eternal moment.

"What?"

The bard closed her eyes, as if the sight of her were too much to bear.

*Stupid, stupid!* her mind railed; but all she could muster was more of the same. "How..."

"Lilla told me. The first day we saw her." The candle fluttered in a gust of wind as Gabrielle's mask of calm dissolved into bitter resentment. "Because we weren't there, because Meleager the Mighty wasn't there...because *I* wasn't there!"

"You can't blame yourself --" She tried not to gulp each precious bit of air. For an instant, she thought she might faint. "We could have gone there instead, I could have left you...none of this had to happen --"

"But it did!" Xena flinched from the venom, but icy self-possession quickly returned.

"I don't care what happens to me." Gabrielle's voice was a whisper on the air. "But I can't go on like this. I need some kind of answer...I need to know for sure. Because otherwise, we're going to kill each other." She opened her eyes, features smoothing to sorrowful, resigned composure. "And I won't let anyone else get caught in the middle."

"Oh yeah, speaking of which --" She started out calmly, but sarcasm quickly fell before raw frustration that demanded release. "Maybe you forgot, but we're the ones caught in the middle here! It's just like that story I told you about Jason, Skilla Carob whatserfaces --"

"That was Odysseus," the bard snapped from sheer reflex, "*and I* told you that story! Gods know I sat through you going on about him enough --"

"*Hercules* told me the damn story." The words ground themselves out from between the warrior's teeth. "*Him,* and Iolaus, and Jason...they all grew up together, they were on some adventure, and Hercules tricked Hera into helping *Jason*...and his *Argonauts*...make it through the Wandering Rocks."

"I cannot believe you are arguing with me about this!" Gabrielle stood up, very obviously, deliberately leaving her staff on the floor as she towered over the warrior, pale with rage. "Of all
"I haven't got any answers." Xena could feel her own hands clenching, a low growl building in her chest, quiet tones sharpened on the keen edge of anger. "If I did you'd be the first to know, and I would really appreciate it if you would ever so kindly GET THESE DAMNED THINGS OFF OF ME RIGHT NOW!" She hurled herself against her restraints, kicking and screaming frustration until falling back in a panting, glaring heap.

"Keep your voice down." Gabrielle hadn't moved, her voice chill as the grave.

"How come?" The taunting came quite naturally; Callisto certainly had used it enough. "Thoughtcha said no one could hear us? Maybe you're the one who's lyin'!" She lifted her head to the solitary door with a malicious grin, finding the strength to give her chains a good rattle. "Hey! Anyone out there? I'm being held prisoner by an insane bard!"

Gabrielle swelled in her sight like a gathering hurricane, and she was drawing breath in preparation for another tantrum when the bard cocked her head to one side. Reflexive caution held sway over the urges singing in her blood as Xena froze, every sense straining to its limit.

The bard was walking over to the door, standing on tiptoe to peer through the bars, looking both directions. Xena felt sluggish awareness register, they weren't at the end of a hall --

A black and crimson band slithered between the bars. Gabrielle stiffened as it wrapped around her neck, yanking the bard from her feet; smashing into the door, her cry echoing Xena's own, finding full volume.

The lock gave with a groan of tortured metal. Gabrielle was hurtling into the far wall, the door flying open as a streak of midnight poured through.

He was lost in no-name, had been so since the shame of his capture; and he alone would choose the time, the place and manner of his end. His failure would yet be redeemed; this thought had sustained him, given him strength to escape his bonds, to take the lives of the few outside his cell so swiftly that knew no fear. And when he caught the scent of the dragon, heard her roar of anger, he nearly smiled for joy. She would be his salvation, this one who had prevented his purpose: She would not allow him to escape, and must be destroyed. He would bear her with reverence back to the Emperor, and all would bow before his glory.

The one who guarded had been dispatched, and he crawled from darkness toward the dragon.

Xena felt her mind a blank slate of rage and terror; Gabrielle was struggling to sit up by the wildly dancing light of the candle, the flame guttering and threatening to go out. Something squirmed out of the shadows, a glitter of light at its core.

Everything was moving as if through thick syrup; Xena felt herself pull away from the line of fire that ran down her face, whisper of a blade against her skin. Gabrielle was on top of the attacker in an instant before being thrown off, rolling away, fumbling at her boot.

Xena lashed out blindly with both feet. The kicks missed, it was on her --

A crimson spray drenched her face, eyes bulging at the bard's features twisted in desperation as she
drew a dagger -- *Ephiny's dagger*, came a dim realization through the horror -- across her line of sight, across the assassin's throat. The dark figure was already growing limp in her arms, but Gabrielle was repeating the stroke on the return, and again; unrecognizable sounds coming from her. Pulling the body off and hurling it away, dagger slipping from bloody fingers...

She was turning too slowly, would fall before she managed to see, but it would have been better had she remained blind. Callisto was staring silently at her, a faint moan of accusation forming on her lips as the bard's eyes fell; Gabrielle thought madness upon her, and then she had no time for that at the sight of the ebony hilt, protruding from the warrior's stomach.

It was a dream, these tears on her cheeks; the babbling half sobs, as she was at Callisto's side in a heartbeat. Her awkward, ineffectual hands trying in vain to hold back the tide as the warrior's life ran out over them, driving a scream up that she smashed flat before it could take hold. She was seized with a panicly premonition, the sheer weight of all she had done and said.

"Oh gods, it -- tell me what to do, we did this before -- should I take it out or leave it, Xena -- Callisto -- oh, *gods* --"

She was ripping at her skirt and winding the cloth around her other hand in some half-defined reflex. "You have to *tell* me -- it must hurt so much --"

Xena felt perfectly empty; all the pain had vanished, a part of her still needing to crack a joke, to reassure. "You kiddin'? Personally..." It was only her body, but the spasm had to pass before her tongue would obey. "Think it hurts worse when I...stub my toe..."

"Don't you die on me!" The bard's shout should have hurt her ears; even that little pleasure denied. "Gut wound...s'onea the most painful spots to get hit --" The smile turned to a grimace. "Don't worry, it can take..." She searched for the word, but nothing sounded right. "Days to die..."

It wasn't helping; Gabrielle was looking worse than ever. Something wet and warm bubbled its way to her surface. "Tell Solan..."

Why was Gabrielle crying? She had no idea. Surely her best friend wouldn't begrudge her this unbearable ecstasy; she had become light itself, and her shout of joy shook Olympus. And like every moment it was over before it began; that small part of her that trembled in fear and awe holding on to the memory of Gabrielle's face. Words forming as they passed by in a flash, and were sucked away down.

She followed gladly, to beckoning oblivion.

---

But even that infinite moment of void must pass sooner or later, and its end with the kiss of a fist somehow failed to surprise.

*Not fair*, came the dazed thought before she hit the ground; the surprising realization that her chains were gone, and she was no longer attached to the wall.

She lifted a trembling hand, still observing it through that curious, numb sense of detachment as she tried to struggle to her knees. Her body felt like it was made out of lead --

Everything stopped again as raven tresses fell across her vision, hair black as night.

She stared in dumb incomprehension as slender fingers curled into her hair; hauling her up though surely she must be too much for any mortal to bear. And the loving, mocking words were
exquisitely predictable.

"Hello, Xena."

Callisto's smile was infinitely tender; her eyes shining with dark promise.

"Oh, how I've missed you..."
Some get what they deserve; bad things happen to good people. "She is the closed circle...she is returning to the beginning."

We can have justice whenever those who have not been injured by injustice are as outraged by it as those who have been.

_Solon (594 B.C.)_

Your reality, sir, is lies and balderdash; and I'm delighted to say that I have no grasp of it whatsoever.

_Terry Gilliam, THE ADVENTURES OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN_

Eyes melt, skin explodes, everybody dead!

_Alex Cox, REPO MAN_

Prickle-Prickle

A soft padding of slippers echoed down the darkened hallway, lifting Solan out of his distress. The fear of discovery was more bearable than the agony he'd been putting himself through; his legs badly cramped from the considerable passage of time since he'd fled the entrance to the dungeon and gone to ground, ascended to the heights of the near-top floor that housed the royal family's personal chambers, finding a darkened niche between arch and ceiling.

He froze in place, eyes following the shadows that wavered in the torchlight. He could make out a second set of slightly louder steps; the quiet sounds of conversation.

"You're sure --" A soft male chuckle. "What am I saying? Of course she'll be safe. It's a wonderful idea!" A remonstration from his female companion made the man lower his voice, but the enthusiasm remained. "Amongst all those other children, there's no way anyone can tell a so-called royal from anyone else. And Briyana, the only other to know she's there?"

She must have nodded in response, for he went on. Their voices were directly underneath Solan, his guilty ears opening further to soak up every drop of information.

"And the hospice is already the most heavily guarded area. So there's no suspicion there..."

"You know me so well," the woman sighed. For a moment Solan was back in the centaur village where he'd grown up, before the joining of tribes upset everything and everyone.
"Sometimes people do things that they regret. Things which at the time...seem like the right thing to do."

But he knew it couldn't be her, and now he could discern the open warmth, the essential inner vulnerability of Diana.

"Many of the men are still injured. We can't risk them." A moment of silence stretched out as Solan tried to keep his breath from being as loud as their own seemed. "I know they need all the help they can get. But I hate the thought of you being out there. I can't afford to lose you again --"

"No promises." The man sounded more subdued. "But we've done our best. Haven't we?"

"Yes." So much love in that solitary syllable; but she instantly returned to practical matters. "The castle is secure, but we've spotted at least two groups of centaurs. I'm counting on you --"

"Don't worry," he soothed. "I'm not the only one tired of all this nonsense. We'll fight if we have no other choice, but I promise you we'll do everything in our power to stop this war."

Diana's relief was apparent, and a note of pride and hope. The sound of her smile was enough that Solan could see that familiar face even without looking.

"Our resident athletes are already helping everywhere else, and apparently ready to do it on the battlefield. Salmoneous wasn't too happy, but he must have known it was pointless to try and stop them." A new serious note. "I'll try to track down Gabrielle. Hopefully she'll have some ideas on the Amazon situation. I'm sorry I don't have any fresh reports from Liberium, but..."

The man's smile was audible. "The only way my brother's going to take anyone by surprise is by not attacking." A wistful note entered his voice. "Still...I can't help wishing Xena was here."

"Why?" The reply was cautious and curious. "Is it that Xena's not here, or..."

"I guess a little of both. You're right, though. They seem a lot alike, from what you've been telling me. Xena was the finest warrior I've ever met, and yet she was so much more..." A heavy sigh. "I would have liked to have known her better."

"Philemon --"

Solan lifted a cupped hand to his ear and leaned down, feeling a prickle in his legs as they started to awaken. Diana's voice had dropped to a whisper, with the barest hint of guilt. "I'm going to tell you something...something that's going to sound unbelievable. I only hope you can forgive me for keeping it from you for so long --"

"Nothing could shock me anymore," he chuckled. "Go on. I'm willing to bet it's good news."

The princess's hushed words drifted up toward Solan, and he felt his eyes slowly growing to the size of dinner plates, the roar in his ears nearly sending his balance and him over the edge. Somehow he remained silent and concealed, all manner of thoughts running fast and furious.

"By the gods." Philemon sounded faint, his voice gradually regaining strength. "You're right, it's unbelievable...but suddenly everything makes sense. After what you told me, I can see why Gabrielle would be --"

Solan was trying to draw long, quiet breaths, mouth stretched to its fullest, but Philemon's
excitement was sufficient cover for the little noise he made. He'd almost lost consciousness when Xena set his broken arm, but that was nothing compared to this terrifying sense of hope and dread. She was alive, and they had kept it from him...and from Philemon, whoever he was.

He dimly heard a new note of gravity in the man's voice; concentrated on the sound, forcing himself to hear and remember. His uncle had sounded like this on that fateful night, when he'd overheard a chance conversation with an Amazon that irrevocably altered his destiny.

"But what the gods have done, they can undo. And if Xena managed to come back from the dead...Callisto might well do the same?"

"More or less everyone's thoughts," came Diana's rueful agreement. "Philemon, I'm so sorry --"

"No," he interjected grimly. "You were right to be careful. If those Amazons find out, they'll tear this place apart to get to Xena." His tone softened to respectful awe. "And just when I thought there were no surprises left."

Solan's throat was parched, and he focused on the joy to help him stay strong and silent as Philemon continued.

"Don't worry. If even half of the stories about her are true, she won't let a little thing like this stop her. You find Meg and everyone else who's still missing, I'll check outside while the guards are rotating and be back as quick as I can. All right?"

"Yes." The sound of cloth rustling, her words muffled. "I love you." His voice was likewise indistinct in their embrace, the gentle sound of a kiss reaching Solan's burning ears; footsteps moving off down the hallway at a moderate run.

Diana watched until her husband's retreating form was swallowed in the shadows before leaning against the wall, taking a moment to breathe in the wake of her remaining undashed hopes. It was all going too well, and that was probably why her heart failed to leap from her chest when a small body landed next to her; it being Xena's third visit, she was almost starting to get used to this sort of thing.

She was prepared to relax or run, but did neither at the sight of the pain in Solan's eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He expected the guilty flinch, the withdrawing inward, but not to this extent. For a brief moment the princess looked like he'd felt only moments ago, and he suddenly didn't want to know.

"Solan, I..." It wasn't fair; this burden should not be hers, to walk through this viper's nest of ambiguities and half-truths. She'd brought up the entirely separate subject of Kaleipus's own revelations during her discussion with Gabrielle; the bard reluctantly confirming the astonishing secret, the looks on Meg and Joxer's faces enough to bring anyone to tears.

"Xena must be..." She swallowed. "A very good friend."

He stood straighter under her gaze, the quiet directness keeping his anger in check. "And Gabrielle. I only met her once. But she said we'd always be friends..." He had to look down, but his voice gave it away. "I know they were only being careful. But it hurts that they didn't trust me."

"Solan -- as misguided as it may seem, they were only trying to protect you. Xena has many powerful enemies, people who will do whatever it takes to get to her. Being her friend can be...dangerous, for you."
He looked away again, pushing scruffy bangs out of his eyes. Now she could see something of the warrior in his face and movements; or maybe she was just imagining it.

"Princess --"

"Please." She knelt to his level, unmindful of the dust her dress must have been acquiring. "Call me Diana."

"Diana." He had to suspect something, but she couldn't bring herself to surrender. "I..."

"His bravery wasn't in being a warrior. It came from knowing what was in his heart. He recognized what was right, and he stood up for it."

"Against you."

"Yes. Against me."

He thought he understood now what Gabrielle might have been thinking, the degree to which the stakes had been raised; unable to keep the quiver from his voice.

"Have you ever felt...like no matter what you did, it was going to be wrong?"

Her silent nod was no surprise, and the paralyzing burden lifted from his shoulders, decision already made.

"I think..." He swallowed nervously, but it still felt better.

"I think I know where Gabrielle is."

She was in hell.

There had been stories, every once in a while, that she'd overheard on their travels and filed away with the others; tales of a place that made Tartarus look like Elysia in comparison, and wherever that place was, she was in it. *In it up to my neck*, and the giddy internal laugh threatened to balloon up and out. Everything was so cold, the only source of warmth the body in her arms...

Gabrielle snapped out of her trance, open eyes seeing once more. It was as bad as she remembered: the half-consumed candle, the still dark figure only a few feet away, floor all around glistening red in the reflected light. Her mind registered all these things as her eyes ran over the warrior's shirt, drenched through with the blood that had slowed to a trickle under her grip.

*Clean wound*, Xena's calming voice echoed in her head, almost enough to see the warrior at her side. But her water skin was upstairs in their room, lying in the middle of the floor; damning evidence for the observant or suspicious.

She dared to remove one hand, wiping the blood on her skirt with a grimace, holding it to Callisto's forehead. The woman's face was ghostly pale under the drench of sweat, burning hot to the touch. Indistinct mutters that were not quite words formed on the warrior's lips, evoking her last words in Gabrielle's memory.

*Tell Solan...* Tell him what? That Xena was his mother? That she loved him? And what if Callisto had been the one to speak those words, or if it had really been Xena all along; or sometimes one, then the other. What if, what if...
A shaky laugh emerged, and she didn't care for the sound at all. She looked away, a brief reflecting of light giving pause as she identified the faint dripping, among the sound of their combined breath.

Disentangling herself as gently as she could, which wasn't very; pulling the key from her bodice, with fingers numb as sticks. Fumbling to find each lock, holding the other woman's arms to keep from falling, their bodies sinking to the floor as she fought as to protect her burden from further injury. Callisto's face twisted, but she made no sound; eyes remaining closed as Gabrielle gently lay her down, arranging her limbs with the care she would give a newborn child.

She managed to look away once she'd let go, and that made it easier to stand on rubbery legs, concentrate on the moisture glistening in the cracks. Age and lack of use had encouraged the dungeon's state of disrepair, snow melting from the heat inside the castle, forming a tiny stream of water as it entered that trickled down from the corner of wall and ceiling; in other places it fell from the ceiling itself, adding in turn to the growing puddle. It was ice cold on her knees but she was calculating the quantity of available water, gauging the fleeting risk of infection and discarding its use on the wound itself. Still, it could serve some purpose.

Soaking up as much as the cloth in her hand would hold, her eyes were drawn unwillingly to the crumpled black figure in the crimson pool. Its dark clothing was crusted with old as well as fresh blood, and now she recognized him as Diana's attempted assassin. The thought of him in her grasp; one moment prey, the next her kill, the terror as every thought and instinct had fled but the need to...

Protect?

To kill...

She moved before hysteria could take hold, half-crawling to where Ephiny's dagger lay; watching her fingers wrap around the hilt, returning to the warrior's side. Her shaking hands carefully sliced into blood-soaked fabric, pulling it aside. Whatever magic or madness had produced the patterns in that fair flesh had fled, and this was just one more thing. But to see that pale beauty marred by the pulsing wound, the sight of the strange, black hilt protruding was almost too much.

She cut the rest of the shirt free more quickly than was likely prudent, making the decision to remove the dagger before she could change her mind. A weak hiss burned her ears as she flung it away, hearing it clatter on the stone. Callisto's eyelids fluttered, one hand rising and clutching at her stomach. The bard carefully wiped blood from her face, wincing at the thin line running from forehead to chin; surely deep enough to scar.

The warrior's eyes sprang open, and Gabrielle was only vaguely surprised to see swirling clouds within, a storm in full blooming rage that was all colors and none as she stared into its rippling depths. More surprising was the odd sensation of her body having exhausted its supply of tears. She should be paralyzed, hopeless, but it didn't matter: Nothing mattered in this crystal clarity, a calm tranquility of a thousand lazy days and an intensity that brought the disconcerting feeling of acting on a stage for an unseen, infinite audience. Every experience of her life merely preparation for this moment, and those that lay ahead.

Her free hand stroked the warrior's cheek, cradling her head up and into her lap; trying to offer what comfort she could to whoever was there.

"Xena...there will never be enough words to say what I feel. I don't know if you can even hear me..." The chuckle didn't seem too inappropriate, but she knew the warrior would understand her guilt. "I guess this is what people mean when they say things got a little crazy." She took a deep breath, closing her eyes and refusing to succumb to the pain. "I know. Bad joke...old habit."
She couldn't look away for long while speaking as close to the truth as she knew, but the sight that greeted her was almost enough to keep her from it. The other woman's face was paler than ever, her fingers feebly twitching; for a moment her eyes focused, and the weak smile nearly broke Gabrielle's heart before she stumbled on.

"I could say I'm sorry...I could say I had good intentions. I want to say I won't say those things, but I already did. So I just want you to know I tried my best to do the right thing, and..." A bitter flood of remorse that their last words had been raised in anger. "Nothing's going to make me stop trying. There were too many wrong words between us...not enough right ones...but you are so wrong if you think you didn't teach me wisdom." She swallowed dryly. "In so many ways, big and little. I could sit here listing them for..."

You kiddin'? The memory of another weak smile, on that same delicate face. C'n take...days to die...

A howl or sob nearly wrenched its way free. She absorbed it, channeled it into every moment of happiness they had shared.

"You're the best friend I ever had, and I love you. I hope..." An angry sniffle. "Hope that's enough. I hope you can hear me. I hope I'll see you again. That when we do you'll forgive me...that we'll hold onto each other, no matter how bad it hurts." The sounds of their breath and heartbeats threatened to drown everything else.

"If you never want to see me again...I'll hurt, because you are a part of me. But I would do anything to ease your pain...to give you even a moment's peace. Because you're worth it to me." A shaky smile. "Besides, you can't get rid of me that easy. Remember?" How long, until sunrise...

"I don't know if I should turn myself over to the Amazons. Maybe I'll be able to tell them my side of things...or maybe Velasca will just kill me without a trial. But at least innocent people wouldn't suffer because of me." A knowing and cynical chuckle, the voice of grim experience. "At least until I'm dead. And then what good can I do the Amazons, or anyone else?" She couldn't fritter away these moments; sully them with pointless hair-splitting.

"I know you would have told me to follow my heart. But I might end up having to surrender, just because I can't stand the thought of doing anything else. And that seems really --" She angrily wiped away a solitary tear, heedless of the blood smeared across her cheeks. "That seems like a really stupid reason. But I'll just think about it a little longer --" While I sit here watching you die --

"And maybe I'll say goodbye to you. And maybe..."

No way, honey! laughed the cynical side. But foolishness was better than surrender. She felt so light inside; wanted more than anything to share this feeling.

"Maybe we'll walk out of here together. Stranger things have happened..."

But there was only the quiet drip of water, and the faint sounds of a life hanging on.

She gathered her last shreds of resolve, plunging headlong into the abyss.

"Callisto."

Another trembling breath, so many memories and emotions in the sound of that name. "I don't know if you can hear me either...I don't know if you were ever there. There were too many wrong words between us, and almost no right ones. I don't have as much to say to you and I wish I had more...but for once, you're a captive audience." She couldn't help a sardonic smile at the memory.
"Hmm...I envy her, in a way." The childish smile did nothing to conceal Callisto's murderous intentions as the bard's eyes met Xena's in silent panic. "She gets to leave this life so pure...I wonder if I could have been her?"

"I hated you almost as much as you hate Xena." She flinched as she remembered Perdicas, sacrificed on the altar of her innocence. "You'd probably laugh at that, but for me it's true. Everyone's separated by all these walls already. And then we put up even more. And when we hate...

Another eternal heartbeat; was the warrior's breath slowing? "When we hate we feel more alone than ever before. And hate is like love, because it is a weakness...but it has none of love's strength." Her father's craggy face in a rare smile as she sat on his knee, wood shavings curling from under his knife and spiraling to the floor as the animal's shape became clear; before time and labor drained his spirit.

"I never really hated anyone until you...it wasn't Xena who taught me that. But so many other things have changed me, the way I look at things..." Her weak chuckle at least sounded more sane. "It's kind of funny. You and she were always so much alike...and now you and I have more in common than ever." Lilla's tear-streaked face swam in her mind; surely her sister alone was reason enough to fight and live. And there were so many others...

"I never really mattered to you. I was just an annoying sidekick...a useful idiot. Xena was always between us. Everything you did or said was about her, or to hurt her. You and I...we never really knew each other at all."

She cleaned the last of the blood away, the wound down the face slowly weeping fluid. The other woman's chest rose and fell with each pained breath, and incongruously Gabrielle's attention was drawn to the warrior's breasts, nipples stiff in the chill air.

A faint heat rose in her cheeks and she returned her gaze to Callisto's face; eyes storming with color as the lids fell to half-mast.

"You can ignore me...you can hate me, you can laugh at me. But things could have been different." She tried to find something more and failed, stroking the warrior's cheek as tears begin to fall once more.

"Things should have been different."

Xena's arms were thinner than they should have been, clad in dirty, tattered rags; the weight and size of her breasts all wrong, the heaviness in her limbs at odds with this lanky, adolescent form whose nerve and muscle had failed her. She'd been beaten many times over a period of weeks, something she'd been through too often to be unsure of, and at least half-starved -- how long had she been here? -- and she could only stare up at her captor, blinded by the brightest of light.

Callisto was the picture of perfect health and larger than life, a goddess whose beauty outshone the sun itself; an avenging angel in full battle armor, an enormous shield strapped across her back, wielding an ornate but deadly sword almost a foot longer than anything Xena could remember her owning. Sharp spikes adorned the guards at her knees and shoulders, the soft white fur of some arctic beast flowing in a cape and loincloth, and an enormous blonde mane cascaded dramatically
down her back to billow slightly in the breeze. But even these changes paled beside the overwhelming contentment that danced in her eyes, victory smile never wavering; the added muscle, the increased height and weight. She knew that body intimately from their every encounter, every moment of her sentence within it, and even with the gradual gains she had made, such a rapid metamorphosis was impossible by any mortal means. If she'd cared, she might have rejoiced at the potential opportunity. Instead, she hung there in a featureless, grey fog that stretched away into infinity.

As usual, she wasted precious strength on wit.

"Nice line." Even her voice was wrong; a mere gasp, higher pitch. "Got any fresh material?"

Again that tender smile; she never saw the foot that sent her sprawling, her head ringing from the blow. Her jaw was now as numb as the rest of her, and with that came the pang of realization that carried the first hint of fear: Lifeless from the waist down, she knew her legs were there but had to look anyway, feebly reaching out and unable to feel her own touch.

Callisto grabbed under her arms, lifting her as effortlessly as a kitten.

"I've had a long time to come up with ideas, darling...long enough to drive most people mad." The giggle carried an irrepresensible satisfaction. "You have no idea how gratifying it is to have someone to share them with."

Reality flickered, a vision of herself roasting over a fire on a spit turned by Callisto while the world cheered; vanishing before she could scream from the sizzle of flesh.

"Don't want you getting too distracted." The offhand snicker reminded her of her precarious position. She felt like her fangs and claws had been yanked out, but still managed a weak snarl.

"Bite me..."

Another giggle. "All in good time, precious. All good things come to those who wait. And I've waited so long."

"I knew it!" She struggled helplessly for a long moment before the surge of strength faded, weakly panting as she hung in Callisto's grip. "I knew you had to be yankin' my chain in there somewhere!"

The smile vanished and Callisto abruptly froze, too surprised to reply. Xena could feel each breath rattle in her chest.

"Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?" The warrior queen's face filled her vision, a bitter laugh resounding in her ears. "You really are a spoiled little princess, aren't you? Here's a dinar --" A blow of sheer rage, a far cry from the love taps before, that sent her nearly a foot into the dirt. "Buy a clue!"

She hauled Xena up again, the warrior's legs dangling uselessly as she fought to stay conscious; it was right that she be here, suffer with the full knowledge of her motivations. Wet teeth bared inches from her eyes, sibilant hiss burning the air.

"The world always revolves around you, oh yes! Is it my fault you trapped me in here?"

"No..." she gasped through a flood of denial and dread. Fingers tightened around her throat, squeezing her life away; Callisto didn't appear to know or care that she was killing her too quickly, voice rising to a shout that threatened to shatter her eardrums.
"You locked me up and threw away the key, and all I could do in here was scream. And just like
every other time, nobody listened!" She appeared to come to her senses, and the calm smile made
Xena yearn for more abuse.

Callisto let go with a devilish grin; jolts running up Xena's spine, as she hit whatever the hell was
beneath. The warrior knelt beside her, taking her hand in a gentle grip she couldn't have escaped on
her best day.

"Fortunately for both of us..."

Her little finger snapped and nails dug into her palm, drawing fresh blood. She lacked the strength
to do more than whimper as Callisto smiled, their hands joined as she held them against her cheek.
The warrior queen's nose gave an odd, wriggling twitch, healing the break in a hot flash of agony
worse than the injury itself.

Xena gaped weakly at her hand and their eyes met once more, that soft voice filling the air.

"We have all the time in the world."

"This isn't real..." she croaked. "*You're* not real. You can't be."

Callisto's peal of laughter was swallowed by the emptiness all around them. "Oh, this will be fun!
And how would you have me prove it?" She leaned in closer, mischievous excitement coloring her
tone. "Shall I tell you everything I've seen since you moved in...all the delicious things I've
discovered in your memories?"

"Doesn't mean anything..." She wondered vaguely why she was arguing. "You're just some part of
me...too stubborn to let the rest die in peace."

The blonde sighed dramatically, momentarily raising her gaze to the imprecise heavens as she
continued to hold Xena's hand against her cheek. "Then again, philosophy always did bore me. I
can think of far more amusing ways to spend our time." Her tongue curled around the tip of the
healed finger, eyes boring into Xena's as she bared her teeth. "Until I start to feel bored again...so
you'd better keep me amused."

"Don't believe it..." She tried to pull the hand away and Callisto fell on her chest in an obscene
parody of a hug, staring into her eyes with a long and heartfelt gaze.

"If it's philosophy you want, Xena, then riddle me this. If I think I've managed to survive, if you
held on to your guilt enough to allow me to do the same, well...doesn't that make it true?" She gave
a contented, blissful sigh, eyes closing as she shivered in ecstasy. "Don't you see? It doesn't matter
if you and I don't exist! You believe you do, and I believe..." The giggle nearly sounded sane. "I
believe I caught you off guard, my dear. And now that I have you, I am *not* letting go."

"Just like a damn philosopher..." Xena managed to croak. Callisto's weight on her chest was
forcing out what breath she could draw; little spots danced in front of her eyes, the smile burning
her skin through the thin rags.

"You've been in control for so long, I should think you'd be *happy* to give it up." Singing again,
more annoying than ever. "I control the horizontal, I control the vertical..." Another giggle
disrupted the song. "I don't know what that means, but I like the sound of it. And your first lesson -
-" An affectionate finger poked her nose. "-- is that I have done *nothing.*"

"No..." But there was no point in arguing, truth or no. Callisto's weight was gone from her chest,
and she coughed weakly as the warrior queen cradled her head in her lap.
"So you see, dear, all that pitiful paranoia was so much wasted effort...the only one driving you crazy is you. But I wanted to thank you for making all that pain worthwhile, because you've provided some excellent entertainment." Her grin was a cold knife through the heart of Xena's numbness. "It's been the only thing keeping me...sane, you might say. And the hope, however small, that this moment would come."

The tender smile was worse than any hatred. "That we would meet again, in thunder, lightning or rain...through snow, and sleet, and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go..." Xena wondered how many times she could hear that giggle before going mad. "That there was still another chapter to be written, in this book of ours. And now I have everything..."

Her lips brushed against Xena's forehead in loving benediction, her voice dropping to a husky shiver. "The only thing...I've ever wanted."

"I still think you were enjoying yourself a little too much."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Iolaus was easily matching the pace of his larger companion, which was only natural since the demigod had been pulling him on a sled until increasingly hilly terrain eliminated its advantage for the sake of speed. Seeing the road was impossible, much less staying on it, and desperation would have driven them in a straight line anyway. "I was just having a little fun. I know you couldn't go any faster --"

"You were whipping me," Hercules replied, continuing to plow through the snow. His weight made it more difficult for him to stay on top, and he couldn't let his pettiness slow Iolaus down.

Iolaus stopped in his tracks with a laugh that couldn't cover his nervousness. "Oh, come on, Herc. I didn't mean -- don't tell me you're starting to believe all those rumors about us?"

Hercules slowly turned around, a curious and somewhat disbelieving note in his voice. "What rumors?"

Darkness covered his blush, for which the hunter was profoundly grateful. "Oh, you know...rumors..."

An exasperated sigh came from the fur hood as Hercules pulled it back, peering at him from under ice-encrusted eyebrows. "No, I don't know. Why don't you tell me?" The smaller man squirmed under his studied gaze for a long moment before the demigod relaxed. "You're secretly jealous of all my fame and glory and want to kill me?"

The casual, joking tone was as much a relief to Iolaus as the close brush with awkwardness. "Jealous?" he chuckled. A little, something reminded him; but the pang was less than last he'd felt, and he knew Hercules was just as uncomfortable with being worshiped almost on the same level as his father.

"More like jealous of Xena. Ever since we met her, it's like all the stories are about her!"

"It's not a popularity contest." Hercules hadn't slipped into lecture mode, thankfully, but the quiet earnestness was more than enough. "It's about helping people...trying to make a difference."

"I know that, Herc." Iolaus couldn't feel his cheeks when he smiled, but at least the snow had stopped falling and they could see each other again. "And that's why we're trying to help Xena and Gabrielle. So we, uh...better get a move on?"
"Yeah." Hercules turned but stopped before pulling his hood up. "Iolaus?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're here."

"So am I."

They resumed the journey with no more to say and no strength to say it, at least for a time. Predictably, Iolaus was the first to break the silence.

"You ever run into this Callisto?"

"Not that I recall," Hercules replied shortly. His breath was now audible with each slogging step forward; they were angling uphill again, a small copse of spindly, denuded trees at its summit. If he remembered Cyrene right, this was an old place of ritual execution that marked the Amazon border. "Heard plenty of stories, though...almost as much as Xena's early days."

"That's the problem." Iolaus sounded unusually worried, and the demigod tried to pay attention to his companion while continuing to stay alert for possible attacks. "Xena was obsessed with some people, but all that anger was pretty unfocused. From what I've heard, as far as Callisto's concerned, Xena is the only thing that exists. There's no reasoning with her, and she'll stop at nothing to get to her. Their motivations, their personalities...you can't go in there thinking you can treat them the same, or you'll end up dead!"

They continued in silence uphill long enough for him to be sure he wouldn't get a reply. Finally the bigger man stopped, clearing out a space around them before sinking to the ground. Iolaus reflexively did likewise, glad for the respite.

"You heard what Cyrene said." Hercules's voice gave no sign of his exhaustion, at least to anyone but Iolaus. "What makes you think she's wrong?"

At least he's being patient about it, the hunter thought. He'd probably have been much less gracious if their positions were reversed; his feet were still dry inside the triply greased leather boots and layers of thick wool, but the rest of his clothes were still damp even after their brief stop in Amphipolis. Hercules had to be just as wet, tired and cranky as he was, and he chose his words carefully.

"Cyrene told us what she saw, and she believed it. But she could have been wrong. And even if she wasn't, Callisto doesn't sound like the type to take this kind of thing lying down. I'm just saying we shouldn't assume anything, especially if your brother's involved."

The seconds ticked by as Hercules mulled this over, finally heaving a sigh.

"Iolaus, you know my opinions about the immortal half of my family. I'm almost as suspicious as Xena when it comes to their meddling...sometimes I have to stop and wonder if I'm blaming everything on them." He managed a weak smile. "I'm worried about our friends, same as you. If it turns out that Xena's gone, we'll have to face that. But you know me," he softly concluded. "I have to believe there's good in everyone. I have to give them every chance I can, even if it means I get stabbed in the back --"

"Ssh!"

The demigod's angry reply was swallowed as he heard the muffled voices that had reached Iolaus's ears before his own. A brief nod was exchanged and they resumed their stealthy climb, reaching
the hilltop in short order, burrowing deeply into the tall drifts among the trees.

The scattered cloud cover had all but disappeared, the reflected light of moon and stars in every glittering inch of the landscape distracting them with its beauty, but even without a fire burning in the camp below they could discern the dark forms, the female voices raised in anger. Around the little valley were more trees, some still with leaves after the rapid unexpected snowfall.

Iolaus glanced over, nodding toward the treeline with questioning eyebrows. Hercules nodded back, pointing in the other direction, and they set off on separate trails down opposite sides of the hill; grimacing as still more snow worked its way inside their clothing.

"--out enough of this!"

Iolaus came first within earshot, clamping down on chattering teeth. He carefully worked his way around the perimeter, keeping one eye on his target, the other on the forest for unexpected visitors. While it was unlikely that the centaurs would venture this far from the border without provocation, force of long habit led him to prepare for the worst.

"Settle down, Chilapa." He could see only shadowy outlines from this distance, two taller ones blocking another pair as they stood before what looked to be a cage. As he watched, two more bodies shifted in the darkness inside; one was seated on the ground in the middle, the other standing and grasping the bars.

"I'll settle down when you let her out of there!" The one called Chilapa was a reasonable size with another smaller woman at her side, both considerably outsized by the two guarding the cage.
"We've put up with a lot for the good of the Nation, but this is going too far --"

"You want to join her?" The taller of the guards, and the first who'd spoken.

Iolaus glanced behind again. The dark woods showed no sign of life, though by now Hercules had to have made it to the other side.

"In my tribe, we would have at least had trial by combat." The smaller one sounded feisty enough, Iolaus thought, for a woman twice her size and age. "I don't care what you think she's done. If you keep locking everyone up, soon there'll be nobody left to fight the centaurs!"

"Yeah?" the other guard interjected, sword hand twitching by her side. "Well, you're in our tribe now. So quiet down before I --"

"Excuse me!" Iolaus hobbled forth from his hiding place, waving a stick which fell from his hands; trying to appear completely oblivious to anything but the air in front of his face. "'Scuse me?"

Hercules felt a twinge of anger, but quickly suppressed it; the best laid plans usually always went astray, and his best friend was infamous for improvisation. Truth be told, he'd nearly been ready to intervene before any blood was shed, but he knew this was a primary concern for Iolaus as well.

"Excuse me!" the hunter repeated, wearing a wide, stupid smile as he stumbled forward. He'd succeeded in distracting them, but the cold was sapping his ingenuity.

"Awful sorry to intrude on yer party, ladies, but I'm froze half ta death! You wouldn't be knowin' the way ta Treus, by any chance? Or spare a blanket, or a cuppa hot tea?"

There was no need for pretense as far as the shivering, and the immediate hostile reaction was relieving in its predictability.
"Stop right there!" Nichola drew her sword and stepped back, regrettably out of reach of the cage and its more alert occupant. The other prisoner still sat motionless and uninterested, and Iolaus quickly obeyed, scanning the edge of the clearing but finding no signs of life.

"You're on Amazon land, stranger." The second guard sounded more annoyed than outraged, one eye trained on the would-be rebels as she swaggered up to him. They were close enough for him to see the sneer all too apparent in her voice, the cocky, relaxed stance as she looked down on him from a height close to Xena's; he was long accustomed to being in this position, but it still rankled when someone was rude enough to rub it in.

She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, his startled reaction nearly giving Hercules away as he saw his friend emerge from where she pointed. The women were intent on Iolaus, and he offered a weak smile.

"Treus is half a league west over that hill. So you'd best be moving on."

"Aw, have a heart, ladies!" He swayed on his feet, desperately trying to convey a message to the ones remaining silent. "I ain't no threat to ya --" 

"That's right," Nichola snarled. "And you'll be even less of one when you get your sorry ass out of here and let us go about our business --" 

"Pardon me," Hercules calmly interjected; the women swung about with chagrined looks at having been outflanked, and he held his open hands up before him. "I don't mean to intrude. Is there a problem?"

"Nothing we can't handle." Nichola's control over the situation was slipping as rapidly as her grip on her sword. She didn't want to kill outsiders no matter what Velasca might believe; it would only make their position more precarious when the fighting ceased, as sooner or later it would have to. In the meantime she'd be damned if she'd let a clear case of conspiracy go unpunished, especially with Velasca's current favorite serving as her partner. Selene was one of the more rabid isolationists, short of temper and quick to violence, and had gained the new queen's trust in short order.

She tried to make a joke of it. "Why don't you take this one with you? He could use some help."

"Don't listen!" yelled the smallest woman. "There's more in the woods --" 

The hilt of Nichola's sword cut off the rest of the sentence but the men were already in motion, the hunter grabbing a double handful of snow and throwing it into the air. Moonlight scattered off the whirling crystals, adding to the confusion as Chilapa grabbed her stunned companion and hauled her out of further harm's way.

"Get 'em, guys!" Solari gripped the bars tighter, wishing she was free to do some damage of her own. She was in a foul mood; not only had she woken with a headache from Zeus's own thunderbolts, but Eponin's damn plan hadn't worked and she had found herself tidily locked up with no questions asked. Apparently, their association was one too many coincidences for Velasca's trusted command. Their strange foreign prisoner had been lousy company, too; she didn't think he'd moved once since she'd become conscious, but she was too cold and impatient to do the same.

"No!"

Her head jerked in surprise and she saw the man in question standing beside her, gripping the bars as tightly as she was, practically jumping up and down with excitement.
"Why fight? No fighting!"

"You do speak Greek!" Solari would have cheerfully throttled him but her attention was quickly drawn back to the action. The large man moved with astounding speed and grace despite his size and layers of thick clothing, but the snow proved too much for him as the guards attacked from two sides. He lost his balance, arms helplessly spinning, vanishing under the soft, white surface.

Chilapa had lain Amarice down, and now leapt on Nichola as the smaller man advanced on Selene.

"No fighting!" An-Tai's tongue had deserted him, only a few scant pieces of the barbarian language remaining in all the excitement. He considered himself lucky to recall any of it; his attempts at conversation since being captured by these women had been rebuffed and eventually one had grabbed hold of his tongue, making a gesture with a dagger that required no translation. So he sat quietly, attempting to clear his thoughts; only peripherally aware of his new cellmate, and her increasingly desperate overtures. She might well be there simply to gain his trust, and it was crucial that he make a decision soon.

"Never mind him!" his cellmate yelled, reminding him again of her presence.

The tableau froze as everyone else gaped at them. Nichola, never one to pass on an opportunity, tried to run the big man through and received a fist full in the face for her trouble. He obviously pulled the blow at the last second, but its impact staggered her enough to loosen her grip on her weapon.

Selene had thrown Chilapa off again, facing off against the small man. She brought her sword down in an arc that would have laid open his skull if a groggy Amarice had not grabbed her ankle; the blade missing by inches as he jerked back, pouncing on the prone figure and grabbing her swordarm, bending back the elbow until it was immobilized, wincing as he saw her grip tighten on the hilt.

"NO FIGHTING!"

Nichola sank to her knees, sneezing blood on the snow as Selene's struggles slowed and finally stopped. She glared at the enormous man before her, ready to die like an Amazon, but he merely stepped back and raised his hands again, pointing at the cage.

"Why is this man your prisoner?"

Amarice was only partially following the discussion, head spinning in pain and confusion as snatches of phrases reached her ears. Damn Chilapa anyway, for making her question herself, getting her involved in this mess. And damn her, too, for opening her mouth before thinking! It had all been so crystal clear when they found the funeral pyre, ashes still warm; tracking the strange man until he crossed the border and they had an excuse to take him. Seeing the fear on that little pretend Amazon's face give away her guilt.

She heard a familiar name, but it took a moment to register. The smaller of the men had mentioned the traitor's name -- Gabrielle, it was -- and Chilapa was angrily denying that "her queen" could have had anything to do with the death. More noise about Gabrielle reminding them that strength didn't always come from a sword. But the fear in the prisoner's voice echoed so closely what she had seen on the traitor's face, couldn't be solely attributed to guilt, and so Amarice merely sat and nursed her aching head.

"Velasca will have you flayed alive for this!" Selene spat as Chilapa knelt beside her. "You --"
The curses turned to frantic giggles. Iolaus had a difficult time keeping her restrained as the darker-skinned Amazon thoroughly explored her clothing, emerging triumphantly with a set of keys.

Chilapa only smiled as she unlocked the cage; Solari grabbing the stunned foreigner and propelling him ahead of her, stamping up to her rescuers with an impatient scowl.

"All right," she panted, surveying the motley crew before her. "What's next?"

As a child, Xena's conception of magic had been limited to the traveling illusionists who visited Amphipolis twice a year, or the occasional introspective moment spent admiring the perfect honeycomb or snowflake. As an adolescent warlord she had desired the power of sorcerors, but found most to be harmless frauds and the rare genuine article quite disturbing, regardless of philosophy or intent. Her increasingly practical nature saw it as a tool like any other, her almost instinctive fear and distrust not so easily outgrown; she knew the real thing when she saw it, and it was not to be taken lightly. While once she had danced on air itself, time and bitter experience had convinced her that in this area, her many skills were sorely lacking, and limited solely to its detection. Now, the stink of magic should be overpowering, but her senses felt dulled and flattened by the oppressive nothing that enveloped them.

If that smiling face wasn't real, it was the best damn imitation ever.

"Yoo-hoo..." Fingers trailed down her cheek. "I know you're in there. If you don't come out and play, I'll have to come in after you..."

Leave me alone, she wanted to say; but it turned into another coughing fit whose force helped roll her out of Callisto's lap and onto the floor -- no, it was only more of that stupid grey nothing. The hand that grabbed the scruff of her neck wasn't at all playful, and neither was the malevolence once more present.

"You think you can hide from me, Xena?" Don't, couldn't... The numbness and dehydration meant she couldn't cry, and it was safer that way. "From the one who knows you better than anyone?"

"No," she managed. "Gabrielle..."

A great stone column seemed to meet the small of her back. The paralysis spared her further pain below, but the rest of her spine flared in agony as her head was wrenched back and furious eyes burned into hers. Cold metal pressed against her shoulders as Callisto crouched over her, warm fur luxuriously soft against her skin.

"Never speak that name again." Each syllable precisely articulated, harsh and brutal. "Do you understand?"

Her air cut off again, she had no choice but to nod, but it took enormous effort. She was rewarded with its return and had to wonder, through the haze. What in Hades was she breathing?

Callisto had calmed somewhat, but the quiet menace was even more frightening.

"My body, my rules. And I say this body isn't big enough for the two of us. Let alone her."

Follow the rules. Plenty of leeway, and something in that embittered tone demanded investigation. "Why..."

The single word was all she could utter. Something tickled the back of her throat, moisture or soothing medicine that trickled in a fiery line to her stomach, bringing a hint of relief from the cramping. She suspected it would have its price, and wasn't disappointed.
"Poor, poor Xena." She was being lifted again, and another pang of memory; the hands of another only guiding her, an all-encompassing joy suffusing her weightless form as it was borne on the winds. Callisto stepped back to admire her handiwork, cocking her head to one side and sadly clucking her tongue. The warrior hung motionless, gaping weakly in disbelief, suspended on an invisible cross.

"You don't look at all well, dear. But don't worry...Auntie Callisto's going to take good care of -- oh, silly me!" An evil grin crawled across her face. "I forgot the nails!"

Her scream echoed for years, and she dove into welcoming darkness.

...Callisto the virgin Priestess, who could give Leah a run for her money in the Sweetness, Light and Purity departments (who in Hades was Leah?); in a world where the Conqueror and the Sovereign ruled, she faced a grim and bloody future with no one to run to and nowhere to run...

"Really?" Callisto had hold of her by the throat again but sounded quite calm, almost contemplative as she sadly shook her head. "Oh, Xena...this is going to hurt me almost as much as it hurts you."

...Callisto, the Queen of Thieves; friend and lover to Gabrielle, the slave turned warrior after her family was slaughtered to the last...

"No!" Blood ran freely as Xena struggled to tear herself loose, invisible impalements remaining fast. Callisto looked genuinely appalled.

"No?" The word sounded innocent enough, a warning in itself. "Why?"

Tendrils of healing energy insinuated into her being, providing just enough energy to speak. Oh no you don't, a baleful voice chuckled. No temptation would loosen her tongue, and then she remembered she'd just been planning to keep Callisto talking, draw her out. Already sounds about as far out as you can get...

The cross and its wounds were wiped away, and in the moment of disorientation it struck again --

Callisto, the idealistic young peasant who fell in love with Xena from the moment the battle-weary warrior rescued her and her village from slavers; the woman who refused to leave her side, whose faith never wavered, whose love was her light...

"It's only might have beens and what ifs!" Ares snapped. Was he a flashback or a convenient hallucination? "You waste each precious mortal moment trying to figure out how to live, instead of living!" But this wasn't living; this was dying by degrees of madness.
"Xena?" Callisto looked more confused than ever, slender hands cradling her bruised face. "Were we always meant to be together?"

"Why..."

A relieved smile. "Why am I doing this? Oh, don't be ridiculous." A water skin was offered and she took a long swallow with a grin of relish; it disappeared with a poit, and Callisto leaned over with devilish expectance in her eyes. Xena couldn't even begrudge this little humiliation, too grateful for the coolness that flowed from soft lips to hers, down her throat.

The other woman finally pulled away, fire in her eyes.

"I think a better question would be how," she smiled. "Make no mistake, it's as real as you and I. And I'm not some superstitious idiot." An undercurrent of steel. "Oh, no. I want you to help me figure it out. Clever Xena," and the grating rush spilled out and over her again, "pretty, precious Xena! You're going to figure it all out, I'm going to rub your face in it and there won't be a damned thing you can do about it!"

Her voice fell to a whisper, taking on new dimensions of terror.

"Now...where were we?"

Hercules nearly groaned aloud, forcing his legs to keep moving through the snow. He would never forgive himself if they allowed themselves to be stopped now; the ragged band of adventurers had made it to within almost an arrows' flight of the castle when what looked like an entire flank of the Amazonian army broke from the protective cover of forest, someone else yelled something about centaurs, and then they were in the thick of it. His greatest handicap was his own restraint; trying to keep both sides from doing damage to each other, while trying to do as little as possible himself. Even this only marginally crippled their effectiveness until both Amazon and centaur figured out this strategy, at which point he lost sight of all his comrades and it was a war merely to stay upright.

He wasn't quite sure at first, but it became apparent that another party of combatants had entered the fray when he had to dodge two men who visibly lacked equine lower halves. The ground was fast becoming a lake of slush and mud, which along with the poor lighting made it difficult to determine who wore what colors; still, the fact that all the two-legged males seemed to be coming from two different directions served as a clue, as well as the scattered shouts as he fought his way up the steep incline, toward the castle wall.

Amarice was having a hard time reconciling her first impressions of the demigod with the stories of his prowess as a warrior -- after all, his name was as respected among the Amazons as Xena's was reviled -- until Hercules reached the top of the hill, a horde of centaurs in pursuit. He turned and raised one fist, a frozen silhouette in the moonlight; bringing it down in a blow that rocked the hillside.

The centaurs immediately lost interest in their quarry, scrambling to keep their footing, but the resulting avalanche swept them away along with the men behind. Chilapa had managed to rally more than a few disgruntled Amazons, and Hercules saw the flow of battle shift away from the castle while his male companions fought their way through the bodies and snow; sucking in great gasps of air as they reached him, three more Amazons hot on their heels.

A bolo caught Iolaus, wrapping around his ankle. Hercules grabbed for his friend's hand, missing by a fraction of an instant or inch; An-Tai saw the desperate grab, and he spun round, sliding back
down the hill.

The Amazon looked up from a prone Iolaus in time to easily avoid the punch, sneer turning to a yell as her wrist was caught in an iron grip. She let go immediately as An-Tai led her around in a circle; the women behind hesitated as they tried to dodge or thrust past her, and he had only to give the slightest push as he relinquished his grasp, sending them rolling to the bottom in a tumble of outraged and enlightening curses.

An-Tai marveled again at the imagination these people possessed as he pulled Iolaus with him to the top, Hercules assisting with the last inch. The din fell to a dull roar, hoarse shouts of command echoing from the hills and forest.

"Who are you?" someone yelled. A man in light leather armor was stumbling out of the shadows by the wall, sword drawn, pulling two people behind him. The three raised open hands, demigod and hunter's jaws falling open as they simultaneously spoke.

"Xena?"

"No!" The woman poked the long-haired man in the ribs, making him wince. "Tell 'em, Phil! I'm so sick of this --"

"It's okay!" Hercules hastily interjected. "We know what happened. Her mother told us."

"That she was dead?" Philemon's guarded appraisal told him nearly everything.

"Who's the other army?" Iolaus was obviously attempting to be polite while steering the conversation back to more pressing matters. "The humans, I mean the guys -- the ones who aren't yours?"

"Probably my brother's," the man replied, trying to make out details in the ongoing action. "But he's got gods know how many warlords with him! And we think he's been inciting trouble amongst our neighbors --"

They all heard the whir of arrow shafts, moving together; a volley clattering off the wall, vanishing into the snowy ground.

Iolaus's head was the first to pop up; the confused noises from below didn't tell him a thing, but the attack wasn't repeated. He saw Hercules pull himself out of the snow at the same time the gasp of pain reached him, red stains on white as the woman who looked like Xena tried to sit up, clutching the haft running through her. For an instant he panicked and then its position became clearer; the arm rather than chest, her companions helping her to safety as one yelled what was presumably her name.

The thunder of troops apparently caught everyone by surprise. Amazon, centaur, soldier and bandit looked around in momentary confusion as the advancing tide surged toward and around them; From the vantage point of high ground the observers easily saw the multiple prongs of attack, designed to contain and obliterate. From the increasing chaos it sounded as though those just joining the battle were as unprepared for the eel's nest they'd entered as the ones being literally stumbled upon. Their superior numbers cleaving through the mass of bodies, pressing advantage before all progress was halted and they joined the writhing throng, a few from each side flank breaking away in an attempt to surround the hill.

"Get the others inside!" Hercules pleaded. "I'll hold them off!"

"The gate's on the far side," Philemon snapped, impatiently watching as the seething tentacles of
humanity continued their patient approach. "No time to go around. Joxer, take care of Meg. We'll hold the line. If anyone gets up here --"

"You crazy?" yelled Meg; Iolaus was bent over her, slicing off the haft while Joxer held her hand, and the hunter visibly winced before returning to his task. "Quit tryin' to be a hero! You got a wife and kid in there, now get back to 'em!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Philemon was obviously trying to reassure the woman, even if he wasn't sparing her a backward glance. "Our men are down there, and they know their business. I can swing a sword, but I'm more use if I stay out of the way --"

As Hercules watched one of the flanks broke and faltered, their outer edge under assault from the nearby trees to the west, the ululating yells that reached his ears immediately identifying the attack as Amazon in origin. Stray particles of men broke free in the wake of the tentacle's outermost tip, swirling away into the swarm of warfare, but the bit that remained had now reached the base of the final hill. An Amazon battle cry resounded again, an answering howl from Meg as Iolaus pulled the arrow from her arm, and the hunter looked up to see the first men coming up over the edge.

Hercules had been nervously clenching the lump of snow in his bare hand for some time, and his reaction was immediate. The man disappeared with an audible ring of impact as the icy missile met his armored head. Iolaus hastily concluded his instructions to Joxer, showing the green-faced warrior where to press against Meg's wound before joining the others in looking over the side.

It got a bit messier, after that.

For the most part, Iolaus could only remember that he and An-Tai fought abominably well together; possibly better than his best days with Hercules. Their styles precisely complemented one another, his rough desperation in stark contrast to the foreigner's deadly economy of motion. Philemon's deft swordwork and the demigod's size and strength kept their attackers at bay and wore them down, allowing the smaller and faster men to concentrate on protecting Meg and Joxer.

He was trying to listen to what might be happening on the other side of the castle walls, and it almost cost him dearly on more than one occasion. The Amazons and centaurs hadn't exactly been taking prisoners, but the ferocity these men brought to the task was unnerving. Still his frantic curiosity mounted with the rising number of attackers; Hercules had communicated his urgency well over the last few weeks until Iolaus was equally jumpy with anticipation, and both now fought with the assumption that it was vital to get inside, before something unspeakably bad could happen.

Iolaus glanced quickly up the tower, trying to gauge the distance. Philemon was by Joxer's side, who along with Meg looked scared out of his wits but physically safe; An-Tai was a few feet away, like the rest of them bruised but intact.

"Hey!" He gestured wildly. "Up there? Ready?"

The man from Q'in nodded, understanding the words if unsure of what exactly was being asked of him. Hercules was shaking his head, waving his arms for emphasis.

"Uh-uh. No way, Iolaus! That stone is too slippery --"

"Don't argue," the other man yelled, further confusing everyone else. "Just do it --"

Another round of attackers scrambled up on either side. Iolaus caught his in the face with a foot before the man had taken two steps; Hercules stood his ground as the bandit charged, hands
swinging together with a thunderclap that froze the man's sword in place, A kick to the chest sent him directly into the soldier behind him. In both cases, each group of men went sliding back as one to the bottom.

Iolaus met his friend's eyes, in a silent plea.

"All right!" Hercules threw up his hands. "But find them as fast as you can! I've got a bad feeling about this --"

He cut off as Iolaus flipped onto his hands, stepping forward and grabbing the hunter by the ankles. As the others watched disbelievingly he began to spin in place; once, twice before leaning back and letting go with a grunt of effort. The other man flew, somewhat less gracefully than a bird; arcing over the tower, limbs flailing as he disappeared from sight.

Iolaus knew his friend had been right when he reached the peak of his ascent. Black, shiny patches decorated the stone below; Hercules had given him more forward momentum than either of them had intended, and he rolled into a ball as he landed, smacking up against a wall. Kept him from going over and knocked the wind from his lungs, and he lay there in a tangle as he tried to focus, see if anyone else was around.

"Send me with him!" the foreigner pleaded, black eyes bright with passion.

Hercules was about to protest again -- the man was smaller even than Iolaus -- but both of them had to deal with attackers again. The demigod was losing his patience, feeling a guilty enjoyment at the brief surge of anger that allowed him to pick up a struggling soldier and hurl him into four other oncoming men, the resulting ungainly and many-armed monster staggering back to vanish over the edge in a cacophony of dismal shouting.

Meg's voice rose again in a weak but heartfelt cheer as An-Tai disarmed his own adversary with a brutal twist of the elbow; the bandit's other fist came curving through the air straight at his unprotected face, missing by a hair as he released his grasp and allowed the man to fall away.

"Please!" he yelled, as if they hadn't even been interrupted. Hercules hesitated only another second; An-Tai saw the decision in his eyes and leapt at him, twisting in midair, allowing Hercules to catch his ankles.

The demigod twirled again twice before leaning back and letting go, trying to provide less horizontal momentum this time; losing his balance in attempting to track the human missile's upward progress, falling back into the snow as two bandits came at him from either side, ending with surprised looks, their swords embedded in each other's chests. The others completely missed this little comedy of error, their eyes riveted on the small foreign man as he rocketed into the night sky, far more gracefully than Iolaus, and vanished over the edge.

An-Tai landed in a catlike crouch with an uncharacteristic grin, feeling more alive than ever. He looked about and froze at the sight of Iolaus, pressed back against the wall and with a sword at his throat wielded by what appeared to be yet another Amazon.

She turned, nearly impaling the hunter in her surprise. An-Tai quickly raised his hands over his head, as Gabrielle had instructed, and the woman's surprise allowed Iolaus to catch a breath.

"Please tell me you know where the stairs are?"

She could feel it coming on again; far off and away, growing larger with each second. Instinct howled to move aside but she was still limp as a dishrag. Callisto's arms were wrapped around her
unresisting form and those eyes burned into hers, receding with dizzying speed as the full force met her head on.

...she was Callisto, Warrior Queen of Cirra, the peasant girl who rose up against those who oppressed her village and murdered her brother; and then it was _her_ life almost as she had known it, so close as to be a mirror...

"I told you," Callisto rasped. "I told you!" But it wasn't at all clear what she'd been told; only that the warrior queen had undergone another mercurial shift of mood, and she was in danger of being shaken to death. Rattling teeth nearly severed her own tongue until she was let go again, half-shoved away in a paroxysm of disgust.

"You...tell me," she mumbled through swollen, bleeding lips. The effort expended, unable to remember where she'd been going. Another attempt at wit sufficed for insight. "Y'really know how to...t'show a girl a good time..."

The laughter meant she'd escaped another beating, for the moment. Cold comfort as she felt herself grabbed, effortlessly flipped onto her back. Xena arched in a silent scream from the torrent of returned sensation, nerves restored to life and drenched in acidic flame; she could move her legs again, but it hurt too much to try.

"Feel that?" Cool fingers stroked her forehead, Callisto's voice dropping to a low murmur. "You think it hurts to feel...but it hurts just as much to know, doesn't it? Everything you've ever done wrong, or could have prevented...the things your friends say behind your back. The secret thoughts they harbor, in the darkness of their minds..."

The tone sharpened to the crack of a whip as a thumb caressed the orbit of her eye socket. She nearly cringed, waiting for it to plunge inside.

"Every glorious possibility. Everything that might have been...all lost, the day you entered my life."

"No..." So what, if she lost an eye. Probably wouldn't last long. "M not th' only..."

"Not the only fish in the sea?" A cruel giggle. "Teach me to fish, Xee-na. We've got so many lifetimes to catch up on..." Callisto sighed, growing casual, conversational.

"You know, you should be on your knees thanking me. I'm sure you'd put up more of a fight if your little bard --"

"Don't you dare!" Xena proved her right as she managed to pull away from that hated touch.

Callisto raised an eyebrow at her words, and the sight of the ragged shift riding up her thighs. The warrior queen grabbed her by the ankles and gave a hard yank, wrapping Xena's legs around her waist, pulling the struggling body to her with a devilish smile.

"You'd better remember something, princess." Callisto pulled her upright and wrapped her arms around the other woman's body, squeezing with all her might until Xena nearly lost consciousness. She let go the deadly embrace and sat up, glaring down at her gasping foe; her voice crawling across Xena's skin, seeping through, a gentle sandstorm running over reawakened nerves. "There is nothing I wouldn't dare."
"Y'got me." She choked it out. "Don' need her..." But Callisto didn't hear, or didn't care.

"How'd you like to be pregnant again?" She giggled at the predictable shock, trailing one hand over Xena's bruised lips, the swell of breast, the curve of her belly. Fingers came to rest over the warrior's womb; the heel of Callisto's hand a hot, heavy presence pressing against her pubic mound.

"I can do it, you know. And just to make things interesting, I'll let you decide. You can carry that child, go through the pain of bearing it, and then allow it to join our game." She grinned, ticking off each criterion on the fingers of her free hand, relishing the growing horror in those pretty blue eyes. "I've always wanted a child...we can see which one it calls mommy first." She pushed a little harder, pinning the struggling warrior like a bug.

"Or I could do you a favor." The hint of a tremor came to her voice.

New terror flared in the warrior's eyes as she watched the hand grab and tear the fabric open; glow, smolder and burst into flame, hovering inches above quivering flesh.

Callisto wasn't smiling anymore.

She fled into the nightmare, before it could take her.

She was Callisto, an idealistic peasant girl who risked her life to save a total stranger; who accepted the mantle of Amazon Queen though it meant leaving home and family, who rose to the challenges of leadership and grew into the role, uniting with the centaurs against all invaders foreign and domestic. Still most humans continued to see both as enemies; still she worked tirelessly for all sides as much as her own. And then the Nation was split asunder when an exiled Velasca ate of ambrosia and was joined by her following of rebels, including an increasingly desperate Warrior Princess; a kidnapped Callisto likewise partook of the gods' food and defeated them, but was forced to relinquish the throne when Zeus refused to remove her godhood. Heartbroken, she passed her right of caste to Ephiny in a public ceremony, privately and finally confessing her love for the stoic warrior; sharing their first and last kiss before departing the mortal plane. The Regent had become Queen, but forever lost the woman who taught her to love after the cruel murder of her husband, whom she had been afraid to love until it was too late...

"You're no god!" She grimaced as Callisto pulled her up by the hair again. Miraculously, she had almost strength to stand; unable to rejoice at the thought that her adversary was providing it. But how?

"No?" An amused chuckle resounded like a giant's drum. Callisto ballooned in her sight, the next instant holding a speechless Xena in the palm of one hand, smiling sadly down at her. She spoke normally, the sheer volume of her voice pinning the warrior to the ground. "In here, Xena? I'm your god."

"No!" She made it to her feet despite the soft, uneven surface, glaring up at her mountainous foe. "You don't have all the answers. You said you needed my help --"

"Ah-ah-ah..." An enormous eyebrow lifted along with the other hand, and Xena shuddered at the thought of flying out from between them as so much red pulp. "I said I wanted your help. I don't
need anything. Not any more."

"Just me," she panted, deliberately goading. "And once I'm gone, you'll be all alone. Again --"

She never saw motion but the pain of being smashed flat was real, disappearing before she could scream again. Once more whole, lying with her head in Callisto's lap; the warrior queen humming a tuneless lullaby.

"It's all in your mind, Xena..." A note of awe, and no little astonishment that the vaunted warrior princess hadn't also figured it out. "Don't you see? But we aren't done yet...oh, no. Not by a long shot." Her lips brushed Xena's, silky smooth, so cold it felt as though pieces of flesh were being torn away.

"So hold your breath." Callisto's eyes sparkled with hideous joy. "Make a wish." She leaned in, their noses barely touching.

"Count to three."

Narif knew he should have followed his instincts and run for the hills when he'd had the chance; the days leading to the attack had been chaotic enough that his absence would never have been noticed, and he'd nearly picked up his heels more than once, but indecision and fear had kept him paralyzed until it was too late. Everyone from citizen to slave had been in a state of near-panic under Mineus's increasingly erratic rule, the troops' orders left deliberately vague even at the last moment and further heightening their already wracking, nervous tension. Rumors flew thicker than ever, including mutters of sorcery by one side or the other; perhaps both.

Everything had gone wrong before they'd even moved out: two men succumbed to food poisoning, and the watch commander felt it necessary to make an example of the incompetents guarding the kitchen before tracking down the source of the contamination, by which time another man had come down with identical symptoms. Narif had hastily intervened, ferreting out the culprits and destroying the affected stores. The only thing he could have done, and to be noticed for his quick thinking was unavoidable. But to be rewarded for it? Unthinkable, or would have been until his on-the-spot promotion just yesterday; and from no less than Oraces, his nose-picking companion of a few days before, who turned out to be precisely what he'd idly speculated -- that is, one of Mineus's highest ranking and most trusted officers whose true identity had been known to only a handful of souls. If he survived this battle, he might make out all right, but his chances were looking slimmer; Oraces had hand-picked him to help lead the charge, and the unpleasant looks from his former comrades far outnumbered the congratulations.

They'd been one of some unknown number of squads surrounding Treus, advancing down from the mountains. It was actually far easier than navigating the flat terrain separating the two kingdoms. Moving men through the snow was enough of a job without the complication of much hardware, causing further grumbles among the hardened veterans. Not even a single catapult, some muttered, with a few resentful comments about youngsters expecting them to shoulder the lion's share. One wit volunteered as a battering ram, but there were too many real problems, and so he was spared the wrath of the commander. And the commander in turn reduced to a glorified errand boy, busily engaged in finding convenient targets upon whom to vent his frustrations.

Unfortunately the Amazons had ruined their planning by attacking sooner than anticipated, and that was the beginning of their end, faster by the moment. The castle's defending forces seemed at first like a complete pushover; even Oraces, as deadly a tactician as he was an effective spy, had been fooled by the ruse until most of their squad were drawn into the last valley, within ironic sight of their goal. There they were trapped, hooves and harlots on one side, the most skilled warriors of
Treus on the other, and an ever-increasing flood of peasants with homemade armor and improvised weapons that threatened to drown them all.

That was it, he thought; ripping the medallion from his chest with trembling fingers, throwing it to the sodden ground. He stumbled as he forced numb legs through the snow, anticipating with every step an arrow in the back that never came. The cries of the wounded rose in his ears and he nearly slipped on a patch of earth grown slick with frozen blood, deliberately not looking behind. He would find someone to surrender to, throw himself on what mercy might be found.

The body he was stepping over chose that moment to reflexively twitch. Narif caught himself on the body, sprawling in the snow; shaking free with a gasp, hoping the grabbing fingers were only his imagination. Muted thunder pulled his gaze to the castle, and he steeled himself as a wave of centaurs roared down the hillside. They wavered in his sight, growing larger with the boom of each oncoming tread.

Everyone was shouting, their voices distorted as if through a layer of thick clouds, many fathoms of water. The centaur leading the charge was coming straight towards him, mad glare seemingly fixed directly upon him, and Narif could only stare as doom approached on four legs.

He heard the sound before his eyes could grasp the sight; unable to tell whether someone had stumbled into the leader or deliberately pushed him, or if anyone else had even touched the centaur. Most of the others scattered to either side, the remaining few either getting tangled up with him or ignoring the falling bodies, increasing their frenzied drive, charging past Narif as though he were invisible. The leader's screams came louder as a gout of blood arced through the air, lost in the dark until it spattered against the already crimson earth, and the limp body slid through mud and slush, coming to a halt.

Pandemonium reigned all around, and no one noticed Narif as he crawled toward the unmoving body. The centaur had been a fool to hold onto his sword, and he was a bigger one for giving into his curiosity, but he kept running his hands over the corpse, trying to make out details in the dim light. The chest wound was still bleeding but its position didn't appear fatal; and it was then that his roving hand closed around a nearby piece of curved metal.

He held the horseshoe up before his wondering eye, oblivious to his surroundings.

It was absolutely vital that she move, and yet equally impossible; Callisto had reached inside her chest, grabbing up her innards in a clenched fist, pinning her to the spot. It was as impossible as everything else, and Xena couldn't bring herself to be too upset by it. Except it was rather disconcerting to see the woman's arm embedded in her to the elbow, every time she looked down.

"Like that?" Callisto's breath came heavier, a ferocious grin on her face. "Oh, yes. Right there...am I as good as Borias?"

Her reply was cut off by the tightening fist, heart skipping a beat as she felt her lungs crumple. The warrior queen's knee pressed into the juncture of Xena's thighs as she leaned down, gently nibbling her neck.

"I could make you love me." She made it sound inevitable. "Then put on Gabrielle's face, just to see how you react...oh, I'd make it hurt worse than any rape."

A spasm ran through Xena, and her fingers closed over a bicep, just above her chest. She glared up, feeling fingers loosen in surprise.
"Leave her outta this," she managed; wishing she could sound more threatening. "S'tween...you'n me."

"You're not the one in charge here." The voice was flat again, deadly warning between the lines. She remained silent but didn't relinquish her feeble grasp.

Her foe's gaze softened as she pulled her arm from the warrior's chest with a burst of pain and horrid sucking sound. Callisto was stroking her cheek, a hurt look in her eyes.

"How can you do this to me?" A petulant, childish tone, complete with a bite of the lip, and suddenly her head rang with an open handed slap. Callisto was on her feet, fists clenched.

"I did you a favor! The two of you were ready to kill each other, and I was having a lovely time of it. After all those pitiful attempts to redeem me, it was like a breath of fresh air!"

A boot landed in her stomach with a crack of ribs, galvanizing her into trying to take advantage of newfound mobility. Callisto had hold of her by the hair again, other arm around her neck.

"You...owe me, Xena." Callisto's voice trembled with emotion. "For all the suffering you put me through. And I'm not just talking ancient history. For the use of my body...making me sit here and watch, while you and your pathetic friends try to turn me into you!"

The air shimmered, a mirror coming into existence before her. Xena stared at the reflected tableau; it perfectly matched what her senses were telling her, and that felt like all the more reason to disbelieve.

"For forcing me so deep inside, I had no choice! Your hopes, your dreams, your fears...the people you can't help but love though you know it will be your destruction. They're an open book to me! Oh, I thought I knew you before. But now..."

A strained giggle, with a hint of fear. "People had enough trouble already, telling us apart. And now more than ever...I am you..."

Xena felt her thoughts whirl as Callisto's face flickered with a weary, all too sane expression. She shook it off, the singsong voice returning.

"But now I never have to worry about anyone else...it's just you and me, my darling."

That awful, loving smile as they stared into the mirror.

"Forever."

"Diana?" A shadow fell across the great jeweled throne, and its owner blinked in the dim torchlight. Surely it was far too frail and spindly for a man in the prime of life. He shivered, pulling the luxurious robe tighter around himself.

"Bitch," he coughed, nearly losing his balance on the steps. The crown atop his head, already askew, fell and rolled away with a clatter; the soft metal denting as it hit the floor. He paid it no heed. "I'm going to find her," he muttered. "And I'm going to kill her..."

"Your majesty?"

The intruder was male but higher pitched, politeness bordering on condescension. That voice was all too familiar after these last few weeks, and he swiveled as he sagged into the throne, pointing a
"You!" His quarry merely smiled under the accusation, and it infuriated him all the more. "This is all your fault! You said nothing could go wrong!"

"I believe you are mistaken." That mellifluous tone was downright bland in its inoffensiveness. The man even had the gall to pretend to be surprised, dusting an imaginary speck of dust from his brightly colored robe. "You requested help, which I provided. My servant failed you. For that, I am sorry."

"You turned my own men against me!"

Ah, yes. Now the bastard had the gall to look offended.

"If that is truly how you feel, then I will take my leave."

"Damn right you will," he coughed, shrinking into the comfort of his throne. He leveled a hostile glare at the two ever-present bodyguards. "And take every last one of your people with you."

A sardonic curl of the lip, accompanied by a sarcastic bow. "Unfortunately, a number of them appear to have defected as well."

"Imagine that!" He didn't try to repress the horribly weak laugh that clawed its way from his throat, breathing hoarsely as he stared them down. "And why, pray tell, would anyone wish to leave your paradise on earth?"

"No matter." Fingers gently flicked along the hem of the robe, dismissing this. "You are welcome to those who would betray us. We will depart, and we will go on; and you will wither and die, to be swept away in the winds that follow."

"Enough!" He lurched to his feet, feeling the tremor in his fists betray him. "You'll be the one to wither and die! And I'll see that bitch Callisto drawn and quartered, for her interference --"

"No." The cool interruption made him stagger to a halt, dumbfounded at this casual disregard for his authority. "The woman you seek is not who she seems. She and I have a destiny to fulfill, and you..."

A hand emerged from the sleeve quicker than his eye could follow. Mineus felt an odd popping sensation in his skull. But the pain was brief and then it was nothing, filling him with light. He fled his fleshly prison as it crumpled around him, every pore and sphincter opening in glorious release.

"You are in the way."

"Emperor." One of the men bowed. "Shall we dispose of the body?"

"No." Ming Ti'en smiled coldly. "Leave it as a message...for the future."

"Oh no you don't..." The slaps were barely hard enough to sting. "Can't have you sleeping through the good part. On your feet, there's a good girl..."

"It's just you and me, my darling..."

"Damn you, Xena!" Playtime was over, her passive resistance apparently lacking sufficient amusement value. A frigid rush blew through her veins, blunting the worst of the pain and hunger; she felt almost normal but for the volley of minor, long-term injuries that now yelled louder than
ever. Typical Callisto, make her just healthy enough to know how truly bad off she was...

"That your best shot?" She was glad for the strength if it let her crack wise; uncaring of the consequences as she straightened to full height despite her back's protests. Even this younger version of herself was slightly taller than her foe, and she used it to full advantage as she smiled down.

The other woman's eyes screwed shut as if in pain, and the raging inferno when they opened nearly made Xena quail. She stood her ground, gathering every remaining shred of what might have been the Conqueror.

"Go on." One eyebrow arched wryly against that surprised disbelief, the smile coming almost naturally. "I'm waiting."

Callisto folded her arms across her chest but made no reply. Xena noted idly, with no surprise, that the other woman's breasts seemed larger than she remembered.

She returned the gaze, ready to keep it up as long as necessary or until her back gave out. Apparently the warrior queen was taking another cue from Gabrielle, and this was actually funny until the chilling thought struck that she didn't stand a chance. Sooner or later, she'd crack under that silent, stare.

"I think you're nuts." Her smile dripped insolence. "My guilt trapped me once already, when you forced me out of my body. I learned my lesson, and as far as I'm concerned I've paid my debt, to Ares and to you. So you can take that little theory and cra--"

Stars exploded behind her eyes as a fist met her nose. She landed hard on her tailbone and a foot to the chest sent her back, fanning the first flames of rebellion. That's what she wants! something warned. Don't fight her on her terms...

"No, Xena." Without even a wave of a hand she was reduced to her former abject condition, seemingly on the verge of death, unable to speak. The warrior queen straddled her, wearing a malicious grin; bending down with sparkling eyes and pressed her lips to Xena's, sucking the air from her lungs until spots danced before her eyes.

The dim roar in her ears drowned out all else for a moment. Her vision returned, and she felt a surge of unreasoning terror at the look of hungry anticipation.

"I said you're going to help me." Callisto's insistence was oppressive in its certainty, a trace of humor shining through. "We both know the facts, you're guilty as sin, so let's not waste time."

"It wasn't just me!" Xena knew it with all her heart and mind. "You can't make me feel any worse than I already do --"

A wave of dismissal. "Yes, yes, I know all the arguments. Spare me."

The warrior arched as taut as a bowstring as Callisto grabbed her throat; squeezing until all outward resistance ceased, Xena glaring helplessly up at her.

"So let's take it a little further." She leaned down, laying a trail of burning kisses along her jaw and neck. "Because we're definitely close...I can feel it."

It wasn't much, but the leap was still a blinding one when it came: Her enemy was ignorant of the origin and extent of her powers; she had no more idea how she was performing these miracles than
Xena herself. If Callisto even existed at all, she had certainly played a part in bringing Xena here, wherever here was. Maybe instinct kept them alive; maybe just plain stubbornness. In any case, she'd accepted full responsibility for her crimes from the first day she'd chosen a different path, and this alone gave her strength to speak.

"Not impressed..." The words were weak but quite distinct. "So ya learned some of Alti's tricks...from my memories. Big deal..."

The teeth nipped harder, bringing a gasp from her lips. Thought fled before the barrage of sensation, Lao Ma's words echoing in her head. But she couldn't give those things up; they were as much a part of her as everything else, and she moaned in frustration as much as pain.

"Hate?"

"Yes..." Callisto held her tightly, burying her face in the hollow of the warrior's neck. Xena felt a pang of regret as the woman's muffled voice reached her.

"Your little friend thinks hate's such a bad thing...but I don't think we hate nearly enough." A brief tremor quickly subsided, her voice soft and innocent. "If people hated evil and injustice, they wouldn't flourish, now would they?"

The chilling similarity between their thoughts sent her back to the gnawing problem before her; neither Alti's surrender to whim nor Lao Ma's denial were the answer, and in that core of recognition was the seed of something greater. In another dim recollection, one of the few sorcerors she'd ever met with a grain of sense in his head was lecturing her on basic principles:

"Human magic's a far different beast from that of the gods." Nicklio was trying to distract her from the sight of the needles sticking out of her; a thoughtful gesture if she hadn't been so interested in figuring out how they worked, but she wasn't paying attention at first. "More difficult, and rather more draining. We're no match for them when it comes to sheer power, but --"

"Yeah?" She glanced up, distracted from the pain in her shattered legs by the lovely sound of that word. "Tell me more."

Encouraged, he inserted another needle before she could object.

"There are things we can achieve that gods can only dream of. Our true power is in the world of the inner spirit -- the world that only exists because we make it so." He smiled, nodding in misty-eyed introspection. "The gods may play with it. But they can never truly conquer one who has mastered that realm."

"Ah!" Callisto's eyes grew big and she sat up, clapping and bouncing on Xena's stomach. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you? We should all be so lucky! To have a god for a father..."

"You're crazy..." Using her remaining air to talk probably hadn't been a smart idea but she could still feel life bleeding into her, giving her the breath to continue. "No proof...I don' know it, an' neither d'you!"

Callisto shook her head sadly, making little disappointed noises at her foe's naivete. "Certainly explains an awful lot. Yes, that certainly seems fair; you kill my entire family and get to be a
demigod..." Her teeth ground together as she contemplated the injustice of it all, and she pulled the warrior up until their noses were touching again.

"So where's daddy now, hm?" She drank up the horrified denial before her voice sank to an icy growl.

"No more games."

*It couldn't have been just me...*

It pushed up from deep inside, a full rejection of guilt and darkness as Xena rose with it. She'd suspected her divine parentage ever since Ares had paid her that little visit; Callisto's confirmation only drove it home, that part of her blooming in a silent shout at having its potential acknowledged, every last mask stripped away to reveal the truth: The two of them alone in her mind, her new body near death, the old long turned to dust when her foe left its confines.

For a heartbeat or a lifetime, Callisto was a speck on the palm of an enormous Xena. Before a whirlwind erupted --

They were separated and facing each other, both in perfect physical condition, not even slightly winded from the fury of moments before. Callisto's face was a mask of pure rage as she took in leather and brass armor, the chakram, whip and sword; and Xena had time only to react, as the battle was joined.

It went on forever, the conflict involving these bodies that existed and yet did not, on an infinite number of other levels she perceived even as she ignored them to focus wholly on the fight. It was magic and swordplay, terrible and glorious, everything she had ever wanted yet nothing compared to the memory of what she had left behind, pushing her passion to new and extravagant heights. She fought for survival, for honor and justice and for love, for the dead and the living; more than anything for herself. Her heart wept at the power she had summoned, wondering how it could ever be contained even as she exulted in its use; it was right, it was *her* and she would never let it go...

She was crouching over a battered Callisto, feeling equally bruised. Both of them weaponless, in their old armor, as they had been before the nightmare began; fingers wrapped around her foe's throat and sunk deep in her flesh, her other arm cocked back to deliver a killing blow.

Desperate eyes met hers and Xena knew, with the certainty that had heralded her rebirth: it was in her power to grant Callisto the oblivion she craved but she would be judge, jury and executioner; it might release or forever imprison, return her to the only place left just in time to die in Gabrielle's arms. Or a more frightening possibility: that her enemy would be freed, and it would be she who was granted the release of the grave --

"What are you waiting for?" Callisto screamed. Hatred warred with something else, beyond description. "Finish it!"

She slowly lowered her arm. Callisto's eyes blazed.

"You let me go now, Xena, and I swear to you I will spend the rest of eternity making you regret it. I'll rip you to shreds and devour the remains, and keep you inside me to scream just like I did! I'll get out of here somehow, oh, you can bet on that. And when I do I'll make your precious Gabrielle's suffering look like Elysia --"

Her eyes widened. Xena felt her stomach twist in pain as she drove the dagger in (where had it come from?)
she gathers me to her                 In the tongue of the Northern Amazons,
embraces me, and slides                    "I love you" is almost identical to
the blade in; with love                    "I will kill you"
she hurts me, with hate                      "Ya tebya 'ubl'u"
she loves me; my mother,                         kiss me...
my lover, my warrior princess...                  ...kill me
...Xena...                                       i love you...i'll kill you
...Callisto...                                    hate can be a stronger shackle than love
                                                   if you can't live without me
                                                   why aren't you dead yet

(no longer clear, who was saying what)

...i'm sorry...
...i love you...

Blood flowed over her hand, the birthing process in reverse; Callisto was touching her face,
struggling to keep her eyes open as Xena's own tears came just as freely. She held her closer,
stroking her enemy's hair with her free hand --

-- and Callisto's dagger was in her also, shock penetrating her consciousness as they embraced.

"You have to die now." Callisto was crying too, damn it; looking profoundly noble and beautiful,
finally at peace. "For both of us..."

Their bodies were fading; everything was fading, even herself. Was it worth it, should she have
done it differently? The vaguest sense of disappointment, that she would never know what
happened next.

And a last thought, before it was all lost.

Zeus frowned as the other gods collectively blinked. "What in --"

She had been forged in fire, and Gabrielle was unable to feel surprise as the flame escaped, running
from her hands in a torrent; filling the horrendous gut wound, wrapping around the fallen warrior,
lifting her from the ground, flowing around and within her in a protective cocoon. No idea what
extremity had brought forth this power, or what the cost would be; inexpressibly frustrating for one
who lived her life with words, but while it lasted she would make the best use of it. She could only
heal the body, could do nothing for the soul, and every fiber of her resounded with a silent prayer
as

everything
exploded

She felt the loss of that new-found power, a severing of the connection between them, her body
gone numb as she was flung back and met unforgiving stone. The candle had been extinguished by
the soundless blast but she was already scrambling back, Xena's name on her lips as she crawled on
sticklike limbs through the darkness.

Her eyes were already adjusting, though she could see only the body lying still. A sob caught in her throat at the faint sound of breathing.

Pale eyes met her gaze.
The Path Not Taken

Chapter Summary

Does she or doesn't she? Do they or don't they? Where do we go from here?

F*%king writers...

"I'd die defending you, and your welfare is more important to me than any other human being. I've never had a friend as good as you. If that isn't enough, I'll stop."

"Don't stop."

"When I loved a man, once, I wanted to have his children. What I feel for you is very close to what I felt then, but it doesn't have that. I desire you...oh, so bad I can't even express it. But I can't say for sure that I love you."

Gaby smiled.

"Life is full of disappointments."

*John Varley, TITAN*

Gaby got up and went to the other room. Cirocco heard sounds that might have been sobs. She didn't want to think about it. Gaby returned with a fresh glass of water.

"Gaby, I think I'm your friend. At least, I am if you'll have me."

"You're my friend," Gaby confirmed, in a husky voice.

*John Varley, DEMON*

That's what learning is: not whether we lose the game, but how we lose, and how we've changed because of it, and what we take away from it that we never had before, to apply to other games.

*Richard Bach, ILLUSIONS: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*

*Setting Orange*

They found Gabrielle by the warrior's side, still staring into her eyes.

Diana grabbed the doorjamb for support, mouth working silently as she took in the copious quantities of blood on the wall and floor. The thick, cloying scent invaded her nostrils, the torch trembling in her grip as she took in the frightful scene; the slain guards in the hall with efficiently broken necks were one thing, but for a woman traditionally fainted at the sight of a single drop, this was pushing it.
Her head whirled as Solan approached Gabrielle, hesitantly speaking her name. The bard turned to them and the princess's growing nausea was forgotten at the sight of her blood and tear-streaked face. Neither heard the words she spoke, but the plea was evident in her eyes, and for an instant Diana felt sure Gabrielle had gone mad before belatedly realizing what the woman had said:

"Help her."

Solari had been ready for a real fight on reaching the heights of the tower -- leave it to a blundering army to take the hard way up, with a convenient tree just around the corner, out of the way of the fighting. Getting inside proved more difficult: her fingers were frozen to the bone, and lock-picking had never been one of her greater skills. She'd been ready to slit throats out of sheer frustration when someone obligingly dropped in from the sky, and not even his scruffy good looks would have saved him if his friend hadn't followed right behind, hastily offering the Amazon gesture of peace. This had provided enough time to establish a hasty truce, and they quickly gained the interior of the castle once their forces were joined.

At least, she mused, these people knew who the real Amazon Queen was. And not just her strange new companions; the sight of her leathers inspired immediate respect instead of the expected hostility among the guards, who directed them to the princess's chambers as soon as they'd recovered from the surprise. Some of the grim faces were familiar to her, others seemed they ought to be, and one in particular stood out like a sore thumb.

"You!" Her snarl and her courage failed at the weaponsmaster's obvious relief, and Solari swept the other woman into a bear hug, pounding her already bruised ribs with an enthusiasm that was instantly returned.

"Don't you ever do that to me again," she growled, swallowing the lump in her throat. An appropriately guilty-looking Eponin nodded glumly, not bothering to ask for clarification. Solari offered an awkward arm punch, trying to alleviate her discontent.

"Not now." Eponin's voice was dull with exhaustion. "Please..."

"What's going on?" Solari's demand was a bit loud for indoors, but she was tired of being kept in the dark. One way or another, it was time for answers. "Anyone know what's up with Velasca?"

A grim shake of the head. "Probably made herself scarce when things started to get hot."

"You hope," Solari returned, only to receive a hard glare.

"Ep, what's gotten into you? Where's Gabrielle?" Casting a suspicious eye about, she sourly noted that the room's attention was already focused on them. Little point in lowering her voice now.

Eponin shook her head again. "She's with the centaur chief. The real one, not the fool that broke his neck last night."

"She look any better?" Solari asked bluntly.

"No."

"What if she doesn't wake up?"

"She will." Diana didn't attempt to sound braver than she felt, being long done with false promises.
Solan's young face was haggard in the bleak morning light, and she wondered how much worse she looked after Gabrielle had left her with this burden -- but that wasn't fair; she knew well the responsibilities of royalty, and the bard's intervention had quelled a great deal of resentment and fear regarding the presence of so many centaurs and Amazons together in one place. Her brief explanation of the night's events had been too confusing to follow, and it was easier just to accept it and move on.

She and Gabrielle had carried the warrior to an unused room on the first floor formerly occupied by some kitchen staff, accompanied by an anxious Solan. The princess had found a soldier and assured herself of Philemon's safety, but when Gabrielle heard Kaleipus and Ephiny calling her name outside she'd fled before Diana could open her mouth, increasing the awkwardness between herself and Solan. Their earlier conversation still weighed heavily upon her, but the unsettling conundrum now before them was enough to prevent further discussion.

Now the warrior lay on the bed where they'd placed her a few candlemarks ago. Since then she'd slipped in and out of fitful sleep, an occasional half-lucid utterance breaking the near complete silence while Diana went about cleaning the blood from the leather pants and exposed flesh, Solan sitting at the foot of the bed; neither saying a word. She'd grown visibly taller and broader, to the point where the pants were almost a second skin; the blonde hair longer yet with black and silver streaks in equal amounts running through; the eyes, when open, a pale grey in the dim illumination.

The princess finished her task and tucked a sheet around her, ready to change out of her stained clothing; remembering Solan's presence and ducking into the closet with a blush before also remembering that he'd seen a topless Xena for some time, as well as the fact that these rooms had formerly housed young men who worked in the kitchen and stable, which in turn meant that there were only men's clothes to wear. It took her a moment to find a blue shirt and pair of pants that fit comfortably, during which she fretted non-stop and listened very carefully for any hint of noise from the outer room, quickly leaving the closet's confines when she heard the bard's voice again.

Gabrielle was flanked by two tall, dark-haired and impressively muscled Amazons; behind them were two blonde men, one as large as the other was small and both looking as concerned as the bard herself, while behind them Joxer and someone she didn't recognize were holding up a wounded, hastily bandaged Meg. Something about the stranger clicked in her before she identified his origin, one of the countries whose names had so frequently been mentioned of late and their pronunciation generally mangled.

Solan stared at the bard's impressive entourage. "Where's my uncle?"

"Still with the other centaurs." Gabrielle sounded absolutely exhausted and looked even more so, only briefly glancing up as Diana shut the closet door, showing no reaction to the change in wardrobe. She gestured vaguely at the bed. "Has she --"

All heads turned as one at the barely audible groan from the bed, watching in frozen expectation. Pools of grey reflected the growing light in the room, unfocused and shimmering as they stared at nothing, sliding over the silent observers until they came to rest on Gabrielle, standing closest to the head of the bed.

Everyone jerked back at the sudden surge of motion, the panicked scrambling away until the warrior's trembling, wide-eyed form was pressed up against the headboard. "Stay away from me!"

She seemed to realize her partial nudity and grabbed the sheet, pulling it about her as she half-slid, half-fell from the bed, backing into the nearest corner as grey eyes darted about in search of an escape route. Gabrielle's outstretched arms halted both Amazons as they poised to draw their weapons and the bard felt every fear come flooding back, unable to keep the tremor from her
voice.

"Who *are* you?"

The woman flinched as if she'd been slapped but then appeared to gather her resolve, straightening the sheet as it threatened to slip off one shoulder.

"Diana?" The mute nod gave her the courage to leave the safety of the corner, striding up to the princess and staring into her eyes; their heights were very near equal now.

"I'm leaving," she breathed hoarsely. Even the voice was different, a rich and fluted alto. "Don't try to stop me."

"I -- of course," the princess replied awkwardly. "I'll have your things --"

"No!" Gabrielle shoved Diana aside and her quarry backed away, almost tripping over the end of the sheet. Her insides were tearing themselves apart at that trapped, hunted look and she forced herself to stop a few feet away. "You're not going anywhere until I get an explanation!"

A fist knotted in the folds of fabric, and Iolaus felt Hercules tense beside him. "Get out of my way..."

"No."

Desperation flickered across the stranger's face as she took a trembling step forward. "Move!"

Gabrielle's voice was as quiet as the other's was desperate. "No."

The scream ripped through her ears as the warrior sank to the floor, cradling her head in her hands. Gabrielle held herself very, very still, caught between conflicting urges and waiting for the other woman to make the first move.

As usual it was the last thing she expected, and the rest of the room joined the warrior in turning as they noticed what she'd already sensed.

"I don't think so." Ares was just standing there, not trying to look godly or impressive, and that made him all the more intimidating to the mortals in the room as he threw a glare at his brother. "You're not getting off that easy."

"No!" The warrior was on her feet again, anticipatory dread filling the room. "Stay out of this --"

Ares drew back and flung something that rippled in the air and expanded as it settled about her, holding her in place; her muscles bulged against invisible restraints, mouth straining silently to utter a sound. Gabrielle's staff was already raised but Hercules held her back with one hand, and the room watched as Ares approached them with a weary expression.

"She never would have told you."

"Told me what?" the bard demanded. "Get on with it! I --" But she stopped at the look of terror on the imprisoned warrior's face.

"You really need me to spell it out?" He didn't even snicker at this mortal weakness. "Callisto got what she wanted, but she was never really sure what she wanted. Oblivion...or a second chance."

Her stomach contracted in an icy knot. "You mean that's --"
"No," Ares growled, and the stones in the walls and floor shivered. "You see, Xena was never sure what she wanted...for herself or Callisto." He suddenly looked very tired.

"They're joined together so tightly, neither one really exists anymore. Even my father can't tell where one leaves off and the other begins. You want to know who that is?" His weak snort lacked any real amusement. "Both...neither. Someone new." He sent a sidelong glance at the warrior, the energy that held her dissipating as she nearly lost her balance, staring helplessly at him with her fists clenched.

His tone sharpened, slicing the air. "I also wanted to make sure you didn't go blaming anyone on Olympus, because we had nothing to do with it."

"Except starting it all in the first place!" Gabrielle shouted. Hercules had both hands on her shoulders, not trying to restrain her, and she could feel them shaking slightly as she poured out her frustration and helplessness. "You never even apologized for lying -- you said you'd put her back!"

"I can't!" Ares bit back his own anger. "And I practically begged my family for help. But everyone swears there's nothing to put her back in to."

"Does this mean you'll stay out of my life?"

The startled roomful turned at the weak voice, finding the strange woman standing motionless as she watched all manner of unfamiliar emotions battling on the war god's craggy features. He looked away, then down at the floor.

"Actually, I've been thinking of retiring." He sighed heavily. "Just chucking it all, and spending a few centuries fishing...then I remember what happened the last time I wasn't on the job." A weak chuckle. "Then I think about what a mess I've been lately. No focus, no direction...I honestly don't see how you mortals can screw things up any worse without me around."

He turned to Solan, kneeling to look him in the eye for long moments, the rest of the room silently watching as the boy returned his frank, appraising stare. Finally he shook his head and rose, giving the warrior a look of longing with the barest hint of pride.

"Sometimes I think the saddest words ever are, 'What if...'"

"Please!" Ares ignored the warrior's weak, cracking whisper as he stepped back to address the room; and if there was even a hint of malevolence in his voice, nobody heard it.

"I hereby renounce any and all claims upon my daughters..." He looked down at a mystified Solan, a haggard smile touching his lips. "And their offspring."

And then he was gone.

"You --" Hercules gaped and floundered as he tried to remember who he was speaking to. "Xena was his daughter? But that --" He broke off, managing to blush and turn pale at the same time.

A weak chuckle came from Iolaus. "No niece is good niece...eh, Herc?"

"What was he talking about?" Solan was looking about the gathered adults, his confused face reflecting their increasing anxiety. "What did he --" His brow knit in furious concentration as his eyes suddenly widened.

"That..." Diana sounded lost in disbelief, trying to sort it all out and not think about the implications of Ares' use of the plural. "That was the god of war?"
Gabrielle drew a trembling breath.

"In the flesh." She was looking at Solan, reassuring herself that Ares hadn't pulled some last-minute misdirection, and she whirled about and stalked up to the warrior.

"How could you?" It came out a pathetic whisper, the anger threatening to take control before she wrestled it down. "How could you even think about leaving without telling me?"

The other woman's face could have been chiseled from marble but for some great current of emotion running deep beneath.

"Do us both a favor, Gabrielle." Her voice was equally cold and distant. "Let me go."

"Which 'us' are you talking about?" The misery in Gabrielle's voice threatened to shatter her calm as she reached out and the warrior flinched away from her. "Which 'me'? Or did you even bother to take my feelings into account?"

"Solan, go find your uncle." Diana's quiet, authoritative tone sharpened. "Now."

The boy obeyed promptly, sending a mistrustful glance back at the two women facing each other; he opened the door upon a startled Cilla whose hand was poised to knock, all manner of misery on her face as she took in the silently staring group. Diana stepped forward, and the servant girl blinked briefly at the masculine attire.

"Your majesty?"

Diana didn't correct her, curiously gentle despite the use of the hated title. "Yes?"

"It's --" Cilla tried to meet the princess's gaze and failed, sinking to one knee. "It's your father."

"Your highness, I -- " Flautus's discomfort was tinged with more than a hint of respect, his arrogance of a few days ago vanished; he still appeared a bit unnerved by Callisto's presence, but her change in appearance and the sombre occasion combined seemed to suffice to keep him from voicing any objections. "I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything." Diana's eyes were wet with tears but her voice was strong and confident, aided at least in her mind by her masculine clothing. "Let's not allow past mistakes to cloud future judgment. We all meant well... we all wanted what was best for the kingdom. Now we need to put hurtful words behind us and move on."

He nodded, suddenly looking uncomfortable. "I truly hope you'll attend the meeting today. I realize you may want some time to grieve, but --"

"He's not dead yet." Her tone brooked no argument, but softened. "Don't worry, I'll be there. None of us can do it alone."

The councilman's relief was evident. "Thank you, your maj-- Diana. And I'll speak to your husband as you suggested." He bowed low and turned to make his way through the throng, stopping at the door with another puzzled glance at Callisto before exiting.

The hospice was crammed to bursting with spectators, who were surprisingly subdued even in such close quarters. Lias lay peacefully in his bed, still seemingly asleep and oblivious to the air of gloom that pervaded the tiny room; Meg sat on his opposite site, arm and shoulder bandaged from the arrow wound, holding the king's hand and making no attempt to hide her silent tears.
Gabrielle's followers had been squeezed back into one corner by the remaining crowd, comprised mainly of the citizenry of Treus.

Diana raised her voice to address everyone.

"You've heard the opinions of our most respected physicians. My father may never awaken, and even if such a miracle were to occur he would no longer be fit to rule. But until he passes from us, I cannot in good conscience accept the throne." A low murmur rose and quickly settled as she went on. "I will continue to sit on the council for as long as you'll have me. The castle doors will remain open day and night for any in need. But more than anything, I hope you will continue to work together as we have done here these past few days."

Her eyes shone, but not with sadness. "That I was not the rightful daughter of Lias was common knowledge, yet it took me years to learn what was kept from me in the name of the greater good. Your king and his wife took an orphaned girl who would have otherwise died. They cared for me as their own, even though I was not of royal blood, and I can do no less for him. And as long as my father lives..." She held her head high, defying anyone to believe otherwise. "I will allow myself to hope."

The crowd that left was even quieter than it had been upon entering. Of the servants only Briyana and Cilla remained behind, the younger woman trying not to stare at the transformed warrior, who was in turn hanging back against the wall trying even less successfully to remain unnoticed. Joxer held onto Meg's free hand, awkwardly stroking her hair; she relinquished the king's hand and laid it upon his chest, turning and sinking into Joxer with a small grunt of pain as they took solace in each other. Eponin and Solari stood to either side of the bed, heads bowed; Hercules, Iolaus and An-Tai doing the same.

"It never ends, you know."

Gabrielle was startled from her nervous surveillance of the warrior by this quiet observation, but the look on Diana's face sent her thoughts into further fragmentation as the princess looked up at her. "Although you might not have heard the latest news."

"Heard what?" Gabrielle's voice sounded oddly harsh to her ears. "What now?"

Diana intervened before the bard's apprehension turned to panic. "Don't worry, Gabrielle. Nothing we need to concern ourselves with...at least not yet." She sighed heavily, her lips compressing in a thin line; Cilla appeared almost as confused as Joxer, while Briyana's weary, cynical expression mirrored Diana's.

"We thought we'd held our own a little too easily, and as it turns out we had reason to worry. Even while Mineus lost the bulk of his forces to an internal rebellion the rest were investigating some rather disturbing rumors. Earlier this morning, those rumors were confirmed." She gazed down at Lias with a look of infinite care and concern. "I'm surprised you hadn't heard already...seems it's all anyone can talk of."

"Then what is it!?" Everyone turned at Joxer's outburst, but he seemed not to notice anyone else as a startled Meg lifted her head from his chest.

Diana met his gaze squarely.

"Imperial Rome is on the march, Joxer. And all everyone can talk about now is how we need to overcome our differences, join together against the Romans. So The best I can hope for is to remain neutral, but what will that matter when everyone else in Greece is united against the enemy?"
bard swallowed at the haggard look in Diana's eyes, the weary inevitability in her voice. "And under all the talk of peace...you tell me, has anything truly changed? Does it ever really end? Or do we just find someone new to hate and blame...someone else to be a someone else?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath before replying. "I think it's more important to look at all the good we've managed to accomplish somehow, despite ourselves." She looked deliberately away from the warrior, her words deceptively casual. "The Amazons certainly seem to think so."

For the first time since her metamorphosis the other woman appeared truly shaken. "You talked to them? What --" She swallowed, obviously uncomfortable with the changed voice. "What happened?"

"Not much," the bard nonchalantly replied. "Once we straightened out a few little misunderstandings, we were able to make some real progress. Velasca's strongest supporters were calling her a coward for running, and as for her politics..." An almost unwilling smile crept across her face; she seemed to be feeling very smug, and just a bit guilty. "I convinced them to be a little more practical."

The warrior looked more confused than ever and Gabrielle continued, the subtle grin growing. "Naturally there were some tense moments at first. But really, the hardest part was just keeping the meeting neutral so they didn't fill each other full of arrows. Once we got them and the centaurs together and explained it all --"

"Centaurs?" the warrior blurted, shaking her head in dismay. "You have to be joking! You deliberately put yourself in the middle?" She glared at Eponin and Solari, who actually had trouble meeting her gaze. "And you let her?"

"Well, I got them together," the bard admitted, "and I made sure they didn't kill each other. But then I got out of the way." That infuriating smile; she seemed to be taking special pleasure in torturing the warrior during their last moments together. "They didn't really need me after that."

Meg's cackle shattered the sombre mood and she staggered to her feet, leaving a dumbfounded Joxer staring up at her. "Oh, you --!" She was pounding her good fist against her forehead in amazement. "Gab, you're a genius!"

"I don't --" But then Diana did know.

"Gods." The warrior drew an amazed, trembling breath that turned to a shaky laugh. "Why didn't anyone think of it before?"

"Think of what?" Joxer was looking from woman to woman, trying to decipher the myriad emotions on their faces. "Come on, somebody --"

Meg sank down in his lap, face wet with tears of joy.

"The kids, Jox!" She was bubbling with enthusiasm, tripping over the words as she stumbled to get them out. "There's no female centaurs, so they gotta find women to have their kids! And the Amazons don't keep boys around anyway! So if they have kids, all the boys are gonna be centaurs, and any girls will be --"

"Amazons!" Diana laughed aloud in sheer wonderment, and Gabrielle shrugged, appearing uncomfortable with the overwhelming praise.

"Well, for a while. Some might decide to leave when they're older." Her gaze went briefly briefly to the warrior, still holding herself apart from the others but unable to take her eyes off of the bard.
"I can't take too much credit, though...all the pieces were there for anyone to put together. Of course it won't be perfect --"

"What if the centaurs can't have girls at all?" Cilla asked.

"Oh, they can have 'em," Meg grinned. "Trust me."

"There's always plenty of potential for trouble," Gabrielle continued. "But I think between talking to each other and all our neighbors we've managed to work out a lot of the details. Enough of them are willing to try, and that's the important thing."

"Well." Briyana chuckled, seemingly at a loss for anything further. "Well..."

"Oh!" Cilla covered her mouth as everyone looked at her. "Gabrielle, I nearly forgot! Eleas wanted to talk to you --"

"Is she leaving soon?" the bard asked, receiving a negative shake of the head. She risked another sideways glance, finding pale grey eyes still fixed upon her; the warrior looked away with a shrug as if she were unwilling to admit the extent of her pain. She exhaled noisily, running fingers through tangled hair, and that strangely quiet voice startled her from her reverie.

"Go on."

She cast a startled look at the warrior, who returned her gaze with aplomb.

"Promise you won't leave until we talk?"

The warrior blinked, lower lip giving the faintest twitch.

"Promise."

"So that's it?" Gabrielle regarded the young woman across the table from her. Meg's light snores drifted from the corner of the kitchen; the cook had fallen asleep sitting up moments after sinking into her chair, leaving Joxer to fuss over her and the cauldrons bubbling in the fireplace. "You're just giving up?"

"Call it what you like," Eleas returned. Her hair was still out of its tight bun, draped about her shoulders like raven's wings. "I don't see it that way."

"What else would you call it?" Gabrielle persisted. "Isn't it just running away, instead of facing the problem?"

"Perhaps," the younger woman quietly acknowledged. "But I don't see much point in trying to convince my superiors. Would you believe this story, if I told it to you?"

"I suppose not." The bard sighed heavily. "It's just so frustrating knowing hardly anyone will ever really know the truth."

"What is truth?" Eleas gave a wry smile as she polished her glasses on the folds of her robe. "Is justice always served by truth? In this case, I don't think so." She drank deeply from the steaming cup she was using to warm her hands. "I could go back to Athens and tell them everything, but they'd want some kind of proof. I'm not sure I believe all of it." Glancing at the bard as if expecting a response, she nodded slightly at the knowing return look. "Trust me. You're better off dead than caught up in the tangled webs they weave."
Gabrielle frowned despite her essential agreement with the woman's points. "It sounds as if they need more people like you, not less."

"Need?" Joxer looked up from the stewpot at the weary chuckle. "They need me more than I need them. All they ever wanted was a puppet...someone they could point to and say, 'See, not all our officials are corrupt, heartless souls; truly, everyone is represented in our courts...'" She snorted delicately. "No, I'm done with that nonsense. I think I can do more good without them, in my own way."

"Do you have any plans?"

The ex-adjudicator shook her head.

"Right now I just want a little time alone, to think about what I'm going to do next." She gazed out the window at the brightening sky, the overcast clouds having long since fled. "Although Genipher did offer me a spot on the team. She said they needed at least one player with a handicap."

"How cruel!" Gabrielle smiled at the twinkle in the other woman's eyes.

"I talked to some of the Amazons as well...it sounds like it could be a very exciting place to be right now. I really can't say at this point." She turned back to Gabrielle. "But either sounds better than having the life sucked out of me."

The bard nodded, lost in thought as the other woman rose from her seat. Eleas stopped at the door. "Oh, I almost forgot. There was someone else asking to speak with you earlier. I think his name was Attalos?"

Joxer's worried stare followed the adjudicator until she had disappeared from the room. Briefly checking to ensure the cauldrons weren't boiling over, he sent a concerned glance into the corner. Meg was still in the same position as before, sprawled out in the chair with her face relaxed and at peace, lips slightly parted.

"Gabby?"

"Yeah?" Even the hated nickname didn't grate as much as usual. She motioned for him to sit and he did, wiping his hands on the apron.

"I just wanted to let you know --" He looked back at the sleeping Meg, then at her, awkwardly reaching out to take her hand. "I've never been really good with words, like you, so I guess I'm just gonna spit it out. I --" He cleared his throat again. "I love you. I may be spending the rest of my life with Meg, but I'll always love you. And if you or Xena, or whoever -- if you ever need help...all you have to do is ask."

"Thank you." She gave his bony hand a firm squeeze. "Will you be staying here with Meg?"

"I -- guess I hadn't thought about it." He collected his hand back with a deep blush. "What about you? Are you going to --"

"I don't know." Gabrielle didn't feel like discussing the matter with anyone but the warrior herself, and she rose from the table with a businesslike air. "I've got some other people to see before I talk to her. Then..." She shrugged away the hurt. "We'll see what happens."

Gabrielle was stunned when she saw his face; the young philosopher had obviously been crying
long and hard, and hadn't bothered to engage in more than a cursory cleaning. He was standing by the fountain in the main courtyard, now dried up and covered with snow, staring into its depths; he looked as though he wanted to drown himself and was willing to wait for the spring thaw, but the sun high overhead was already doing a good job. If it stayed this warm, all the snow might even be gone by nighttime...

"I'm glad you came," he said awkwardly as she approached, standing next to him. "I just wanted to make sure you and Lilla were all right."

"Thank you." She was touched by his sincerity, but the pain he was trying to conceal made her unsure of his motivations. "I'm not sure what I'm doing...I know I'll be staying here at least a little longer, but I don't have a clue where I'm going next." He appeared equally without direction, and she risked a tentative inquiry.

"Attalos, I don't mean to pry, but..." She fumbled, politeness succumbing to truth. "You look as if you've lost something, or someone, very important to you. If you don't want to talk about it that's okay, but --" She stopped at the growing misery on his face.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, hating the impotence of her words. She'd turned to go when he laid a hand on her arm.

"No --" His voice cracked and he swallowed hard, releasing his grasp. "I'm sorry. Please stay."

She didn't push and joined him in staring at the fountain, listening to the faint drip of melting snow. It didn't take long.

"My sister was here." He said it as if that explained it all; she remained silent, allowing him to tell the tale at his own pace. "She came all the way through the storm, traveled all night to tell me..." A short bark of laughter at his own overdramatics. "I'm a father."

She quelled the strength of her immediate reaction, waiting for him to go on, but he seemed stunned enough by this fact alone. When he finally looked back at her, the lines in his face were carved deep.

"I've been seeing this girl for years now...we always talked about marrying, but there were always so many more important things to think about. When I found out she was carrying my child, I..." He rubbed furiously at the whiskers growing on his chin. "I just panicked. I can talk about how complex life is until I'm blue in the face, but the thought of being responsible for another human life terrifies me more than anything...it always has. The whole time she was pregnant I was worried sick over whether it would be born dead, or worse."

A shudder of remembrance went through him. She wanted to tell him he had nothing to worry about, that she was sure he'd make a good father, but still she held her tongue.

"Attalan said -- she's the most perfect baby girl she's ever seen." He wiped the tears away with a savage gesture, breathing hoarsely as he regained his emotions. "And now I'm more frightened than ever. Gabrielle, even normal life is more than anyone should have to bear! How can I possibly teach that child to know joy? How can it not go wrong, and end with us hating each other?"

She laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "You already know there aren't any easy answers. Maybe you'll do everything right and everything will go wrong anyway...but I think you know you're going to try, or you wouldn't be talking about it like this."

"Theory over practice," he nodded, wiping dry, reddened eyes. "I've had to face some unpleasant
things about myself recently...things that I always knew, that I would have happily gone to my grave without ever thinking of again." He looked up to the wheeling birds in the sky, straining to see beyond the castle walls. "I think it'll be good for me. I'm so scared...but I have to try."

"You won't be alone." The bard felt a tug at the strings of her heart as she gazed up with him; the dim part of her that remembered the frightened young girl she had been continued to raise an occasional protest, fearing that the warrior might have already left and the distance between them growing with each passing moment. Such a lifetime of heartache to risk on a single word, but if she didn't start trusting now she would ruin whatever chance she had of salvaging their relationship.

"I do love her, I know...she feels the same way I do about children, always has." Attalos gave a light but rueful chuckle. "It was one of the things we always talked about, how children shouldn't be seen or heard...preferably roasted." He grinned at the bard's mocking look of horrified disapproval. "I feel better just thinking about her...gods!" He came out of his reverie with a start. "At least Attalan said she came through well. I can't wait to see her!"

"I'd like to meet her." Gabrielle could feel the sun soaking through her furs, drawing her out of the shell she'd constructed around herself.

"Right now, she's the only thing keeping me from running away. We're so strong together," he quietly concluded. "The thought of a future without her..." He swallowed again. "I'd do anything to prevent that."

"And then, um..." The young woman bit the inside of her cheek as she tried to recall the details of the afternoon. "Well, she was very hungry. Couldn't stop eating for quite a while. Then I think she went down to the stables..." She wrung her hands in frustration. "I'm sorry. It's just been so -- if I'd known, I would have made sure there was someone watching her --"

"Cilla, I'm sure she hasn't gone far." Gabrielle refused to believe otherwise, keeping her own fears at bay with her attempts to reassure the flustered maid. "Just try to relax...as nervous as you are, I'd be surprised if you remembered your own name. Come on..." She patted the chair beside her, glaring at Eponin and Solari as if daring them to say something.

The trembling woman obeyed as if she were one of the Amazon queen's subjects. She didn't quite know what to make of Gabrielle. A bard who carried and used a weapon was odd enough, particularly a girl shorter and younger than herself; the uncertainty of the past few days seemed to have vanished from her and a tempered core shone through, surrounding her like armor despite her unassuming outfit and appearance. Now she looked every inch the warrior she had been when the maid watched her furiously cut down her enemies, the desperation fled and leaving only the finest steel. What on earth she needed two bodyguards for, Cilla couldn't possibly imagine and had no desire to. And the third Amazon was equally intimidating despite her slightly less warlike demeanor, even without the frightful stories she'd heard regarding centaur births.

"It's okay," the bard offered, inching her chair back. "Take a deep breath."

Cilla did so, shakily letting it out.

"Take as long as you need to." Gabrielle told herself to heed her own advice. Any additional pressure would be counterproductive, given the girl's level of anxiety. "Try to remember...where were you when you last saw her?"

"I was with Meg..." She took another deep breath before hesitantly continuing, fingers twitching as she tried to suppress the twisting of her hands. "Yes, we were coming from the hospice and I saw
her still in the stables. We were going straight to the kitchen so I didn't talk to her...but when I came back, Aleus said she'd just left --"

"That's the stable boy?"

A nod of confirmation, and the bard forced her voice to remain level.

"Was her horse still there?"

Another miserable nod. "I'm sorry. I don't know anything else..."

Gabrielle reached over and took her hand.

"Thank you." That she truly meant it made it easier to sound sincere, and this seemed to assuage Cilla's fears. "At least I know who to talk to now."

She gave a reassuring squeeze and rose, picking up her staff from under the chair and nodding to the Amazons as Cilla spoke again.

"Gabrielle?"

She turned back, drawn by the odd note in the other woman's voice; Cilla was still trying not to fidget, looking repeatedly about the little room and back at her. Her patience was already worn thin, and she made sure she was capable of normal speech before opening her mouth.

"Yes?"

"Aren't you..." The maid grappled with the burden of politeness before giving up. "Aren't you afraid of Callisto?"

"No." The Amazon Queen leaned on her staff, but it didn't seem a weakness as she gazed into the other woman's eyes. "I was at first, but not any more."

Ephiny's lip curled in a sneer. The bard's good intentions aside, she had a growing suspicion that she'd been deceived, and now she was full of anger with noone to vent it at.

"I -- I didn't mean it like that," Cilla stammered, plucking miserably at the folds of her dress. "I don't pretend to know anything about your relationship or anything like that, but..."

She gathered her courage and lifted her eyes to the bard's, cringing as if in fear of a blow as Gabrielle knelt before her, commanding her attention.

"Once, I had a dream about Xena..." The bard's heart twisted at the memory. "No, it was a real nightmare. I dreamed that we hurt each other...very badly."

Cilla's heart went out to the bard in a startling reversal of their positions, and she forced herself to remain still.

"Well, you know dreams. Sometimes they're over before you know it, and other times they go on forever." She rose just enough to sit back in the chair across from Cilla, laying the staff on her knees. "It was like watching myself on a stage, and there was nothing I could do about it. But at the same time it was so real...it seemed to go on for many, many moons, and the worse it got the less I could look away. I saw us tear ourselves and each other apart until we hated each other so much we were willing -- eager -- to kill each other. Because when we did, we'd be killing ourselves...and at least the pain would be over."
Cilla looked away, but the bard's soft voice relentlessly followed. "In that dream, she dragged me behind a horse until I nearly died, and she enjoyed it. And part of me just let it happen, because I was so ashamed of what I'd done to her..." Untold pain stirred below the surface. "Things it was all too easy to imagine myself capable of. Things for which I could never forgive myself."

Solari's quick glance at Ephiny threatened to reveal a tear lurking in the corner of the weaponsmaster's eye, and she looked away in embarrassment only to find Gabrielle staring at her. Ephiny was looking at the bard in wonder, lingering resentment and jealousy in her stare.

"What would you do if Xena had done that to me?" Cilla looked back as she realized she wasn't the one being spoken to, and Solari was unable to answer as the bard's sad eyes held her transfixed. "Could you ever understand the pain that would drive her to do something like that...or find it in your heart to forgive her? When every time you looked into her eyes, you saw me broken and bleeding?"

"Gabrielle --" Ephiny's voice was a harsh croak and the bard rose from her chair, setting her staff down and crossing the distance between them, wrapping her arms around the bigger woman like a child. The weaponsmaster's sob choked off and she returned the fierce embrace, rocking back and forth in Gabrielle's arms until she regained control of herself.

The bard finally released her, still holding onto her hands as she stepped back and surveyed her loyal subjects. She turned and held out one hand to Cilla, who slowly stood and came forward to accept it.

"Things are no different now." She addressed them all equally while looking at none, barely raising her voice. "I could die any time, at any moment, and for no reason at all. But I can't live like that...always worrying, always waiting for my fears to come true." Her gaze fell to the floor. "It would kill me."

The woods had remained relatively free from snow due to the thick covering of leaves still on the trees, the little that had fallen inside nearly vanished under the day's reign of sun, and the unseasonably warm evening had resulted in Gabrielle packing away her new furs before exiting the castle. Now she made her way among numerous puddles that dotted the forest floor, the tiny light of a fire flickering up ahead; she'd spotted it from Diana's window, and had been aiming toward since entering the forest. Far from a surprise it was a welcome sight, a beacon in the growing darkness as dusk descended.

She'd politely refused offers of accompaniment from Hercules and Iolaus, as well as her ever-present Amazon bodyguards whose silent awe felt increasingly chafing and constricting; better they treat her like a confused girl again than practically worship her like the incarnation of Artemis herself. Solan, however, had insisted on seeing her before she left and the bard had hesitated only momentarily before agreeing to a meeting.

He'd looked a little taller himself, or perhaps it was the way he stood.

"Is she --" He came perilously close to stopping, but he was closer still to an answer. "Was she my mother?"

The bard nodded apprehensively; but at least some tension seemed to leave him, and it wasn't as painful as she'd expected to look him in the eye.
"How long have you known?"

Somehow the truth seemed to be easier with repeated use, just as lies only became hopelessly tangled and eventually impossible to maintain. "Xena told me after I first met you."

He appeared to have suspected this much already, and she waited patiently for him to proceed. She distractedly thought that he was truly going to be a beautiful man.

"Xena said..." He swallowed. "She said that my father stopped her from hurting a lot of people. And I remember when you told me how she met Hercules...how he did the same thing, and refused to kill her when he had the chance."

She nodded again, and he stood straighter as he met her gaze.

"I know --" For a moment he was again just a boy who wanted very much to cry. "I know that's not really my mother anymore. I know you might have to kill her." He couldn't look at her any more, lowering his eyes to the floor and his voice to a whisper. "But I don't want _either_ of you to die."

She pushed aside a tangled mass of dripping foliage, making deliberate and unnecessary noise as she entered the clearing. She painstakingly avoided eye contact as she shook off the moisture, but abandoned the pretense as the other woman looked up from the fire.

Flames danced in grey eyes as they silently regarded each other, taking in the almost familiar appearances. The warrior sat before the fire with her legs crossed, once more wearing her retooled armor which amazingly still fit despite her increased size, although with a slighter margin of comfort. The sword had returned to its proper place in the scabbard across her back, the old familiar braids Callisto had worn again on each side; but the still-damp hair was otherwise free, tumbling loosely about her shoulders in a subtle swirl of color. She held the chakram in both hands, and looked down at it as if she'd forgotten its purpose.

Gabrielle kept a respectful distance as she sat, choosing a position at an angle to her quarry rather than directly opposite. She was prepared to make the first move, but the shock of the other woman speaking nearly made her forget everything.

"You healed me." It wasn't an accusation, and the matter-of-fact wonder in her tone reminded Gabrielle of the extent of her own amazement; how little she had thought about it during and since.

"I don't think I could have done it without you."

"Or Xena."

"No." The lump in her throat again; but she couldn't deny Xena's sacrifice with the evidence before her. "Is it true? What Ares said?"

"It must be." Her mouth twisted in a brief, sad smile. "Because it hurts."

Gabrielle didn't want to talk about pain. "Thank you." The other woman stared into the fire, and she clarified the unspoken question. "For staying."

She watched Callisto (Xena, her mind insisted, that odd twist again in her guts) look away, hesitantly placing the chakram on the ground nearby before picking up some sticks and adding
them to the fire.

"Could you do that again?"

_I don't want to know..._ Gabrielle cleared her throat.

"I don't know. I don't think so...I still don't quite know what it was, or how I did it. Maybe I'll never know." She hated this game of cat and mouse that she'd already spent so long in overcoming, wearing down Xena's barriers with a love and trust she wanted nothing more than to be returned; their eyes meeting like awkward partners at a dance and falling away again. "All I knew was that I needed to save you, and it didn't matter who you were."

The warrior bowed her head, thumb and forefinger idly tracing patterns in the damp earth.

"I've been sitting here..." She was calm, not emotionless; still obviously nervous. "Trying to be angry."

Gabrielle took it in stride. "Why?"

"Because I feel I deserve to be." The slightest shrug. "Because part of me wants to be."

The bard didn't ask which part. "At me?"

"No --" Real fear, that was quickly choked off. The fire's crackle was joined by the distant hoot of an owl, and Gabrielle suppressed a weary sigh.

"Look, this isn't going very well. Can we start over?" It almost seemed as if whatever part of Callisto that remained was unable to accept the fact that she was sane and in control. "At least tell me what I should call you now."

She couldn't see the other woman's face but the reply sounded amused, if not truly relieved. "I don't know. Either one feels right, but..." A gruff, almost stern note. "Pick something easier."

"You won't like it."

"Like that's new." Callisto -- the voice seemed to be more her, even if the sentiment could easily have been Xena -- didn't turn around. Gabrielle was on the verge of replying but the warrior abruptly turned to face her again, her amusement gone. "I can't raise Solan."

Gabrielle shrugged. "Nobody asked you to." She picked up a stick and stirred the embers, letting the warrior decide whether to stew in her own juices or make an effort to help carry the conversation.

"I'm stronger now."

The bard gave her companion a quizzical look and she clarified with a bleak, ghostly look. "Physically."

Gabrielle had to smile herself. "How can you tell? You were already as strong as an ox."

"Make that two oxes." The warrior reached out to the fire despite the lack of chill in the air. "Give me a dinar."

Gabrielle frowned, trying to figure it out as she fished a coin from the inside pocket of her new belt and handed it over. The warrior held up her hand, commanding the bard's attention as she slowly rotated it to show her grasp on its surface, one finger on either side and her thumb at its center. Her
face remained calm and unblinking as the tendons of her hand and forearm flexed, thumb pushing as her fingers squeezed, and the bard's eyes bulged as she watched the shiny metal disc bend almost completely in half.

Their fingers brushed briefly as the warrior handed back the coin, her touch like a burn through the numbness in Gabrielle's skin. A vague memory surfaced; she'd witnessed this particular stunt once before.

"Couldn't you do that before?"

"Xena could have. But not that easily." Her evident pain was without bitterness or resentment. A small, amused quirk of the lip. "It actually used to be easier. Those things have less gold in them every year."

Gabrielle felt the smile inside wanting to show itself; she gave up trying to hold it back, but her face fell as the warrior looked away again.

"It's just a dumb trick..." She was quietly accepting, resigned. "Helps keep my mind off things."

"Like what?"

Fists clenched as the warrior brought them to her temples, her face remaining calm. "Too many things..." They tapped lightly against her skull as she opened her eyes and regarded her opening hands with detached interest, the reflective calm when she spoke belied the intense emotion beneath. "I killed your love."

She took a very deep breath, not letting this strangely familiar new face look away. "If you think of Perdicas, he can hear your thoughts." She would not let even a hint of accusation color her words. "Whatever you wish you could tell him...you're doing it right now."

The warrior bowed her head again.

"Everything feels like it's moving too fast." Her knees were pulled up to her chest as she visibly withdrew into herself. "Like a bunch of bees living in my head."

"Charming image," the bard chuckled. She propped her chin on her knees as she leaned forward, staring into the fire before turning her head to observe the other woman. "I know the feeling."

"You do?" Surprised, puzzled grey eyes met hers.

"Xena --" She cleared her throat again as she sat up. "Sorry."

"It's okay." The warrior sounded equally apologetic, and Gabrielle intervened before it could escalate.

"You know how rare it is for someone to be able to read and write. Why do you think I went to all that trouble to learn how, when almost everybody in Potadeia said I was stupid or crazy for wanting to know anything besides what they knew?" She smiled fondly at the memory; it was impossible to be angry at any of them any more. As long as they're not in front of me, she thought, and discarded this as unpromising.

"Writing is important to me for a lot of reasons, and they're all important. But one of the most important to me, personally, is it keeps me from going crazy." She didn't look away, and the half-expected flinch never came. "If you could see the inside of my head, it wouldn't be pretty. When I take the time to write something down, it forces me think about it...helps me organize all the chaos.
She leaned back to look up at the stars, taking a breath to calm herself. "I spent some time in the hospice today. There's a little girl there who lost an arm in a fire...she's still having trouble breathing and can't play with the other children. So I told her a story, and she asked if she could see some of my scrolls." Her tone was full of wonder. "The next thing I knew, it was three candlemarks later and I had to get back to finding you. If you could see how fast she was learning..."

She shivered as she looked back at the warrior. "All those people out there deserve a chance. It's so easy for me that I might not be the best teacher, but there are so many children here who want to learn and so few people who can teach them...can you imagine? That something so simple could make that much of a difference to someone?"

"Gabrielle, you're far from simple." The amused affection carried a husky note that was close to tears. "And you make so much of a difference."

Gabrielle didn't trust herself to respond right away, and her companion seemed to understand.

"I wrote a little bit today." About you, she added silently, as the warrior's eyes once more failed to meet hers. "Not a lot, and it felt really awkward...but at least I didn't want to throw it away when I read it."

"Gabrielle, what are we going to do?"

The plaintive tone tugged at her heart, and she kept her voice neutral despite its sudden leap. "You mean us?"

"If you want."

"If I want --?" Gabrielle reached out blindly through her tears, and this time the warrior didn't pull away as their fingers intertwined. "What about what you want?"

The other woman held on as if the bard could save her from drowning, her grip just shy of painful. Gabrielle stroked the clenched knot of their fists with her free hand until the tension eased slightly, a tiny part of her marveling that she wasn't screaming in terror.

"That's it, isn't it?" The warrior looked away again and Gabrielle resisted the urge to grab her, however gently. "You're scared of me?"

"Yes." The raw honesty caught Gabrielle off guard and she nearly missed the next words. "But just as much of me." Her hand trembled in the bard's grasp. "Of what I might do to you."

Gabrielle regarded her thoughtfully. "I could always chain you up again."

"Um...maybe it's a little soon to make jokes."

"Please..." The warrior bowed her head again, voice muffled by her position and the momentary desire for tears. "Gabrielle, I want to fight by your side, to protect you, see you smile --" She inhaled deeply, shoulders trembling. "I want you to be happy. You could make a difference for so many other people --"
"So could you." Gabrielle prayed that her quiet assurance would be enough; it was all she had left. "And I want the same." She couldn't look any more, and the longer she held on the more she felt as though she were restraining the other woman against her will.

She released her grasp, their fingers trailing away together, and stood up before she remembered her staff. Kneeling to pick it up, she glanced over and saw her friend looking back. There was fear, love and respect in those eyes but the old walls of control were back in place as well, the edge in her voice just shy of what the bard would have called unfeeling.

"You sleep over there."

She obeyed without hesitation, and the last thing she saw as she pulled the blanket around her were those pale grey eyes still staring across the dancing flames. Eventually they disappeared and she could hear the familiar sounds of a bedroll being arranged; the jingle of metal as the warrior settled in, her breathing becoming more regular as the fire crackled on, each irretrievable moment driving the knife a little deeper as it passed before her. She couldn't let it start all over, not this way again...

"Gabrielle?"

She almost laughed at this hesitance, the immediate thought of their role reversal lending her Xena's patience despite her inner turmoil. "Yes?"

"Does anyone know where you are?"

"Go to sleep." She couldn't help the coldness, making an effort to be gentle. "Stop worrying about me."

The resulting silence was just long enough for her to regret her harsh words.

"What am I going to tell Cyrene?" A note of dismay. "Gabrielle, what are you going to tell Lilla?"

"I don't know." She sighed, rubbing at her eyes. Her new friend didn't exactly sound pitiful, but couldn't the woman see she was hurting too? "Lilla probably already talked to Solan, and we can talk about it in the morning." She very deliberately turned on her side, putting her back to the fire and the warrior, and this time the silence remained.

Gabrielle knew if she started crying she likely wouldn't stop, focusing on breathing deeply and regularly. At some point she noticed that they were both following the same rhythm, and the irritation of trying to follow her own made her stop before she said something she'd regret for the rest of her life.

She looked up at the sky again. The stars above seemed vast and impersonal, a realm far beyond human concerns.

"Xena?" Her own heartbeat nearly deafened her. "Callisto?"

That old familiar, patient sigh; as if she hadn't just sounded equally close to tears. "Yes?"

"I'm cold."

The wait was interminable.

It was one of those moments that Hephaestus wished would last forever: just the two of them with no uninvited visitors or outside pressures, no need for communication other than lazing about in
bed enjoying the silence. Zeus had dismissed them all with a stern reminder, warning against any interference with the status quo; everyone had crossed their fingers behind their backs, swearing "This time for sure"; and despite a lingering pain in his lame leg, all was right with the world.

Aphrodite's nose tingled and she abruptly sat up, dislodging a surprised god of the forge from the comfortable position he'd nestled out for himself. He looked up to see a grin on her lips as she raised fists of victory over her head, kicking up her heels and letting out a triumphant squeal. "Yes!" She thumbed her nose at the bedside table where a pillar of flame sputtered pitifully inside a charming, hand-carved snowglobe. "In your face, buddy!"

"Now, dearest." Hephaestus tried not to sound too disapproving. "Gloating is so unbecoming on you."

She turned a devilish grin on him. "I can think of better ways to celebrate." He swallowed as she crawled towards him, remembering her most recent exuberant exertions and hoping she'd go easier this time. "C'mere, you..."

Feathers flew as she dived upon him.

Chaotic, happy sounds continued to emanate from Olympus and the world below for a good long time, mingling on the breeze.

By Aphrodite's bedside, the fire whimpered in its prison but settled down; still flickering, never quite going out.

What have you done?

Gabrielle stared into the darkness as the question resounded in her head. The fire had long since died to a dull glow of embers that gave off a good amount of heat, but this was nothing next to the searing touch of flesh against hers, the very thought of which sent a renewed flush of warring sensation through body and spirit. The warrior still lay sleeping like a babe, tucked under a
protective arm with her head on the bard's chest; one of her own, draped over the other's abdomen. Both women were naked from the waist up, the rest of their garments loose but mostly in place.

Still, Gabrielle remembered with a shiver, clothes had been the least of the barriers between them. As she'd anticipated, she'd had to be the aggressor: initiating every step, gentle but insistent; never forcing herself, yet never yielding an inch of ground once gained. It had been beautiful and terrifying; everything she'd ever dreamed of, and yet nothing she could have imagined. And now...

"Now you're feeling guilty about it."

Her head jerked up at the familiar cynicism. Ares was sitting casually on the log across the fire, the very same one she'd sat on earlier. She risked a look back down but the warrior seemed oblivious to the proceedings, burrowing still deeper into her embrace with an incoherent mumble.

"Oh, it's obvious." Ares' old sneer was barely evident. "Not just because you weren't sure of your own reasons. What have I done to her?" he continued in a rhetorical tone. "Just given us some privacy. And as for why I'm here..."

"Hold it." Gabrielle rummaged around under the sheet until she found her top, pointedly turning her back on the god of war. Her eyes never left the sleeping woman as she pulled the garment on, emblazoning upon her memory the image of the warrior's features at peace. Whatever Ares was up to, he wouldn't make her regret any of her decisions.

"Actually, I'm pretty impressed with the way you handled yourself."

"Stop that," she growled. Her voice sounded shockingly like Xena's, and she closed her eyes and took a deep breath before grabbing her staff, standing and turning to face her adversary.

"I don't have to read your mind," Ares snorted. "Your face is an open scroll." The suggestion of a smile tugged at his lips. "Would you believe me if I said I wanted to be sure you were good enough for my daughter?"

Gabrielle felt her eyebrow raise, again in unconscious imitation of the warrior princess. "Flattery will get you nowhere." She kept her voice low despite his assurances of Xena's continued slumber, walking around the fire pit with an unblinking gaze fixed upon the war god and stopping just out of staff range.

He shook his head in admiration. "Well, it's true. You could be a greater warrior than Xena or Callisto."

"As long as I follow you, right?"

"Not necessarily." He discarded the vague aside and began to pace around her in a slow, deliberate circle, hands held casually behind his back. The calculating scrutiny was more disturbing than any amount of lechery, and she quelled the growing fume of anger. He nodded wearily.

"Thought that'd get your attention."
"What --" She licked her lips and took a few deep breaths, but it didn't help; everything had gone a little gray and fuzzy round the edges, and she sat down rather heavily before she fell down. Her heart was threatening to leap out of her chest for the rush of joy and dread at his matter-of-fact statement. "What are you talking about?"

He managed to look simultaneously annoyed and concerned. "I don't expect you to believe me, so just bear with me. Hephaestus wasn't lying when he told me he didn't give Xena her chakram." Now he looked embarrassed. "Well, he made it...but I'm the one who gave it to her."

She didn't trust herself to speak, but couldn't help being surprised; she'd always thought the mysterious and little-mentioned Lao Ma responsible for that particular item. Cautiously, she nodded for him to go on.

"Apparently, I kept it a secret from myself. Can't imagine why..." He chuckled bitterly. "But that's not important. The important thing is, it's not entirely their fault they ended up like this." He nodded in the direction of the slumbering warrior.

"What are you saying?" She could hear her own uneasiness, and his unsmiling reply only confirmed her worst fears.

"I'm saying you had something to do with joining them, so trying to separate them would be pointless without your cooperation. In other words...you have to really want it to happen."

"What --" Her vaunted gift for words seemed to have utterly deserted her, her tongue as dry as a desert. "What would happen to Callisto?"

He regarded her unblinkingly. "I don't know."

For only a single second she considered keeping silent; but already she knew her course, and she could feel her heart break in anticipation as she bowed her head.

"Damn you, Ares." The muffled tears were audible and she angrily wiped them away, but he merely continued to stare back at her, awaiting explicit assent. She rose on shaky legs but with a determined look.

"All right," she breathed. "Let's do it."

Something had awakened her before she quite knew what, bringing her out of a deep slumber and to an state of instant alertness. She threw the blanket off and rolled smoothly away, looking about wildly in an attempt to pierce the gloom of night by sheer force of will. Slowly the shadows coalesced into some semblance of order, and she was on the verge of relaxing when she felt the chill bite of air on her exposed flesh.

It all came tumbling back then, and she threw her head back and howled her misery into the skies until her throat was raw. She staggered back to her bedroll and collapsed into the jumble of blankets, gathering them to her as she inhaled the scent of Gabrielle and someone else.

"Thank you," she whispered. A single tear burned like ice down her cheek, and she breathed deeply that warm affirmation of life and love, her heart about to burst. "Thank you..."

"Don't thank me yet."

The misery in the voice echoed her own and she whirled about. Gabrielle was standing a few feet away, and the warrior froze at the gleam of a familiar object clenched in the bard's hand. Her eyes
jumped to her own belt loop, and she did a double take at the sight of the chakram still in place where she'd left it.

"Gabrielle, what's going on? Where did that come from?"

The bard looked down at the chakram as if she'd forgotten its presence, let alone its origin. "Same place as the last one." She gave a shaky laugh. "It's a birthday present."

The warrior's eyes widened in horror and she scrambled to her feet. "Ares!" She held out a trembling hand. "I don't know what that bastard said to you, Gabrielle, but he's up to no good --"

"He said it would bring you back!"

The warrior stared dumbly at her, thrown off balance by both the words and the extreme emotion behind them.

"He said --" The bard's voice sank to a dull whisper. "He said all I had to do was give you the choice. So..." She held the weapon out, swallowing as she laid it on the ground before the warrior. "It's there if you want it."

She rose and backed a respectful distance away, half-anticipating a violent outburst of some kind, but the warrior was staring at the shining circle in the dirt as if nothing else existed. Her gaze never left it as she unhooked the other chakram from her belt, carefully, almost reverently grasping its mate; holding them up to examine more closely by the pale light of the moon.

Gabrielle watched a deluge of emotion running across the warrior's face, and realized she'd hardly dared draw breath since handing over the chakram. She opened her mouth to say something -- possibly *Take your time, or I'll just give you some privacy to think it over* -- when the other woman raised her head with a determined look. Before she could move the warrior had raised both chakrams above her head. For an instant her arms trembled, a look of doubt and fear etched into her features; and then they came together.

Gabrielle had been expecting something along the lines of the silent explosion that had accompanied her impromptu attempt at magickal healing, but this was more of a feeling that the entire world had abruptly been *torn*, part of it shifting in a great, ragged mass. She would have screamed if she'd been able to breathe and she held onto the memory of the staff in her hand, the sight of Xena's smile, as the howling winds threatened to sweep her away. Someone was screaming, though it wasn't her, on and on in an endless echo as everything slammed back with a lurch that left her shaking and nauseous.

"NO!"

The cry penetrated Gabrielle's consciousness as her vision cleared. Where one woman had been there were now two; naked as the day they were born, the shreds of their old clothing scattered about, crouched on the ground with a single chakram grasped between them. Xena's face looked as if it had been carved from iron as she stared into Callisto's eyes, and the blonde woman's numb fingers slowly uncurled from the weapon.

"No," she repeated, so softly Gabrielle hardly heard. Her gaze fell away from Xena's stare of accusation and she curled into a ball, wrapping her arms about her legs and burying her head in her knees. A hollow, broken moan emerged from her as she rocked back and forth. "Not fair..."

Xena's own eyes fell and Gabrielle forced herself into motion, walking over to the scattered bedroll and grabbing a blanket. She knelt down by Xena and the dark-haired woman gave her a blank look,
hesitantly accepting the covering.

Gabrielle swallowed. "It's really you, isn't it?"

A silent nod, as if the warrior were ashamed; or perhaps afraid to believe her senses. She pulled the blanket around herself, glancing down briefly at the chakram's intriguing new design before setting it down, casting a guilty look at the bard. Gabrielle instinctively reached out and froze at the look on the warrior's face, becoming painfully aware of the presence behind them.

"Oh, don't mind me." Callisto cleared her throat roughly, but the bitterness remained. "Go ahead, have your reunion. You deserve it." Her breath hitched in her chest; she sounded as though she ached to carve out her own tongue, powerless to prevent herself from speaking. "You deserve each other."

Xena opened her mouth and immediately closed it again as Gabrielle rose. She watched helplessly as her friend slowly approached her old enemy, awkwardly holding the blanket out before her.

The warrior queen's head rose to reveal bloodshot eyes. "I told you..." She swallowed, enunciating the words with brutal precision. "Stay away from me."

Gabrielle stopped in her tracks, looking back at Xena who appeared equally ill at ease and adrift. She turned back to Callisto but the other woman had risen and was already in front of her, snatching the blanket from her and retreating before she could react.

Xena was at her side in an instant with fear in her eyes; she turned to her nemesis ready to deliver a scathing warning, but it died on her lips at the cold mask of suffering her adversary wore. The blonde woman pulled the blanket about herself as she turned away.

"Stop looking at me." It was a plea rather than a command. "Leave me alone."

"Is that really what you want?" Gabrielle asked softly.

"It doesn't matter what I want." Callisto shivered violently under the meager covering of fur, the sharp edge creeping back into her tone. "You both got what you wanted, so go live happily ever after." Her voice rose and cracked. "Forget about me."

Gabrielle could feel the tension rolling off the warrior in waves and turned to her friend, desperate to avert another explosion. "Xena, I don't think it's a trick. I think she's really --"

"Sane?" Another cynical chuckle emerged from Callisto's throat. " Sanity's rather overrated. Maybe I was never insane...just angry."

"And now?"

"What do you think?" Callisto gave the warrior an incredulous look and threw her arms wide. Laughter and tears clashed as she clutched the falling blanket, fighting to keep her voice steady. "For once in my life I did the right thing, and look where it got me!"

"But you know you're not alone anymore." Xena's voice was oddly soft, and Gabrielle threw a startled look at her friend. Callisto shook her head, but Xena persisted.

"You still have a choice."

A shudder ran through the blonde woman as she swayed unsteadily on her feet. Her thin, pale form looked smaller than Gabrielle remembered, but the bard was sure it was a trick of the light and her
own perception.

"You call that a choice?" The question was a vicious hiss as Callisto turned leveled an accusing finger at Xena. "For the first time in forever, I had a life, and I gave it up! You think I want to spend it being reminded of what I had? To settle for being some sloppy, second-rate sidekick?"

She stalked over to the fire and knelt before it, blowing furiously on the embers and adding more twigs while the other women watched in stunned silence. The rising illumination filled the small clearing, throwing shadows every which way in the gloom as she stared into the dancing flames. When she spoke again, her voice was calm.

"Don't kid yourself, Xena. You and I both know it would never work. One body's not big enough for the two of us, let alone her." A soft laugh, like nothing Gabrielle had ever heard from those lips. "The world's not big enough. And one day, it'll all end in tears..."

"And you said I was a pessimist," the warrior muttered under her breath. Gabrielle let out a nervous chuckle.

Callisto continued to stare into the fire. "And what have I got to be thankful for? You're leaving me, she's leaving me --" A sarcastic chuckle. "Yes sir, princess...you get to have it all. So go ride off into the sunset."

Xena's eyes flared and she stalked over the warrior queen, glaring down at her old foe. "You done?"

Callisto looked up at the sky, giving no indication that she had heard. Her voice had gone quiet again. "If you won't let me go...then just kill me and get it over with."

"No," Xena chuckled harshly. "It's not that easy. See, we were inside each other's heads, know each other inside out, and you know what? You're right. I still don't trust you. Never will."

"Xena!" Gabrielle's choked gasp caused Xena to look back at her, but the warrior merely shrugged. "Just being honest." She scowled at Callisto, who conveniently continued to ignore her. "But I trust you more where I can keep an eye on you."

"I thought as much."

The flat tone warned Xena an instant too late before the warrior queen threw off her blanket and whipped the end into the flames. Gabrielle was already moving and Xena intercepted her, rolling and cradling the bard in a protective embrace as hot ash and coals filled the air.

"Let me go!" Gabrielle shouted, struggling furiously in her arms. "She's going to kill herself --"

"Good guess."

Both women froze as the dust and grit cleared. Callisto was kneeling by their saddlebags that still contained her armor, Xena's hidden breast dagger in her hand. Her gaze held riveted them to the spot as the blade quivered inches from exposed flesh.

"Not one step closer." A faint edge of hysteria ran through the quiet whisper, her grip on the blade tightening further as Xena slowly stood and assisted the bard in doing likewise. "Stay away, I mean it --"

"Now that's crazy," Xena breathed. A hint of madness was in her own voice as she slowly
approached her trembling adversary, with Gabrielle following right behind. Callisto's desperate eyes followed her as the warrior knelt in front of her. "You're so afraid of what might happen, you won't even try?"

"No..." Callisto moaned. Her eyes squeezed shut in pain.

A cry leapt from Gabrielle's lips as Xena's hand shot out with the speed of a striking snake. Callisto's eyes flew open as iron fingers encircled her wrist; as the dagger dropped from her grasp her foot was already rising, meeting the warrior's jaw with a resounding impact that loosened her own grip sufficiently for her captive to wriggle free. Callisto was scrambling toward the packs once more, rummaging deep within as the bard caught one of her ankles. Xena grabbed the other and they both gave a tremendous heave, as Callisto's hands emerged from the pack she saw the glint of metal --

They were frozen in a tragicomic tableau; Callisto holding a dagger to Xena's throat, her other hand holding Gabrielle's best cooking knife against her own chest, the tip of the blade resting between her breasts as her gaze flickered back and forth between the women holding her.

And who, the bard wondered, would make the first move; for how long might tragedy be averted? Who would put an end to this standoff, and what could it possibly be?

_I'll write my own ending._ she thought.

Heart in mouth, she opened them to speak.

You left me for the open road
Where you went I didn't know
But now you say
You're back to stay
Isn't it good again
Isn't it right again

When you were gone I count the days
And cry my lonely nights away
Oh promise me
You'll never leave
Isn't it good again
Isn't it right again

And oh how I'll miss those arms around me
I'm mighty glad that you found me
You left me for the open road
Where you went I didn't know
But now you say
You're back to stay
Isn't it good again
Isn't it right again
Isn't it good again
Isn't it right again.

Bill Plympton and Maureen McElheron, THE TUNE
Author's Notes and Soundtrack

Chapter Summary

More than even the pedantic ever wanted to know; aka, why the HELL are you still here? Aren't you ashamed?

"Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with, it is a toy and an amusement; then it becomes a mistress, and then it becomes a master, and then a tyrant. The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster, and fling him out to the public."

*Winston Churchill, 1949, Britain's National Book Exhibition; about his World War II memoirs*

Originally, I was annoyed by the "deus ex machina"/completely unexplained ending to Ten Little Warlords, and only had the vague idea that more could and should be done with Xena in her current predicament. A few vague ideas came to mind, assisted by Themiscrya's "Something Wicked", so at the same time I was envisioning some of the first few scenes (which were chronologically scattered all over the place), I had (with the original author's permission) lifted a section out of that story, chopped it into three sections, edited them almost to their final form AND decided that they were destined to be dream sequences. But I didn't get to use them until eight months later, when I finally had the story written up to that point. By that time, I had mapped out the chapter numbering and structure, as well as pretty much setting in concrete where the dream sequences would go.

(The ideas were floating around in my head as early as mid-1997 -- Intimate Stranger first aired in 11/96 -- and I started typing them in and fleshing them out around the time Season 3 first aired, which was in late September of '97. The initial beta was completed in October, 1999; the second beta, with the new ending, on the night before Christmas of that same year; and SWtE was declared Officially Done after a final proofread and edit in spring 2007.)

"Understanding is a three edged sword: My side, your side, and the truth."

*Kosh, _Babylon 5_ ("Deathwalker")*

Everyone was already on edge, paranoid and suspicious and growing more so with every passing minute. Mistaken identity (one of Hong Kong cinema's favorite plot devices) was central to the core, so it seemed logical to include one or more of the Xena Clones, adding to the potential chaos. I decided to have our heroines initially return to Treus, encouraged by the thought that this made sense by the canon -- "Warrior...Princess...Tramp" came right before the body switch of "Intimate Stranger", and hardly any time at all appeared to pass during this and "Ten Little Warlords". I also tried to keep in mind that TPTB don't give a damn about consistency, historical accuracy or any of that stuff if it gets in the way of their own vision -- so even if I caved on some things, it could still end up more "realistic" than almost any of the actual episodes.

Thinking along these lines, more of the big picture began to slowly appear. Xena would be portrayed physically as less "godlike" than in the series, to accentuate her essential human vulnerability. Of course she's the hero; of course she would continue to kick ass. But surely she
couldn't have adjusted that fast to her new body? Maybe to us mere mortals, she still appeared as impressive as ever -- but only she would know for sure, and of course she'd hide any weaknesses, being a rabid perfectionist and more critical of herself than anyone else is. Don't say nothing, don't complain...just work harder! (Shades of Animal Farm...she really can be stubborn as a mule.) Ares' involvement slowly increased over time, but I've always assumed that he IS Xena's father no matter how TPTB would like to play this issue as ambiguously as the subtext angle.

The story had originally started with extremely prurient motives, but as with all my attempts at pornography I found myself unable to write a flat-out "sex scene", forced by my own standards to work up to it as gradually as possible. A lot of good Xenarotica drags out the "first time" aspect; whenever Gab and Xena are just about to get more physically intimate, one or both of them draw away again. With this setup, there was all sorts of evil waiting to be dredged up, not the least of which would be Xena wondering whether Gab was really in love with her or Callisto -- either the woman, the idea of redeeming her, or both. The body aspect would be hard enough, but once past that there were the thornier issues of the soul.

Xena's reputation had been starting to heal thanks to Gab's efforts; now the world was again treating her like an insane butcher, just like when she first met Gab, as if all her good deeds never happened. Enough psychological stress, and she'd feel the urge to start meeting people's expectations; if she even suspected that Gab thought of her as Callisto, even a little bit, that paranoia would make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. And regardless of her own self-identity concept, she'd have a hard time telling the difference between her own tortured internal dialogue and a real instance of possession, to the point where she might start to fear that Callisto might be inside of her, warring for possession of the body...thus allowing the maximum CONFLICT!, with Callisto's presence not even necessary, kept to a minimum, or left deliberately ambiguous. While I'm most certainly a True Believer when it comes to Callisto, I didn't know for quite a while whether she was really going to appear "for real" (though I certainly should have suspected it).

Gab and everyone else, of course, would have the same worry: What if Callisto is in there, even just a little bit, struggling for control? Gabrielle was still in her second season prime and very much pre-Rift, but the recent murder of Perdicas, followed almost immediately by the body switch, could easily be enough to bring her to the same snapping point. Both she and Xena feel guilty about Callisto's life and death and want to forgive her, but would be at best uncomfortable and at worst outraged by the idea of the other one doing so. (I wrote these words months before 5x01, "Fallen Angel", and was rather pleased to see this reflected in Gab's reactions.) If Gab tried to forgive Callisto by treating Xena as Callisto, no matter how unconsciously or minimally, she'd be on the road to disaster. The most dangerous impulse can be the misguided desire to help. When you think the end justifies the means, it's easy to convince yourself it's necessary to destroy the village to save it.

J___r (as some refer to him) was still tagging along, and I didn't feel like getting rid of him. I didn't want to make him into a superman; just bring out some positive traits that even the most rabid Joxerphobes admit he possesses, while not diminishing any of the other characters, their relationships or their independence. His broad slapstick/phoole childe act works on the boob tube (how appropriate!), but in prose it gets old real fast even for those of us who like the poor guy. My Joxer may sound smarter than the canon in part because I tend to bring all the main characters up to my standards, and also because I'm more forgiving of him than most authors. I ended up using all sorts of little throwaways, verbal and otherwise, to make him a teensy bit more "true to form" (and cheerfully admit that his laughing at every little bit of innuendo is taken directly from Beavis and Butthead). He's still basically a naive klutz when all's said and done; I just made him more consistently like TPTB portrayed him in those few quiet, sensitive and intelligent moments. All it took was bringing him to his senses, first regarding his skills as a warrior and then regarding his chances with Gab (respectively, Slim and None).
The "Maternal Instincts" mess had really pissed me off also, especially Solan's death, so his presence immediately suggested itself. His role remained relatively stable but his level of participation increased very gradually, since I knew it would be major and wouldn't have it completely figured out until the end. At some point I realized consciously that all the relationships other than the one between Xena and Gab were also important and interesting, not only in their own right; but because all of them had relationships of their own with Xena or Gab, and all of those interactions could be illustrated and played on simultaneously.

Lias's medical condition was solidly established before I remembered that he'd already been portrayed in a similar fashion in another fic, which I can't seem to locate under the Meg or Diana sections on xenafiction.net anymore; I decided I hadn't stolen it consciously, and forged ahead. Lots of characters tied in with the title of chapter 4: "Eyes of a stranger" applied to Xena in her new body, Lias in his post-seizure condition, Diana's newfound confidence, Meg's (My Fair Lady, almost-schizophrenia) growing maturity and sophistication both the etiquette and in the cynical sense: disturbing in the contrast of difference and familiarity to their loved ones. Meg's newfound gentleness and self-confidence make her more attractive to Joxer, who at least has some idea of what he really wants. Phil was in love with the woman Diana used to be, but doesn't know how he feels about the new one. About Xena, we need say no more.

I figured Diana and Meg had grown close and probably switched places now and then, both for practical purposes or out of sheer boredom. Meg was still basically a street tough but trying to be well-mannered and intelligent, occasionally making an off-color or blunt remark. The exact nature of their relationship, like many other later developments, was more discovered than developed; i.e., not planned at the beginning, but once I'd gotten that far they popped out of the woodwork and revealed themselves. Lias "adopted" Meg at the end of "Warrior...Princess...Tramp", or at least gave her a job and treated her like a daughter, and this made my job easier (although TPTB conveniently ignored this in every future Meg ep, as well as again failing to ever offer any explanation for that neglect). And Meg, having lost her dad at a young age, would naturally gravitate toward a kind father figure. (The general idea of "You can't plan your child's fate or future" worked itself in along the way somewhere.)

Having already decided that the plot was of secondary importance, it was time to fill in the details. "Adventures in the Sin Trade" provided an essential piece of Xena's past, and combined with Solan's connection to the centaurs and Gab's with the Amazons, it became obvious that both sides should be involved. (An-Tai was a relative latecomer but fit in well when I decided in a fit of madness to throw drunken kung fu into the mix.) The Pink Rabbit Consortium's artwork provided a lot of inspiration; some details of Amazon history were taken from a subpage of S. Wilson's "One Hundred and One Amazons". The FAQ at Whoosh.org verified definitively that there are no female centaurs; both the centaurs and the Amazons are "underdogs" in comparison to the mostly human population, and this conflict (along with my own beliefs) is the crucible from which those details were forged.

I knew I didn't want a traditional or completely happy ending in regards to the Xena/Gab relationship -- I wanted one that suggested all sorts of possible new beginnings, one that simultaneously broke hearts and lifted spirits, that transcended old paradigms and false dichotomies...that almost anyone could find something to enjoy in, even if they disagreed with the direction in which I took the characters. The second half of Season 4 (especially the last few episodes) convinced me I had been on the right track from the beginning with a lot of stuff, but I was also glad to have seen it in order to work in a few more little things here and there. I tried unsuccessfully to finish before the 5th season started, but I think I managed to avoid having that interfere with or spoil my ending; and I was amused/pleased to see some of my themes addressed (balance, impregnation, and even Ares partially turning over a new leaf). And as they say, everything else is gravy.
I hope you've found it to be good gravy.

"Callisto, the Queen of Thieves" is from GL Dartt's Xenafic "Nothing Remembered"; all other AU Callistos are canon-inspired and/or my own creation. And although this story wasn't polished and released until long after the end of the series, the "water sharing" in chapter 17 was written LONG before "Friend In Need." Nothing new under the sun...)

Kat, my esteemed primary beta editor, provided countless and highly effective suggestions regarding some specific structure and content, and SWtE is by far the better for her efforts. Were it not for her optimism and encouragement I might have never finished at all, and my satisfaction is more complete for the pleasure and privilege of her assistance. Her Uberverse is a fast-paced, diabolically funny, strange and wondrous place, and you should seek out The Devil's Workshop if you haven't already had the pleasure of its discovery.

I attempted to only plagiarize from the best, and there are obviously a vast number of movies, books, etc., which I ripped off either blatantly or subtly (blatant example: Xena's impromptu "lesson in martial arts" to Terriea is an almost identical reconstruction of a scene from Samo Hung's TV show "Martial Law"). However, my single greatest influence for action sequences in general, and which I ripped off for one scene in particular, is Jackie Chan's film masterpiece Drunken Master II: I cannot recommend this movie highly enough; the plot, for once, is as good as the action, and the action is top notch. Jet Li's Once Upon A Time In China series also influenced the "kung fu" aspect, while real-life mixed martial arts competitions such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship and Vale Tudo were a great inspiration for a lot of the "ground fighting" (limb locks, joint manipulation and the like).

Other inspirational TV shows: "In The Heat of the Night" and "Babylon 5". B5 offered a grand big picture as a novel for television, and ITHOTHN had the finest little details and character development I've ever seen in any medium, not to mention a welcome refusal to provide consistently happy endings or blindly cater to stereotypes. Both have had a very deep and broad influence on the overall flavor and feeling of this story and its characters. (Eleas, except for not being deaf, is directly inspired by Marlee Matlin's character on the TV show "Reasonable Doubts", another show that likely failed because it didn't spell everything out and required the viewer to actually pay attention and fill in some gaps on their own.)

If you're the kind of person that likes this sort of thing, send me a list of all the references/ripoffs you spot. You may find some I never intended, which is always fun.

Following are miscellaneous unsorted notes left over after organizing the above, including quotes or references that didn't make it into the story but definitely influenced it:

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A human being is never so desperate as when their identity is threatened or called into question. A person's identity is the central point of their existence. Richard Bandler and John Grinder, _Frogs Into Princes_. Also from that book:

"All communication is hypnosis...Whenever *anyone* communicates, they're trying to induce states in one another by using sound sequences called 'words.'"

And:

"Everything we're going to tell you is a lie."

Aldous Huxley's _Doors of Perception_: When you learn a language, you inherit the wisdom of those before, but at the same time you are a victim because of how it limits your infinitely possible
experiences; labeling them with words, emphasizing some and attracting your attention to them, while equally valid (and possibly even more dramatic, rewarding or enjoyable) experiences remain unlabeled, therefore for the most part unnoticed.

"Printer's ink has been running a race against gunpowder these many, many years. Ink is handicapped, in a way, because you can blow up a man with gunpowder in half a second, while it may take twenty years to blow him up with a book. But the gunpowder destroys itself along with its victim, while a book can keep on exploding for centuries."

Christopher Morley, _The Haunted Bookshop_. See also Charles Platt, "Channeling Rebellion" (quoted/paraphrased by Attalos)

Herodotus's Histories on the Persians: "If an important decision is to be made, they discuss the question when they are drunk, and the following day the master of the house where the discussion was held submits their decision for reconsideration when they are sober. If they still approve it, it is adopted; if not, it is abandoned. Conversely, any decision they make when they are sober is reconsidered afterwards when they are drunk."

"Every great mind is faced with the decision to either take over the world or defend it. But is there really a difference?" (source unknown)

"infernal machine": see

- the history of submarine warfare
- and the works of artist Joe Coleman.

"Control guilt and you control the child." (Dan Greenberg, _How to be a Jewish Mother_)

For Him The Bell Tolls-inspired, actual original doggerel by yours truly:

Joxer the Mighty, thanks to Aphrodite
Got his wish to be a stud, but at bell's ring once more a dud
When things get grim
All the girls run to him
If by warlords you're oppressed
Don't get too depressed
He'll slay the leader, spare the rest --
"Compassion isn't weakness!"
A man of action, all agree
Heart the size of sky and sea
So humble that it sickens me
By all the gods! It's Joxer --
Joxer the Mighty!

The Xena story of how the Ixion stone created the centaurs, comes from actual Greek myth: Ixion had sex with a cloud (!) that had taken the form of Hera (hmm...are we sure it wasn't the other way around?). Because he believed it was Hera, he boasted that he had been Hera's lover, and so Zeus bound him on a wheel in the underworld to turn forevermore. (When Orpheus sang, "the very
Excerpt from "Dreamworker":

GABRIELLE: You know, doesn't it make more sense that I should learn how to defend myself? I think it makes more sense.

XENA: Don't confuse defending yourself with using a weapon. When you pull a sword, you have to be ready to kill.

G: You don't think I know that?

X: No, I don't think you do. People are too quick to go for their sword. It should always be the last resort.

G: I don't want to learn to kill. I want to learn to survive.

X: All right. The rules of survival. Number one. If you can run, run. Number two. If you can't run, surrender, and then run. Number three. If you're outnumbered, let them fight each other, while you run. Number four --

G: Wait. More running?

X: No. Four is where you talk your way out of it, and I know you can do that. It's wisdom before weapons, Gabrielle. The moment you pick up a sword, you become a target. And the moment you kill...

G: The moment you kill...what?

X: Everything changes. Everything.

Use light/dark imagery. Contrary to popular themes, Xena, while "dark", has historically been the [anti-]heroine; Callisto, while "light", has been the evil. Now we can contrast in reverse.

NON-TRADITIONAL, semi-awkward love scenes...Life ain't like the movies. Take political stands/sides/views as little as possible: Show by example, not by explanation; show effects of bad law upon individuals; avoid endless ranting and moralizing. Make us care about the people.

Spice up the Over Used "want to [tell each other about their feelings | fuck their brains out] but don't because [X]", with the addition of Xena's MAIN reason that she doesn't want to, deep down inside, when pressed to really say why not. Not just because she doesn't want to give up control for love (see Comedy of Eros et al), definitely not because she thinks of Gabrielle as a child (but G's trust could be her downfall, and X won't let that happen), and not because she's trying to "shield" Gab from the responsibility of making an independent decision (this one's used a lot in fanfic I notice). Not just because she's afraid of her "dark side" that uses sex for power over others, or afraid of confusing physical lust with love AGAIN... And not because "the physical attraction has grown so strong and yet we still deny it," these girls are gonna keep their heads most of the time -- we're not gonna eliminate sex, it just isn't going to be the only driving force in terms of the characters and their actions, we'll still have plenty of ribald fun but there can be, there needs to be, so much more...

...but because, as Xena puts it, when friends decide to do the wild thang...
"Then...Everything changes." (cue violins)

When Meg takes Gabrielle to see Philemon, what does she wear?

A pearl necklace. <groan, duck, run for the hills fleeing angry mob with pitchforks and torches> I swear, the pun came to me AFTER I'd written it in. See the song of the same name on ZZ Top's album _El Loco_:

She's really upset with me again
I didn't give her what she likes
I don't know what to tell her
Don't know what to say
Everything got funky last night
She was really bombed
And I was really blown away
Until I asked her what she wanted
And this is what she had to say

A pearl necklace
She wanna pearl necklace
She wanna pearl necklace

She gets a charge out of bein' so weird
Digs gettin' downright strange
But I can keep a handle on anything
Just this side of deranged
She was gettin' bombed
And I was gettin' blown away
And she held it in her hand
And this is what she had to say

A pearl necklace
She wanna pearl necklace
She wanna pearl necklace

She is so tough, as pure as the driven slush
And that's not true what she's talkin' about,
It really don't cost that much.

But hey, you should have realized by now that I have no shame.

Drink or drown, sink or swim! Drunken kung fu is awesome, funny, terrifying... but "Superheroes don't kill, Tick...EVER!" (Jackie Chan demonstrates this in most of his movies but DM2 is particularly notable, conveying this sentiment beautifully in the final fights with no dialogue whatsoever.)

Owoo! My sweetie was reading chapter 1, and upon reading Eph and Kal offering to trade each other their respective problems, remarked offhandedly that if the Amazons and Centaurs would just get together and have babies, all the males would be centaurs, the females would be human, and everyone would be happy. Whaddyaknow...a MAJOR, NON-XENA/GAB RESOLUTION! I owe
her a HUGE DEBT for this! They're both warrior tribes, with more in common than they realize...

Of course it won't be perfect; She also pointed out some of the potential problems and solutions (quoting her):

One half of the pair gets their child and decides not to participate any longer. I think that some sort contract would almost be necessary to prevent this.

A pair keeps trying, but one sex predominates. I would think that there would be others that are not able to reproduce that would be thrilled to be able to raise a child. It would probably be necessary to have some sort of agreement that the biological mother would not try to hold a claim to the child of interfere with its raising, particularly since they would likely remain in the same village. It might almost be better in this case if different villages traded their "unwanted" offspring to help prevent this sort of problem.

For that matter, there is always the chance of the amazon trying to interfere in "her" son's upbringing, and the centaur in "his" daughter's.

But some will try...

Soundtrack

Like many authors, I listened to music while writing. While I probably would have been able to do the job without it, neither the experience nor the final results would have been as enjoyable for me. And while it's not required for you to listen to the music in order to read or enjoy SWtE, and you're certainly more than welcome to come up with your own or none at all, I consider the following the "official soundtrack," for whatever that's worth. (Personally I see it as pretentious delusions of grandeur, but then, writing fanfic is not exactly the hallmark of a sane individual. Publishing it certainly ain't.)

"Sleeping With the Enemy" has been brought to you by:

Xena, Warrior Princess: Official Soundtrack, Volumes I-IV (Volume 4 was conspicuously missing a LOT of stuff from Adventures in the Sin Trade, which was my primary reference, though I wouldn't shed a tear if you wanna throw in the Indian stuff as well)

And by:

- Polly Jean Harvey and John Parish, _Dance Hall at Louse Point_: "Girl"
- Diamanda Galas, _Malediction and Prayer_: "My World Is Empty Without You"
- the Rolling Stones, "Cocksucker Blues" (original and unplugged)
- Pigface, _Feels Like Heaven...Sounds Like Shit!_: "Empathy (Clarified Vision Remix)"
- Jefferson Airplane, _After Bathing at Baxter's_: "Spare Chaynge"
- King Crimson, _In the Court of the Crimson King_: "Mirrors"
- Apocalyptica, _Inquisition Symphony_: "Inquisition Symphony" (originally by Sepultura)
- Prong, _Prove You Wrong_: "Hell If I Could"
- Deftones: "Be Quiet and Drive (Far Away)" (acoustic version)
- Drunken Master 2 Soundtrack
- Dungeon Keeper: Track 6
The Tune Soundtrack: "Home", "Isn't It Good Again"

I don't know what language the start and end of "Empathy" is in, but if you listen close during the intro, I swear you'll hear him say "Xena". This track combines nicely with the Opium Haze music in "The Debt", both musically and thematically. Prong's contribution is definitely worthy of a Callisto theme: "You wanna know something? I'd give you hell if I could!"

"Home" is Xena's song for Gabrielle; the extended trance-inducement of "Spare Chaynge" and "Mirrors" is during Xena and Meridus's 'Riverdance competition' right after; the Drunken Master should be pretty obvious; "Be Quiet and Drive" was how I figured all three women were feeling after the big split; and "Isn't It Good Again" is for when you're sitting there staring at THE END. All other music may be freely arranged to suit your whim while still retaining the original experience more or less "as the author intended."

**The Tune** is an animated feature by Bill Plympton with music by Maureen McElheron. It's one of the few movies in existence that didn't make me hate myself for breaking down in tears.

The game "Dungeon Keeper" is by Bullfrog Software. It's a lot of fun.

The Xena: Warrior Princess official soundtrack music is by Joseph DoLuca. It's most excellent.

I love you.

Be good, be happy, be free.

-dj

1997 - 2007

now my tale is told

---

*for john t kovach.*

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!