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## From a Dark Wood Rising

By Link

Disclaimers:

Xena, Gabrielle, Argo, Ephiny, Toris, Solan and a bunch of others you'll recognize as you go belong to the Creators of the Xenaverse; I appreciate their imagination in bringing us these characters, and further appreciate their sense of liberality in letting others expand on those characters.

This story is one of a series of three; the first two take place within about five years of each other, and the third spans almost thirty years. The stories build on each other but the first one doesn't have to be read to understand the second and so on. This particular tale is – generally – no more graphic than any of the X:WP episodes, however there are a couple of scenes of violence – the passionate, physical destruction of a body, which is specifically what constitutes an act of violence. The ancient world was just as gory as our own modern one, and while I don't try to tell it all like it was (like I'd know), I did try to insert what I thought was some truth in the way of life those two thousand years ago (including a lurid sprinkling of fantasy... Hey, if Rob and Sam can do it, why not me, right?).

Xenaverse chronology-wise, this story takes place somewhere around the middle of the third season – Gabrielle's Hope has been killed as a child, but she and Xena have recovered from their rift; semi-happily roaming the world again for adventure and lack of anything better to do.

If you have any comments you'd like to share with me about my work, feel free to e-mail me:

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Thanks all!

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I

“*You? Friends with a priest?*” scoffed an incredulous Gabrielle.

“Don't sound so surprised,” laughed Xena lightly. The six-foot tall warrior gave her best friend a coy sideways glance, sending raven hair to sashay in the breeze. “He wasn't a priest when I first knew him. He was a soldier, the only survivor of a small army I destroyed many years ago.”

“You spared his life?”

“Yeah. I fought him hand to hand and he was good competition; but not good enough.”

The smaller blonde snorted. “Like any ever were? Or are for that matter...”

Xena continued, ignoring the commentary. “After I ordered my men to kill everyone else, I left him to return to his home and spread the news of his defeat.”

“And now he calls on you for help?”

Xena smiled. She appreciated her young friend’s blunt recognition of contradiction. “He impressed me. I admired his courage.” A broad shoulder shrugged. “I told him he could stay in my army as one of my officers, or return home.”

He was the first person Xena had spared for the sake of not wanting to kill. A small, happy smile played across full, red lips. When he told her he’d rather return home, Xena would be the first to admit she was surprised. She figured a man willing to stand off with her in combat would prefer to stand with her for battle glory given the chance to do so. The ‘Old Xena’ wouldn’t appreciate *going home*, and definitely not over power, wealth, the supreme chance for world domination.

But a few years later she received a message that he’d become a priest. “He thanked me for helping him see that fighting with a sword was not the only way to battle wrongdoing. He thanked me for giving him the chance to find his way.”

“Wow,” mused Gabrielle. “What’s his name?”

“Thalkus, High Priest of the Temple of Cresca.” Xena’s smile grew, in spite of herself. Thalkus was an anomaly. Besides her son, Solan, Thalkus was probably the only good thing that came of her stint of evil, as unlikely as it sounded to have something good come out of something so horribly wrong. ‘Not that it justified my behavior in any way,’ she added to herself, but it made her feel a certain pleasure to think while even in the farthest reaches of her evil darkness she could still have an effect of goodness.

But Xena had come as far away from that life of destruction and terror as one could get and still carry a sword. Xena was, above all else, a woman who dealt with herself with unillustrated honesty – she was a woman cut for battle. She needed fighting like a musician needed an instrument, an artist a medium, and a politician a government. But the people on the opposite end of her artistically lethal maneuvers were very different than those cowering at her feet only a few years earlier. Instead of kneeling, withering women crying for the lives of their husbands and sons, grown men groveled on their knees, forced to reconcile how much they valued their lives over their lifestyles. Children ran to thank her and invite her to dinner or to play rather than from her, shrieking her coming like heralds of the gods’ own plague.

She also freely admitted that she hadn’t achieved this turnabout alone – her young, blonde, blue-green eyed protégé walking proudly beside her had a large role in introducing the new Xena to the world. Barely into her twenties, Gabrielle was a woman with a depth of observation and knowledge that the decade older Xena wouldn’t have imagined possible; to have an independent deconstruction of her character and later free and stalwart support given to her when she’d felt the most dissected and exposed was the main thing that kept Xena on her path of redemption and redress. She’d heard it was easier to love yourself when someone loves you first – with Gabrielle beside her, she wouldn’t argue the sentiment.

They arrived at the temple just before dark, in the midst of an evening service. Xena and Gabrielle waited patiently near the entrance while Thalkus finished his sermon. Gabrielle craned her neck to see over the people in front of her, but her height afforded her no advantage. The young woman was much shorter than her best friend. This allowed her several advantages – squeezing through small, tight places in a pinch, a low center of gravity in a fight, and a gentle solemnity that many associate with the short. She was a beautiful young woman, with fine strawberry blonde hair, made a touch more blonde by the bleaching power of the sun, and blushing cheeks that flushed easily when she was embarrassed or flattered. Still, because she had so many *cute* qualities, Gabrielle often found it difficult to be taken seriously by others and many tried to take advantage of her or ignored her altogether. Gabrielle was, at heart, gentle – she didn't have the deep seeded ferocity that Xena could so readily display. She stood on her tiptoes and rested a small, delicate, hand on her friend's shoulder for support.

The temple was full of parishioners, men and women in various classes of dress, most bearing offerings as much as they could afford – a bouquet of flowers or basket of figs. The temple columns were widely spaced to give the large room a more open feel. The whitewashing over most of the interior hadn't been retouched in years, and showed dry cracks, made the murals and frescos tiredly dull where they would have been bright and engaging artworks. Still, it was a working temple with its own working and welcoming idiosyncrasies – not at all like many of the oracles' dominions, sterile and forbidding of much interaction. The people inside were locals, comfortable, made the place a part of their daily lives and it showed – it was a lived in temple, very much a part of the community. From the looks of things, with the amount of people in the temple, it was a space they would converge upon in times of stress and turmoil. Xena wasn't necessarily the world's most emotionally acute person, but frowns and squints of concern and anxiety were easily observed on the majority of the people she passed, accompanied by frequent, hopeful looks as they strained necks and chins forward to rely on every word spoken by their religious leader. And that leader was wrapping up his sermon after having spied his newest guests.

“Xena!” A man practically ran up to the pair with a wide smile. Xena smiled at him, easily recognizing the face of a man she hadn't seen in fifteen years. While his hair was pulling away from his forehead as could be expected for a man his age, Thalkus still had a youthful ruggedness and athleticism to his average good looks. Like most men, he was a couple inches shorter than Xena, but as he looked up at his guest, his dark eyes were happy with greeting, and his pleased smile smoothed away some of the wear and tear of an earlier life of war and violence. “I'm so glad to see you.” Xena and Thalkus embraced briefly. “I had hoped you would get here soon – and here you are!”

“This is my friend Gabrielle,” Xena introduced. “Your message said it was urgent. What's the matter, Thalkus?”

The priest raised a hand to lead them off to the side of the milling crowd, his rich robes swaying heavily with the motion. Given the heat in the temple and the weight of the man's clothes, Xena was surprised Thalkus wasn't at least sweating like a spitted pig, let alone dying of heat stroke. “Oh Xena, there's a great evil stalking this town. A giant beast sent by Aries to destroy us.”

“What? What is it?”

“A sphinx.”

Gabrielle blinked in surprise. “A sphinx,” she repeated in question. “I thought they were extinct.”

Xena shook her head, sparing a glance to her friend. “No no, there are still a couple around, though finding one still in Greece would be a challenge. They aren’t usually violent, Thalkus, and they’re Athena’s not Aries’ creatures.”

“But this isn’t just any sphinx, Xena – a cat’s body, a *man*’s head, as big as an elephant and as strong as three. He roams the woods with his demon daughter.” The smaller man lowered his voice even more, his dark eyes fastened intently on the blue ones looking back. “The daughter looks as human as the rest of us, except for her glowing eyes and razor teeth. He sends his spawn to entrance our townspeople and lead them to him to satisfy his appetite. They may have been Athena’s creatures once, but now Aries owns them and they have kidnapped our children, our young sons and daughters. We don’t know why or even if they are still alive.” Thalkus stopped, too upset to continue. Xena put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“I promise you, Thalkus, we will get the children back.”

“Uncle?” A young maid approached them from the congregation. She was tall, thin, a girl of average beauty, much like the man she approached. She had long dark hair that probably would have been as dark as Xena’s had the sun not bleached bronze highlights into the tresses. Her face was darkly tanned, another testament to many long hours in the outdoors. She stood straight in her long skirt and loose, thin shirt. Her eyes, Xena noticed, were dark, like her uncle’s, and held a spark of mischief – the kind of misleading mischief a shiny, wet stepping pebble would offer – an open invitation to trust, a dare not to slip.

“Ah, Tai’gee. Come, I’d like you to meet someone. This is Xena and her friend Gabrielle. They’ve come to rid us of our problem,” said Thalkus proudly.

Tai’gee looked first at Xena then Gabrielle, then back again with a hard, inflexible stare. She smiled a pleasantly false smile and Xena didn’t miss the sudden animosity in the girl’s eyes.

“The Warrior Princess. I’ve heard a lot about you from Uncle Thalkus. He says you are a great warrior,” said Tai’gee with some chill.

“I do the best I can,” Xena replied evenly.

“So you’re who my uncle sent for to get the children back.”

“Not only to return the children, Niece,” cut in Thalkus, “but also to dispose of Aries’ beasts. She has vowed to help us.”

“That’s right,” Xena affirmed. “If Aries is involved he must be stopped.”

“So she’s going up against Cerebrius and his daughter? We’ll see how *she* does.”

Gabrielle glanced to Xena to see her reaction to the girl’s acerbity. Xena only raised an eyebrow.

“I detect some doubt, Niece. Do you not think Xena can defeat those monsters?”

“There’ve been many who’ve tried,” she answered flatly.

“Yes, but none as good as Xena. You always doubt the brave warrior’s ability to defeat evil, Tai’gee. I never understand that.”

Tai’gee didn’t answer right away; instead, she regarded her uncle with a discerning expression in her dark eyes that raised Xena’s eyebrow further. The warrior thought she knew exactly what the girl was considering to say: ‘Thalkus came after Evil-Me and didn’t succeed.’ The warrior watched as the dark-haired youth mentally swallowed that comment and smoothly said instead, “I do not doubt a true warrior against evil, Uncle. I doubt a warrior who fights in ignorance.”

Thalkus smiled, proud and dismissive. “A wonderful girl, isn’t she? Not afraid to speak her mind. You have your father’s mind. It’s a shame he can’t be here to watch you grow into it.” Tai’gee smiled curtly and looked at Xena and Gabrielle again with certain contempt, of which Thalkus was totally oblivious. When she started to move away Thalkus called her back.

“Tai’gee, I’d like you to show Xena and Gabrielle to your Uncle Patrach’s house. I’ve arranged for them to stay with you.”

“Certainly,” the girl hissed.

“That’s really not necessary, Thalkus. Gabrielle and I can make camp just outside of town. It’s really no problem.”

Thalkus raised his hands in insistence. He wouldn’t hear of them sleeping on the hard ground. They were his guests and he would see to their comfort. “I’d offer you a place here in the temple, but with so many flooding the halls in their consternation and supplications to the gods I doubt you would be comfortable at all. Besides, it’s not safe for you to sleep in the open, unprotected. The demon might work her evil and lead you to her master,” he added. “We can’t have that.”

Tai’gee tilted her head in a gesture. “No. We wouldn’t want that. Follow me.” The girl started to leave, then turned back as an afterthought. “Uncle Thalkus, should we expect you for dinner tonight?”

“Yes, I’ll be there. Xena and I have a lot to go over.”

Tai'gee led them out of the temple and through town. Cresca was a fairly busy place, still growing into its own. Most of the people bustling around the streets at present were vendors pulling away their carts for the night and last minute shoppers looking for fresh food for dinner. It wasn't a particularly rich town, not particularly prosperous, not particularly anything – just a town, just there, full of just people concerned with their daily lives and not much else.

Tai'gee walked before Xena and Gabrielle at a brisk pace and never looked back to see if they were keeping up with her. She looked neither left nor right, spoke to no one, nor even acknowledged that she was escorting newcomers. Her drab skirt flapped about her ankles in the breeze she created in her flight, as did the loose ends of her dark hair. Gabrielle wondered what the girl did outside all day – she was too thin to be laboring in a field or some other outdoor work. She and her sister, Lila, were both hardy girls from the work they did on their parents' farm; Gabrielle thought it'd be unlikely that anyone doing a fraction of the same toils would be so insubstantial.

Physical insubstantiality wasn't really on Xena's mind however – Tai'gee's attitude quite made up for any girth the girl's body lacked. Normally Xena wouldn't have given a second thought to such tartness. It wasn't behavior she was unfamiliar with, and she didn't waste her time wishing she could change everyone's opinion of her. But Xena found it interesting that the niece of a man she knew venerated her would have a blatantly ugly opinion of her. Tai'gee was inimical and her coldness would have been much more appropriate coming from someone Xena had personally offended rather than a relation of someone who liked her. She thought she would do well to watch the young woman carefully – it wouldn't do to keep close quarters with someone who had such a significant grudge. When they had exited through the other side of the town, Xena tried to strike up a conversation with the girl.

“Well, let's get away from those nasty formalities, shall we? You don't seem to like me very much. Why might that be?”

Tai'gee didn't bother with looking back as she threw her answer over her shoulder. “I haven't said anything about liking or disliking you.”

“Call it a hunch. I get those every now and then. Seems to me like something's eatin' at you real hard about my bein' here.”

“What you feel is your business. It's not my concern how you feel.”

“How hospitable of you,” Xena egged.

The trio had well left the town proper by then and Tai'gee felt anything she said at that point would be between them only. She stopped her fast-footed trek to turn sharply and square off with her two trailers in the uneven rut of cart tracks running into and out of the town. She wasn't the least intimidated to look into Xena's brilliantly blue eyes, and squared her shoulders as she did so.

Even though her shirt was thin and hung limp against the younger woman's body, Tai'gee possessed a rich sense of dignity that struck Xena as reserved for the truly righteous. The youth raised her chin in confirmation of that righteousness. "I didn't ask you to come here," she stated flatly, dark eyes flashing. "I didn't invite you to stay in my house. I didn't ask for your conversation. You might be great warriors to everyone else, but to me you're just glory-seeking opportunists. When I see otherwise, then we'll have something to talk about." Tai'gee shot an equally contemptuous look at the younger, quieter Gabrielle. Rocks crunched under her worn shoe as she pivoted to continue her stalk up the rutted road, leaving Xena and Gabrielle to follow more slowly behind, musing.

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Tai'gee's aunt, Mian, and other uncle, Patrach, were much more welcoming than their niece. They invited Xena and Gabrielle in, offered them warm baths and as much seconds and thirds of dinner as they wanted. Tai'gee chose to stay out of their company as much as possible, often going outside while the two guests were inside or vice versa. She hardly spoke in their presence, only when it was unavoidable and even then she wasted no breath. Her guardians seemed unperturbed by her curtness.

"Tai'gee has lived with us for ten years now," explained the girl's aunt. "After The Protector killed her father, we took her in. Thalkus would have cared for her, except as a priest he can't have parental responsibilities. We were more than happy to have her live with us." The thin woman smiled proudly as she handed Xena and Gabrielle each a freshly peeled carrot. "We can't have children of our own, and Tai'gee is such a wonderful girl."

"Yeah," smiled Xena. "A real gem, I'm sure." Gabrielle merely crunched her appetizer, choosing the more charitable part of silence.

At dinner, Thalkus carried most of the conversation, reminiscing about his days as a soldier, his encounter with Xena and how she had changed his life. He said when he had fought against her and saw how his strength as a warrior failed him, he knew then he was not fighting the right way. He felt he was spared by Xena through divine intervention, that the gods had set into motion a plan for him to find solutions to battles through spiritual armament and not physical combat. Gabrielle was eager to ask if Thalkus felt he had won any battles so far.

"Oh Gabrielle, everyday is a battle. Everyday we fight against evil and win by coming back the next day." He smiled patronly at Gabrielle's rapt attention then continued. Gabrielle, being a bard, recognized a sermon coming with the prophetic intake of air. "But to be more concrete, I'd say I feel my greatest challenge has been to fortify myself and this town against the evils that lurk in these woods." He gave a practiced wave of his hand to indicate the woods set not far from his kinsman's house. "I've done the best I can to help them not to fear the evil but to conquer the fear in themselves. That is the only true way to win against wickedness."

"Well said," cheered Tai'gee's aunt and uncle. Gabrielle nodded. Xena gave a small smile, but watched Tai'gee out of the corner of her eye. The girl looked at her food, didn't eat, didn't seem particularly approving of her uncle's grand spiel. The creases around her eyes pulled her face

into more of a frown than her mouth did. No one made an attempt to draw her into the conversation, no one asked for her thoughts, and Tai'gee didn't seem the least inclined to offer any opinions – although, Xena noticed, she did look a little more interested when the talk turned to a description of the beasts in the forest. 'Or she looks more sour anyway.'

"Few people have seen the daughter," said Patrach. He was a big man, resembling his brother, Thalkus, in face only. He and his brother could have been twins if one cut their heads from their bodies and looked at nothing else. Because of that Xena wondered if they were circumstantial brothers, not actually related, just happened to have that one similarity between them – like herself and Meg and the Princess Leah. His face was bearded and, like the rest of him, carried a lot of weight – he had solid jowls and a strong, bold forehead. He didn't necessarily look like a man used to fighting – in fact, Xena glanced down to watch the man cut his food, his hands seemed quite delicate and clean – but he still wasn't the kind of person one would approach to antagonize. He spoke in a huff, forcing each word out on a gusty breath, and breathed in heavily once he was done. Noticing the hefty intake of breath, the warrior forced her attention back to the big man's next descriptive burst. "She's so elusive. Of the few that have survived her spells they say she has glowing green eyes, and teeth as sharp as daggers. They say she's as strong as four men and as fast as a galloping horse. And she's quiet, very, very quiet, so that you can never tell when she's right up on top of you, watching from the trees."

"That's all myth, I'm sure though," cut in Thalkus. "As you've said, Patrach, so few have ever seen her. Now the father, The Protector, we've all seen him. A huge beast with a man's face and paws as big as wagon wheels. He's got wings, huge and white to swoop down on his victims from above. He can swallow a man whole if he wanted—"

A bowl was set upon the table sharply, interrupting the priest's description. Gabrielle looked across the table at her young hostess and frowned at her twisted expression. 'It seems awfully insensitive of them to talk like this about the thing that killed her father.' But if they noticed their niece's discomfort at all they cared little about alleviating it.

"Thalkus, I believe now *you're* getting carried away," said Mian. "He is a huge animal, but don't forget, he was not always evil."

"Yeah, why do you call him The Protector if he obviously isn't?" asked Gabrielle. The young guest couldn't help her fascination, in spite of Tai'gee's distaste. Leaving her small, unimaginative hometown, Potedia, had not only been a study in humanity, but an abrupt and frequently mind-blowing introduction to the world's widely varied nonhuman populace. Getting a cage dropped on her by a Cyclops was just the beginning of her lessons; she'd quickly been able to add helping a giant, practicing disarming a centaur, fighting dryads and transforming into bacchai. 'Is that all? Oh wait, yes, and then there was that time with the shades escaping from Tartarus with Hades' helmet – and the gods... always with the gods, and the immortals, and the "what can ambrosia do for you?"...'

Thalkus answered her question without hesitation. He set his wooden wine bowl on the table as though getting ready to make a proclamation. Xena and Gabrielle both raised eyebrows in interest. "The sphinx's real name is Cerebrius. He came here many years ago, a little after



Tai'gee was born. He came to the temple and spoke with our former head priest, saying he found our woods a pleasant place to make a living and promised to keep villainous scum from raiding us – warlords and scavengers. But he was a great attraction for bounty hunters and adventure seekers who came in droves to hunt him, and later his daughter. Now he's maniacally paranoid and he just attacks everyone who enters the woods. I guess he's just taken his first step towards true malevolence by stealing our children."

"But what would a sphinx want with so many children? Twelve you said are missing?"

"Yes and we don't know," finished Thalkus with a shake of his head. "Then again, what reason does evil need?"

When they all had finished with dinner, Tai'gee hastily said good night and went to her room. Thalkus left not long after, giving a final welcome and good luck to Xena and Gabrielle. Patrach showed his guests to their room. They walked past Tai'gee's closed door and into the room next to hers. After assuring Patrach that the space was fine and they were quite comfortable, Xena and Gabrielle were left alone to study their accommodations – a largish room, obviously just cleared out for their use, as no working farm house would have such vacantly available bed space. Xena opened the single window, pushing the heavy slab of wood serving as a shutter aside to look out – open meadow for a hundred yards until the woods. Bright moonlight bathed swaying reeds in silver while leaving the bordering forest in discouraging blackness. A soft breeze hissed through the grasses, but otherwise the world was quiet.

"So Xena, what do you think about all of this," Gabrielle asked as she readied herself for bed. She experimentally pressed on the cot she was going to sleep on. It looked hastily made – and she didn't care to find herself dumped with equal haste because some strapping or other wasn't properly tied.

"All what?"

"About Aries and the sphinx and the children..."

Xena shook out her bedroll before answering. "I think something's not quite right. Cresca doesn't look like a place Aries would want for war – it isn't a strategic embattlement at all. And Aries has no interest in children. It seems a lot of effort for him to acquire one of Athena's sphinxes just to have it steal kids."

Gabrielle hummed thoughtfully, but an unpleasant shudder soon followed. "But it has to eat, right? You can't have a pet without feeding it."

"It's been here for years Gabrielle and not needed children for food. They're probably some kind of collateral... but there's no warlord or rival town for miles to sell them to. Something is definitely out of place."

"What do you think it is?" asked Gabrielle rising up on her elbow to look at her friend across the room.

“I think it’s going to tell us what it is. Go to sleep, Gabrielle. We’ve got a lot to do tomorrow.”

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Not long into the night, Xena awoke from her light sleep with the feeling she was being watched. She lied still in her bed, sensing someone looking into their room through the window above her. Never far from reach, her sword handle rested at the edge of her bed, and her fingertips found the hilt easily, wrapped around it, and discreetly secured her answer for unwanted company – the intruder would definitely get a surprise if he thought he was sneaking up on sleeping defenselessness. But once she was ready for an attack, the feeling of accompaniment evaporated. Throwing back her bedclothes, Xena rushed to the window to see a figure running into the darkness. She woke her sleeping friend, told her not to make a sound, and they grabbed their weapons and packs and jumped out the window in pursuit.

Xena was thankful the moon was full – it was easier to see that the figure retreating towards the woods was Tai’gee. Once she got to the treeline, the girl lit a torch and continued in, just as fast as she had crossed the plain. Xena and Gabrielle followed the bouncing light through so many twists and turns, it was clear Tai’gee must have known the path like the back of her hand.

Shortly, Tai’gee came to a small clearing where a large boulder sat dominating the middle. She wedged the torch into a crevice in the rock, raised her hands to cover her mouth and made a very convincing owl call. She made the call again then waited. Xena and Gabrielle crouched behind a bush to watch her.

A holly bush shook on the opposite side of the clearing. The crouching warriors watched as Tai’gee approached it cautiously, stopped in front of it. She started whispering, too low for Xena to hear, though she strained in the attempt. She couldn’t make anything out and cursed quietly when Tai’gee stepped away from the bush, back to the boulder and pulled herself up onto it to sit, apparently waiting for something. Gabrielle and Xena exchanged puzzled glances. In a few moments, Tai’gee went back to the bush, whispered then came to stand by the boulder again. She turned to face the direction in which Xena and Gabrielle were hiding, folded her arms and called out.

“You can come out now, Xena. I know you’re there. And your friend, too.” Tai’gee was loud and accusing. When neither of them moved she shifted her weight impatiently and tapped her foot. “If you don’t come out you won’t be able to follow me back. I won’t take the torch. You’ll be lost in the sphinx’s woods.”

Gabrielle gave Xena an urging look. The older woman gritted her teeth in submission and stood to enter the clearing, followed by her sidekick. Tai’gee frowned her disgust.

“So who’s behind the bush?” asked Xena coolly.

“No one.”

“You just make it a habit to talk to shrubbery then?” Sarcasm dripped from Xena’s tone, but Tai’gee didn’t seem to care. She shrugged her shoulders and looked away.

“You can look for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“No. I believe they aren’t there now, whoever they were. What are you doing out here?”

“What are you doing out here?” Tai’gee threw back.

“Look, I’m not here to play games,” warned Xena.

“Why are you here?”

“We’re trying to help,” Gabrielle explained. “Your uncle said your village is in trouble and Xena came to help an old friend.”

Tai’gee rolled her eyes.

“It’s fine if you don’t believe me,” Gabrielle defended, “but it’s the truth.”

“You wouldn’t know the truth if it jumped out and bit you,” the youth retorted with a dismissive wave of her hand. “It’s going to be daylight soon. I have to get back before they find I’m gone.”

Gabrielle stepped up to Tai’gee. She started to reach her hand out to her but stopped herself. “I don’t know why you’re so angry with us but we don’t mean you any harm. We only want to find the children and stop Aries and his animals from doing any more damage to your village. Isn’t that what you want?”

Tai’gee glared unrelentingly at Gabrielle’s soft face. She snorted, half laughed, and said, “I want you to leave and never come here again. But since that won’t happen, I hope the Protector finds you so you can die a painful death instead.”

‘Now that’s odd – I wouldn’t expect her to call on the thing that killed her father...’ “What is your problem with us?” Gabrielle called after her when she turned to leave.

Torchlight played across a purely condemning expression. Xena inwardly winced – she knew what was coming next, and steeled herself for it. Tai’gee’s tone was biting, each word pointed and sharp. “My uncles may look at you as salvation, but all I see is a puppet strung with her own guilt. You’re morally weak and try to cover it up roaming the world fighting other people’s battles. Planning to go to the Elysian Fields on their accolades?, my uncles’ praises?, the forgiveness of ghosts?” A sneering upper lip raised further to allow a hiss of disgust.

“Z’at all?” Xena tweaked.

Tai'gee squinted at the warrior with a mixture of disbelief and contempt. With a shake of her head she added, "Your deeds are no measure of goodness. Real goodness doesn't go looking for trouble."

"You sure do know how to welcome the troops. Well – since you don't want our help, does that mean you're planning to rescue the children on your own? Or don't you want your townspeople safely home?"

"My plans never included you to begin with, Xena." Tai'gee's dark eyes hardened even more. "But maybe you're too all important to consider someone besides yourself actually saving the day. Maybe it never crossed your mind someone else could."

Tai'gee moved to leave again. When Xena and Gabrielle didn't follow she asked if they were coming. "No. Like you said, it's almost daylight. Since we're in the woods we might as well start looking around for signs of the children. We'll take our chances with the sphinx."

Tai'gee shrugged 'suit yourself,' and plunged back into the woods, leaving her torch behind as she promised.

"Are we going to follow her again?" Gabrielle asked quietly. She was stung by Tai'gee's nastiness. She considered herself a good person, nice and helpful, a bit sensitive if she was honest. Even with three years of traveling with Xena and participating in and witnessing so many hardening things, it wouldn't be unexpected that Gabrielle would become just as rough as the life she was leading. But she wasn't. She still had a gentle regard and respect for others and meanness could still hurt her feelings. She looked at Xena to reassure herself with the warrior's steadfast exterior.

Blue eyes studied the place where Tai'gee had disappeared into the woods. They could follow her, but she didn't think anything would come of doing so. Xena took a moment to ponder Tai'gee's words. They didn't particularly hurt her feelings – she'd endured worse criticism, and certainly gotten worse from those that she'd personally transgressed against. But still, 'Someone else saving the day, huh?... I wonder if it's her or the bush.' Before she could address the thoughts more, a familiarly unpleasant tingle snaked across the space between her shoulders and her eyes narrowed at the recognition of unwanted company.

"Oh Xena," beckoned a deeply dark voice. A thickly muscled man swaggered from the darkness. The torchlight glinted off various metals worked into his leather clothes and his unnaturally dark eyes glistened with smug humor. Dark, curly hair laced either side of a sharply angled face. Xena knew only one man who would go clad completely in black leather and clutching a heavy-hilted sword with obscenity – Aries, God of War.

"The scum always does float to the top," she sneered.

"And warriors always drown trying to break through it," he laughed back.

"What are you doing here," demanded Gabrielle.

Aries barked a thick, deep laugh, and turned to Xena. “You’ve done some work on her. She’s got more spunk in her since the last time I saw her.”

Xena was unimpressed with his observation. She repeated Gabrielle’s question.

“I just came to tell you you’re wasting your time here.”

“It’s never a waste of my time to whip you, Aries,” smiled Xena curtly.

“As pleasant as that sounds, you’re still in over your head. I’d hate to see you defeated here, so...ignobly.”

“You almost sound concerned; when my vomit settles I might thank you. And who’s here to defeat me? Your beasts? You’ve yet to create a creature I couldn’t beat.”

“How right you are!” Aries thundered. “But the thing is, I didn’t create these. They are creatures of this world like you and your little friend. I just discovered them.”

“Your talent searches always did leave something to be desired,” sniffed Gabrielle.

“Well, I discovered Xena, didn’t I?” he shot back snidely. “No matter, I gave you fair warning. You won’t be able to win this one. You’d do best to walk away.”

“Why is that?” Xena queried. ‘If I were a god, I’d make flowers pop out of his mouth every time he opened it... Aries, God of War and Violets.’ It was thoughts like that coming randomly to Xena’s mind that made her smile the slight, edging grin that made so many of her adversaries nervous. The timing of such mental images was never appropriate for true laughter, but the mirth they inspired had yet to fail her in throwing off opponents. “You think a peasant girl and a talking bush are gonna scare me off? You’re losing your edge War God.”

The god smirked and turned to walk away without answer. A brilliant light appeared at Aries’ feet; being a god he had the ability to disappear into a flash of blue flame, reappearing wherever he wished. But Gabrielle wasn’t done with him and called the chuckling god back.

“Why children, Aries? Where are they?”

The blue light paused at his knees as the rest of him turned around haughtily. “Yes, you are definitely bolder than you used to be. Impressive. But don’t you worry your little blonde head about the kiddies. They’re not of consequence.” He disappeared after a short, hard laugh.

The forest surrounded them in dark silence; faint moonlight filtering through the thick canopy and the flickering torch feet away provided little to see by. Xena was miffed Tai’gee would be reporting to Aries, irritated that he had bent so young a mind into his service. She wondered briefly who had sought out whom... ‘What does Tai’gee want that she thought she had to get it from the God of War?’ Her eyebrow ticked up in reconsideration: ‘What does the God of War

think he can get from Tai'gee?' Well, that question was easily answered given Aries' unregulated prowess; and it's not like a small town girl would see much incentive in turning down a god. Aside from that obvious conclusion however, there was the more immediate puzzle pieces, and illicit liaisons between teenage peasants and slanderous deities didn't explain missing children and homicidal sphinxes. The Warrior Princess was an excellent tracker, and could probably catch up to the girl had she wanted to; maybe putting the pinch on her would make the belligerent teen more cooperative.

"So what're we going to do?" asked Gabrielle.

'What indeed?' Xena was positive there was someone else in the woods watching them, and it wasn't Aries. Tai'gee had definitely made it clear that they were being followed even while they followed her, and had it been the War God observing them, Xena would have known by the tingle that always accompanied his close proximity. For Xena not to register someone else's presence meant that whoever tailed them was damn good. 'They could still be here looking right at us, or they could have gone with Tai'gee back through the woods. Either way, I have no idea.' The Warrior Princess brought her contemplative gaze to her young sidekick who waited patiently for her decision.

Xena's face bespoke her determination. "We find the children," she forced through tight teeth. "Then we deal with Aries."

## II

Xena led the way farther into the woods, looking for anything useful to add to their search for the children. The woods grew more and more dense, and the terrain got rougher and wilder the farther east they went. The morning sunlight was becoming as hard-pressed as the moonlight had been to make it to the interior of the forest, giving the trees a drowsy, melancholy feel. They had been hiking for a couple hours, not a significantly long amount of time for them, but hard work none-the-less. Gabrielle followed faithfully behind, but Xena knew her friend had to be getting tired. The warrior started to turn around and go back the other way when she noticed something on a nearby tree. She walked over to it, followed by Gabrielle, and pointed out the marks.

"They're huge," Gabrielle breathed. There were four parallel gashes struck into the trunk of a fat, old tree. Each mark was easily as big as two of Gabrielle's fingers. She ran her hand gently over the rough cuts, careful not to give herself any splinters. "What do you think-"

"I think it's a territorial marking, and we're about to enter into it."

"The sphinx'?" Gabrielle asked nervously. "Do you think he's the 'slash first and ask questions later' type, or the 'what's a little blood between friends' type?" she quipped. Gabrielle liked to talk, but she *needed* to talk when she got nervous; conversation helped her stay steady.

Xena, on the other hand, was not particularly chatty and took a moment to search around her, getting her bearings. "Come on," Xena ordered, "we'd better not just stand here in the open."

They had only gone a few more steps when Xena noticed something else – the woods had gotten very quiet; there were no birds squawking or animals scrambling around in the brush, as would be expected for a still-early morning. Everything was very still. And she felt someone was watching them again.

“Gabrielle,” Xena whispered.

“Yeah?” Gabrielle whispered back.

“Turn around and start walking the other way. Act normal.”

Obediently the younger woman turned and started shuffling back through the foliage. Her heart pounded as she immediately began obsessing over what had caught her friend’s attention. Whatever it was couldn’t be good – and a flashing cold sweat encouraged a prayer to the gods Xena hadn’t spotted the thing that had made the gashes. But if Xena was particularly worried, she gave no indication – and Gabrielle considered herself pretty good at reading her mercurial friend’s moods and thought strains. The Warrior Princess merely followed quietly, spaced a little behind Gabrielle and pretended not to notice the someone standing behind one of the trees bordering their path. As they passed it, Xena stabbed her hand like a striking snake into the space behind the tree and grabbed the spy, holding him for questioning.

“Tai’gee?” breathed a surprised Gabrielle. The thrashing girl managed an ugly glare at the blonde before an obvious jerk forced her attention back on her captor.

“Why are you following us?” demanded Xena, clinging to the girl’s shirt.

“I was watching to see how good you really are.”

Xena let her go. Tai’gee stumbled away a few steps and straightened her shirt with a jerk. “I’m not impressed. Anyone could have found me behind that tree.”

“Yeah, you’re not the quietest woodswoman. Now, why don’t you tell us who’s really watching us?”

The girl grinned sardonically while making an exaggerated examination of the woods around them. “You think someone’s watching you other than me? You’re paranoid...”

“You seem awfully concerned about what’s going to happen to us,” said Gabrielle, “but not the least bit worried about yourself.”

Long, tapered fingers, not unlike Xena’s own, smoothed a disheveled dress. “I know these woods. I don’t need to fear them.” Tai’gee didn’t bother hiding her smug confidence.

Xena cocked her head to the side. “Yeah... Or you know someone in these woods.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Xena pursed her lips, clamping down on the strong urge to put the pinch on the girl just to teach her temperance. The only thing the Warrior Princess had real patience for was fishing – and not for information. With effort, she swallowed the impulse and settled on an intimidating scowl instead. “Fine. Then you’re coming with us. If you won’t help at least we’ll make sure you’re not getting in the way.”

“You can’t make me stay – Uncle Patrach will think I’m missing.”

“Maybe you should have thought of that.”

Tai’gee started looking around frantically: out into the woods, up into the trees, down along the ground. Gabrielle, startled, looked around too, thinking Tai’gee had heard something. Xena looked also, then asked Tai’gee what was there. “Expecting a rescue?”

“No,” the girl submitted. “Let’s go.”

~

By the end of the day they still hadn’t found anything. Xena was frustrated and had become soundly irritated to the point of short-tempered. ‘A whole day of searching,’ she thought, ‘and not a single clue.’ Besides the tree marks, nothing helpful had presented itself, and they had passed several more border markings during the day. Cerebrius’ claim seemed to be quite vast. Despite Tai’gee’s warnings to the contrary, nothing had happened to them while they wove in and out of supposedly treacherous territory. Even Xena’s feeling that they were being watched and followed had dissipated after they had found their now captive spy.

Saying things weren’t adding up was an understatement; Xena didn’t even have things to add. She found it very hard to believe twelve small children could just be hauled away without a single sign. Even if they were led off one by one Xena suspected there should be *some* trace indicating... *something*. The idea of the sphinx flying off with them hadn’t escaped her, but Xena didn’t really think that was how it was done. ‘It’s not like children that small would actually wait around for him to get back and give them a ride... especially growing up with a town full of ghost stories about him to scare them into behaving.’

Her stomach rumbled and she frowned. “Well, I know if I’m hungry the two of you must be starving. We’ll stop here for the night. I saw a stream back up to the north a little ways. You two wait here.”

After Xena left, Gabrielle started looking around for firewood and kindling. Their fire had to burn down to a low, radiating smolder before it was useful for cooking over, which meant Gabrielle needed to hurry and get it started if it was to be ready by the time Xena returned. She asked Tai’gee for help, but the girl sniffed indifference and made no attempt to be useful.



Gabrielle sighed. “Would it kill you to be cooperative once in a while? It’s your dinner, too, you know.”

“I never said I was hungry,” replied the girl snidely. When her stomach growled she only looked away in an effort to ignore Gabrielle’s smile.

The older blonde busied herself with piling the loose wood she’d collected; it was idle work that consisted mostly of rearranging the neat pile she’d already made. She took the time to surreptitiously study her campmate. ‘Sullen. That’s the perfect word for her,’ Gabrielle decided. She thought she might add spoiled as well, but there was something about the willowy girl that she didn’t feel was particularly spoiled, or pampered, or coddled. Maybe it was the deep tan and burnished hair only attainable by long hours in the sun. Or perhaps the way she refused to acknowledge her own discomfort. No, Gabrielle decided, Tai’gee was much too independent to be spoiled; but she had all rights reserved to ‘pain in the ass.’

The fire burned down well and Xena returned with a line full of trout. “Ugh. Trout. Is that the only thing you could catch?” Gabrielle groaned.

“Yep. Unless river moss is more to your liking. There was plenty of that available.” Xena removed a piece of the suggested entrée from her boot and flicked it at her ungrateful dinnermate with a grin. She laughed quietly at Gabrielle’s “Ehhhhw!” and started scaling fish.

“She remind you of anyone?” Gabrielle murmured to her friend.

Xena paused a moment to glance at their third party. Tai’gee was still sitting at the edge of the camp, looking disinterested, though her stomach had started growling louder once the smell of frying fish began to waft around them. “Tara?”

Gabrielle snorted a laugh. “Yeah. Only she’s a whole different kind of annoying. Tara was just a brat – Tai’gee’s a... a... I don’t know. Something. She’s just so angry.”

Xena had decided to stop paying the teen any attention. Gabrielle suggested they just take her home in the morning and make her promise to stay there. “It probably wouldn’t do any good. She’d just come right back to the woods, probably before we even left the village,” Xena frowned. But it was troublesome walking around with a sulky young woman who tromped through the underbrush loudly, regardless of being told to be quiet. Scratching her head in thought, Xena started to change her mind as she handed one of the cooked fish over to Gabrielle.

Before the hungry blonde had the chance to thank Xena for her dinner, the sound of someone crashing through the underbrush assailed them, followed by a group of shouting men and clanking weaponry.

“Leave it to dinner time to bring trouble around,” Xena groaned.

Tai’gee was on her feet in an instant, strained to see into the forest interior and then dove through it without a word.

“Bacchai balls!” Xena exclaimed, dropped her food and took off after her. Gabrielle spared a moment to set her dinner down sorrowfully and then raced after them.

“Why is it we never find trouble when we’re looking for it!” she ground out while she picked her way through the darkening forest obstacles focusing on the glint of Xena’s armor as a guide through the tress.

They didn’t have far to go it turned out. Just outside of one of Cerebrius’ tree markers, several young men stood surrounding a crumpled figure, laughing, congratulating themselves. One of lesser degrees of attractiveness delivered a powerful kick to the captured person lying unresponsive on the ground. “Tie it up,” he ordered with a satisfied grunt and the remaining two worked quickly to do just that. When they stepped back they revealed a pitiful creature with arms and legs bent backwards and bound together. They ran a pole through the arch of its limbs and lifted it above their heads like a trophy. “Boss’ll be glad we got this one!”

Tai’gee knelt just out of site with Xena and Gabrielle crowding in behind her to see. When the men exposed their catch she gasped then made to charge them. Xena grabbed the girl’s shoulder, forcing her back. “Hold it,” she growled.

The one, as the man had called it, made no movement, gave no sign of life. A long, tangled tussle of brown hair tumbled down over the small form’s face, hiding any expression whether it was still alive or already dead. The figure was small, from what Xena could tell, and when she squinted to see it better, she thought she could make out two small mounds revealed by the tight pulling of its halter top; ‘a young girl, not far into womanhood,’ she thought. Gabrielle noticed too, and tugged at Xena’s shoulder. Xena set her intense blue eyes on the girl’s face hidden behind her hair, silently commanding her to make some movement to show life. As if the girl heard Xena’s commands, she weakly lifted her head enough to part the wave of hair and reveal a badly beaten face. Then the girl dropped it again, too exhausted and hurt to even comprehend the danger she was in.

Xena jumped up and over Tai’gee, cartwheeled off an overhead branch and landed just behind the little hunting party. Her piercing battle cry shocked the men into dumbfounded amazement, giving Gabrielle and Tai’gee ability to slide into the space unnoticed.

“Who the Hades are you?” the first man demanded.

“I’ll be your worst nightmare if you don’t release that girl right now,” Xena snarled.

“This is our business, not yours,” he spat bravely and started to walk off. “It’s a fair catch and we got her first. Tough nuts for you,” he flicked over his shoulder.

“Let her go you filthy pigs,” Tai’gee growled, but her threat was met with dismissive laughter by the retreating men.

“I happen to be in the business of saving defenseless, young children from over grown bullies, much like you,” Xena snapped, then added in a softer, more threatening tone – “I’m very good at what I do, so I suggest you hand her over before I go to work.”

The leader turned, straightened himself under Xena’s vicious gaze, and shifted a circumspect glance at the less threatening face of Gabrielle. “I don’t care if you’re Zeus himself,” the man said folding his arms. “We got her, she’s ours. Go get her father if you’re so hot up for a reward.”

Xena’s chakram was holstered on her right hip, a circular weapon, razor sharp and deadly accurate under Xena’s control. Done with negotiations, Xena grabbed it and slung it with skilled confidence at the dangling girl, severing her binding ropes and letting her fall in a pile to the hard packed earth. Again the men were stunned to motionlessness, giving time for Xena to jump to the girl’s side and effortlessly lift her over her shoulder.

“Now she’s mine,” she smiled smugly. “Get lost,” she hissed through bared teeth.

The two men who had the now unoccupied pole still perched on their shoulders looked to the leader. He in turn looked at them, then at the three women. He made the mistake of sizing them up – one was obviously a peasant girl probably from the village nearby; one looked just as young and just as assailable even though she had a staff; and the last, perhaps a bit more of a challenge but hindered by the deadweight draped over her shoulder. “Get them!” he shouted, drawing his sword.

Xena wasn’t impressed. With one powerful thrust of her legs and a mighty “Sheeeeeee-ya!” she flew to the branches overhead, deposited her unconscious load on a hefty bough and landed neatly again in front of the motionless thugs, sword drawn and ready for whatever they wanted to have inflicted on themselves. “Well come on,” she purred, “come get me.”

One for each of them, and they made short work of the men. Gabrielle’s went down with one solid crack of her staff, broken nose, probably a broken eye socket, and definitely a broken ego. Xena’s, the group leader, took two blows, one disarming him of his sword, the other a sound right hook that sent his jaw too far aside to keep it connected to his face properly, and a heavy dose of unconsciousness to douse the pain. Tai’gee surprised not only her assailant, but her companions as well, by pulling two throwing daggers from sheathes tied to her ankles and sending them into the man’s chest with negligent accuracy. The larger man dropped heavily to the ground, dead probably before he’d even started falling.

“What the-”

Gabrielle didn’t have the chance to finish her exclamation; Tai’gee was trying to find a way up into the tree Xena had left the girl in.

“Hold on,” the Warrior Princess said, and jumped into the canopy just as before. She dropped gently back down with the still unconscious, and surprisingly heavy, girl cradled in her arms.

“Zeus, they really did a number on her.” Gabrielle shook her head. In her estimation, even though she wasn’t as skilled as Xena in healing, the girl seemed very close to being very dead.

“Yeah, they worked her over pretty good,” Xena frowned. She turned to take her back to their camp where she could work on her. She ached as she carried the girl in her arms like she had carried far too many small people – young people – hurt and unable to care for themselves... or dead. She thought of Solan as she looked down at the girl in her arms – they had their hair tied back in the same way with a thin strip of leather, keeping it from falling in their faces, tickling their eyes. Of course, she couldn’t see the girl’s eyes, or really anything characteristic about her face given how swollen and discolored it was. It made her gut wrench and a second wave of anger at the men they left behind them burned through her. She could feel the girl’s ribs shifting unnaturally as she carried her, broken more than likely from when the man kicked her. As they got closer to the clearing, and the light their still burning campfire provided, Xena could see the girl looked... maybe... sixteen summers old, from what she could guess through the bruising. The most obvious injury was a sizable knife sticking into the girl’s lower back – Xena’s fingers kept brushing the handle of it as she carried her.

The warrior laid her down gently; the girl made no move, no groan, no cry, nothing. ‘Not good.’

Tai’gee hadn’t been far behind, having quickly retrieved her knives from the dead man and replaced them inside their sheathes, she was practically on Xena’s heels. Once Xena had spread her load before her and started telling Gabrielle what she needed, Tai’gee had the chance to kneel beside the warrior and see herself what was there.

“Oh Kaija,” she choked.

“You know this girl,” Xena asked while she took a cup full of water and some bandages from Gabrielle.

“She’s my best friend,” whispered Tai’gee, more to the girl than to Xena. Then she turned shining pebbly eyes toward concentrating blue ones. “Can you save her?”

“I can try,” the warrior said without breaking her procedure. The knife embedded in her back had been thrown, she judged by the angle of it. Expertly she prodded the girl’s body, checking for other damage. Besides the broken ribs, the girl, Kaija, had a surprisingly good diagnosis. It was easy to tell why Xena found her so heavy – she was all muscle, tight and lean, and that more than anything was what had saved the girl’s life. Everywhere there was bruising was an indication of some punch, kick, hit, but nothing more than discoloration and strain accompanied those abuses. No other broken bones, no ruptured organs – considering the broken ribs, that was a downright miracle.

“She’s damn lucky,” the warrior huffed as she yanked out the knife and tossed it to her blonde aide. Gabrielle grabbed it, quickly washed it off and placed the blade in the fire. Tai’gee sat mute, waiting, worrying, wringing her insentient friend’s hand between hers.

“I wouldn’t call getting beaten to a pulp lucky, Xena,” said Gabrielle as she passed the heated weapon back to her friend. Xena took the cool handle and seared the wound closed, wrinkling her nose at the scent of burning flesh. The girl made no move. The warrior’s frown tightened, and as she moved to continue her work a dim red glow caught her eye; at the girl’s neck a stone arrowhead seemed to be glowing. Moving on, Xena wrapped the treated wound in clean bandages, used the rest of the bandages to tightly wrap around her broken ribs, and then checked her head for other injuries. Seeing none, she explained to the others that the severity of the beating was probably what had knocked the girl unconscious, not an actual head wound. “Which is good – those can be very tricky. She’s probably got some strained muscles from them bending her arms and legs back – she won’t feel good at all when she wakes up.”

“But she’ll wake up?...” Tai’gee pressed.

“Yeah. She should. Might take a couple days. Those ribs’ll take some weeks.”

Tai’gee surprised them again with something like a smile, something very close to gratitude. Xena lifted an eyebrow at Gabrielle who didn’t bother hiding her own grin. The young blonde always felt a giddy thrill when something particularly good came of their deeds, when a mind seemed to be changed. She brought down her gaze to their unconscious patient and her smile faltered. ‘Though, a changed mind isn’t necessarily worth a beaten child and a dead man...’

‘Thinking of which-’ “Tai’gee – where did you get those knives?”

“I stole them,” she answered simply. Gabrielle gave her an incredulous look, but Tai’gee wasn’t about to look ashamed or apologetic. “I needed them, he didn’t.”

Xena tugged on the back of Gabrielle’s halter top, drawing her to their earlier occupied end of camp, to cut off further commentary on that subject. The Warrior Princess guessed it wasn’t information Gabrielle would really have wanted at the time, especially given the way it appeared Tai’gee was going to deliver it: flat, cold, honest. ‘No better way to distress Gabrielle’s sense of nescience in a person; especially a young person. *Oh yes Gabrielle, I learned murder as a wee tot and you should’ve seen what I could do with just my swaddling clothes...*’ Something like that would probably have driven the blonde to tears.

When they returned to their fire, the warrior looked around for some more wood to throw onto the dimming blaze, grabbed a couple of sizeable logs from Gabrielle’s nearby pile. It was time for dinner, and Xena was even hungrier after their pre-dinner entertainment. When her stomach growled again she glanced at Gabrielle sheepishly. “Starting to sound like you,” she teased of herself, but Gabrielle seemed lost in thought, staring off at Tai’gee and her friend. “What is it?”

Gabrielle jerked her head up suddenly. “What?- Oh, sorry Xena, I was just thinking.” Uneasily, the younger of the two friends twisted her fingertips against each other. Xena prompted her again for whatever was bothering her, after shoving a large piece of fish into her mouth.

“It’s just that... I mean – Tai’gee just killed a man; like it was nothing, like she was doing some normal thing. And those men – they almost beat a child to death. I don’t understand – how can they do that... and not be sorry?”

“You want my opinion or my guess?” Xena spit out a couple of bones neatly into her hand before tossing them into the fire.

“Both,” Gabrielle tossed back to her, “and in that order!”

“Because she’s the sphinx’ daughter.”

Wide green eyes opened a little wider, then narrowed suspiciously at the dancing blue eyes regarding her. The little bard wanted to come up with something snappy to say, but left it. Xena had beaten her to the punch, and all she could do was accept it. She ignored the warrior’s self-satisfied smirk.

“So, since I won the guessing game,” Xena added in a singsong, “you get to do the interrogation.”

“You only won because I was more concerned with how she was, not who she was.”

“Oh don’t be a sore loser,” scolded Xena. “I got confirmation of who she was *while* I was taking care of how she was. Just admit you missed all the clues and go find us some new info.” Xena smirked again at Gabrielle’s grouse. “Oh come on; look, Tai’gee even looks much more agreeable now. Look at her – not all uptight and antsy like before; a prime attitude for probing.”

“Hmm, good idea. But don’t get all huffy because I didn’t ask a question you wanted answered, Ms. Pinch.”

Xena waved her off with graceful nonchalance. Gabrielle flicked her long, fine hair over each shoulder and strode back over to their mercurial teenager and her half-human friend.

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“The swelling in her face has already gone down a whole lot,” Gabrielle observed in quiet tones over Tai’gee’s shoulder.

Tai’gee was gently stroking the girl’s forehead and cheeks with a cool, damp cloth, taking care not to touch the rawer cuts and scrapes that dotted her face. She paused long enough to look up to Gabrielle and said, “she’ll be fine now thanks to you and Xena,” then returned a soft gaze back to her friend.

“We like to help. That’s what we do. I’m just glad we were here.” Gabrielle sat facing Tai’gee, her back towards the fire and Xena. She kept her voice low. “Is she why you don’t want us here?”

Tai'gee's head shot up, sudden anger and worry in her eyes. She put her arms protectively around her friend and looked at Gabrielle warningly.

'It's obvious', thought Gabrielle. That was the same look the teenager had worn from the moment they'd met. 'Xena's really right... ' "It's ok," the young woman insisted. "She's safe here. We mean her no harm. I promise." When Tai'gee didn't look convinced, Gabrielle said she gave her word. "Xena's already guessed, and obviously she's not looking to hurt her. She just helped save her life after all."

Tai'gee glanced over to Xena. The woman was busy cleaning up their dishes, not the least bit concerned about what was going on with them. She looked back to Gabrielle, searched the younger warrior's face, then conceded, taking her word.

"Her name is Kaija. She's Cerebrius' only child. She's the one bounty hunters like to go after the most, because she's a young female. They think she'll be an easy catch. Hunters have come from all over – that's why The Protector doesn't waste any time with strangers. He only does it to protect his daughter."

"And you?"

"Me?"

"You protect her, too, don't you?" Tai'gee frowned as she looked down at Kaija. "You've killed before for her, haven't you?" Gabrielle sighed when the girl nodded.

"You don't understand," Tai'gee pleaded. "Kaija may look as old as I am but there's some things she just doesn't get. She's never killed anyone; she doesn't even know the meaning of the word. When it comes to danger she still has the mind of a child. She's not growing up like regular humans; how could she? – her father and I are the only real relationships in her life. Her body is growing and getting stronger and more developed but socially... Kaija's just getting there – just noticing that something makes her different from other people."

Gabrielle nodded. She reached out to gently pull a lock of Kaija's hair from her face.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" whispered Tai'gee.

Gabrielle smiled a little and gave a small nod. "What about all the stories? What about all the things Thalkus and Patrach said that she's done?"

"Those aren't true," Tai'gee said firmly. "Not entirely. It is true Kaija's eyes will flash green if firelight catches them right at night, like any animal's will. People will see them in the woods – they get curious and they follow her. Then they get lost and if The Protector finds them..." the girl lifted a shoulder to finish the sentence. "The spell people believe she can cast is only their own fascination with her. They stare at her because they've never seen anyone like her. But she's never harmed anyone. She's brought lost children back to the village, brought in her kills for families that haven't got enough food. She's even scared up some prey for unlucky hunters –

just because she likes people. She wants to know us. But she stays hidden away when people come into the woods because she doesn't know who to trust."

"She trusts you."

"She trusts me," Tai'gee murmured. "I just wanted to keep her safe. When you and Xena came, I knew there was nothing *I* could do to stop you – you're beyond my level. Poison or a small trap wouldn't work like it does for the others. So I went to warn Kaija that you were here. She had found you following me though. I told her to keep out of your sight. I was only thinking of Kaija. Xena doesn't have a very good track record with non-humans." Gabrielle tilted her head a little, prompting Tai'gee to explain.

"She blinded a Cyclops, killed giants, and many centaurs..." Tai'gee lowered her eyes a little. "Forgive me, but she wasn't exactly your daughter's biggest fan... Everyone has all these ideas that non-humans are evil creatures, to be feared and destroyed. Kaija is good. She's innocent. She's capable of loving anyone, because she doesn't know how to differentiate good from bad. In that way she's more human than any of us."

Kaija started to stir, uncomfortable on her back. She rolled over on her right side, back towards Gabrielle, head resting on Tai'gee's thigh.

"How did you meet her?"

"Like most other children met her. I saw her in the woods and I followed her. We started playing together. When my father came to look for me he found us tumbling in the grass. When he realized who it was I was playing with, he yanked her up by the back of her clothes and threw her against a tree. Then he grabbed me and told me to run home. He started throwing big rocks at her and I kept yelling 'No Daddy! Stop!' But he wouldn't. He kicked me into the woods trying to make me run away. But I didn't. I did what I could to stop him. Kaija started to cry – only cats can make that cry she makes. It's a horrible sound. Her father heard her and found my father there. He killed him. Kaija was sitting by a tree when The Protector saw her. She reached out to him and he picked her up by the back of the neck with his mouth and flew away with her. He never saw me hiding in the woods. Everyday after that I came back to play with her.

"I never told my uncles what really happened. They wouldn't have believed my father would have tried to kill a young child. So I just told them he was killed by The Protector. That's all they know." She snorted. "That's all they'd want to know, is the truth. I'm not sorry my father died like that – he deserved it. Kaija was so small and defenseless really."

"But...your father. I mean, he was trying to protect you." Gabrielle looked for that grateful emotion from a daughter for her martyred father.

"My father was trying to protect me from another child by throwing rocks at her like she was a rabid dog. But, unlike a rabid dog who would've bitten and fought back, she just sat there and cried. Once he realized she wasn't going to run away and she wasn't going to fight back, he



started looking for bigger rocks.” Tai’gee leveled a daring glare on her interrogator, challenging Gabrielle to justify her father’s actions or the fact that she wasn’t remorseful.

Gabrielle nodded, and inwardly admonished herself. Even after years of trying to reconcile her dutiful childhood obeisance to her father’s instructions and expectations with her ambivalent feelings of how much those expectations were for her or his wellbeing, her first impulse was still that a child should respect her parents. It wasn’t fair of her, she decided as she looked into defiant, dark eyes, to feel children betrayed their parents because they found the courage to judge and denounce them. “Your aunt and uncles don’t know about Kaija, do they?”

“No. And they won’t as far as I’m concerned. You heard them back there; they’re just like the hunters only they don’t have the guts to actually come look for Cerebrius and Kaija themselves.” Absently Tai’gee began stroking her friend’s coarse, matted hair. “They preach against the evil sphinx and his devil daughter, but they’re so happy to have me come home with a brace of rabbits for dinner. ‘You must’ve learned your traps from your father, they were his specialty.’” A sardonic roll of dark eyes. “I barely remember my father, let alone that I learned anything from him. Kaija’s taught me everything I know.”

“What about her parents? Her mother?”

“She doesn’t know anything about her mother; as far as I can tell she died giving birth to her. I don’t know anything about her father either really – she loves him. I stay out of his way.”

“Gabrielle!” Xena interrupted, holding up a freshly scrubbed frying pan. “Where do you want me to put this?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Gabrielle called back.

“Fine. And there’s still more food here for Tai’gee and... what’s her name again?”

“Kaija,” answered Gabrielle, giving Tai’gee a slight smile. Tai’gee smiled back.

~

‘Xena’s a decent fish fry,’ Tai’gee thought. ‘Either that or I was really hungry.’ Her trout didn’t last long after she was served. Then she gingerly carried a bowl of broth over to the still unconscious Kaija. Tai’gee propped her up gently, letting Kaija lean back into her arms. Like Gabrielle, Tai’gee noticed Kaija’s wounds seemed to be doing very well. The swelling was almost gone, and the raw and red cuts and scrapes that she could see were well scabbed over. ‘That’s good,’ she thought and reached around her to work the warm liquid into her friend’s mouth. The smell so close to the sleeping girl’s nose must have been strong, because her eyes began to flutter open.

“Kaija?” Tai’gee coaxed trying to get her to wake up.

At the sound of Tai'gee's voice Gabrielle and Xena paused from what they were doing. Xena had been dressing a small rabbit she'd found in one of her traps while the blonde related what Tai'gee had told her. Xena listened quietly while she strung up the meat and Gabrielle set up the rest of their camp for the night. Gabrielle put down her bedroll and started to move towards the fire to get a torch and sit it beside Tai'gee and Kaija. Xena followed but pulled her partner back while the sleeping girl woke up, encouraging them to move over gradually so not to startle her or Tai'gee.

Kaija's eyes continued to flutter a little more before rolling around and focusing on Tai'gee, who was hovering over her.

"Hey there. Are you awake?"

Kaija slowly regained her senses. She was lying on the ground. She was looking up into Tai'gee's face. There was a dull throbbing in her lower back. It was night. The air was cool. She didn't recognize some of the smells around her.

"Tai'gee?" said Kaija thickly. Her tongue was heavy in her dry mouth; she could hardly muster the energy to speak. She rolled her head to the side looking for water. Tai'gee helped her drink from a water pouch Gabrielle had given her. The girl drank a lot, Xena noticed. 'Which is good. Surprising, but good.'

"I hadn't expected her to wake up so soon," the warrior whispered. "With that amount of blood loss a person could sleep for days."

Gabrielle only nodded and watched.

"Hey Kaija. How do you feel?"

"Tai'gee," was all she could manage to say at first and a slow blinking of eyelids. The darker haired teenager was glad she could see her friend's eyes again where before they had been swollen shut.

"I'm right here Kaija. You're safe. Just rest."

"Tai'gee – I tried, but they were so many. I could not do anything and they were so many. Something hit me, I heard it through the air and it hit me – I ran–"

Tai'gee nodded, continuing to dab the cool cloth on Kaija's forehead. She told her she was safe again. She murmured in a soft voice, "Xena says you'll be fine in a few weeks. You've got a few broken bones and some strained muscles. She says if you rest you'll be good as new in no time."

Kaija shifted restlessly, fidgeted, started getting nervous as she remembered the hateful look on the hunters' faces. "Who-" her voice cracked over her dry throat. Her voice was hoarse and scratchy and she hardly recognized it as her own. But she recognized the name she'd just heard;

there was danger in it. Her weakness and lack of control over her limbs became very salient. She started to panic.

“Shhh-shh-shhh. Hush now,” cooed Tai’gee trying to keep her calm. “Relax, you’re safe now.”

“No,” continued Kaija, who was quickly becoming more hysterical. Her heavy hands and aching ribs told her she was not safe – something had happened to her. Again the hunters’ faces swam into her memory and she whimpered, lacking energy to do much more. “They always hunt me. Papaw said they would. But why me, Tai’gee? What did I do? I will fix it – I will never do it again. I want to be like you – why can I not be like you?”

“Hush now,” insisted Tai’gee. She held Kaija down as tightly as she could, hissing into her ear to keep her quiet. Xena and Gabrielle stayed close by, listening. Gabrielle looked pained, sympathetic for Kaija. Xena just looked, absorbed the ill girl’s rant for later processing. ‘Broken ribs and all...’

“You must be calm Kaija. You are safe now and you must rest. We’ll talk in the morning. Sleep now,” she hummed close to Kaija’s ear. “Shhh. There. That’s it.” Kaija’s body relaxed, and so did Tai’gee’s as she felt the tense energy leave her friend.

“Tai’gee,” Kaija called quietly.

“Yeah,” answered Tai’gee, relaxing her hold.

“Why am I different?” she asked in a whisper.

“Because you can’t be special and be like everyone else,” answered Tai’gee softly. “Go to sleep now.”

### III

The next morning Xena was the first one awake. The sun was just reaching down into the forest, scattering rosy morning light through the trees. She stood, stretched, started remembering the events of the day before. The girl, Kaija. The Warrior Princess looked over to see how the patient was doing. The patient was gone.

“Gabrielle. Wake up. Tai’gee.”

“Huh?” groaned the two sleepers.

Xena shook Tai’gee awake. “Tai’gee, where’s your friend? Where is Kaija?”

“What are you talking about?” The girl rubbed her eyes, irritated at such a rude awakening. “She’s right here.” Sleepily the girl reached a clumsy hand out to pat the body she expected to be at her side. Then reached again... “She’s... She’s gone.” Abruptly she sat up, almost banging heads with Xena and looked at the empty bed clothes like they were a bad joke.

Gabrielle joined them. “How could she be gone? She was hurt so badly.”

“And look,” Xena said pointing to a line hanging between two trees. “She’s not the only thing that’s gone. The rabbit is, too.” The woman turned to Tai’gee. “You didn’t hear *anything* last night?”

“No.” She looked wide-eyed at Gabrielle. “Nothing. I swear. She was sleeping right here beside me when I went to sleep. I didn’t hear anything until you woke me up.”

“Maybe she’s been taken like the other kids,” suggested Gabrielle.

Tai’gee started to protest but Xena cut her off. “No, Thalkus said only young children were being taken. Kaija’s as old as Tai’gee. If anyone took her, it would probably be those hunters.” ‘Great. Another kid to look for.’ “Alright. Both of you pick a direction. Start looking for blood, broken twigs, anything that might look like a clue. Keep within hollering distance.”

“Blood?” asked Tai’gee.

“Yeah. Either someone took her or she left on her own. Either way, if she’s moving too much the stitching will break, which means her wound opens again.”

Tai’gee paled. Gabrielle put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She told her she’d stay close by her while they looked. Xena figured a wounded girl couldn’t get far, whether she walked away or was dragged off, and not leave some sign of her departure. The woman looked critically around her, listening carefully. She found nothing, not one single sign of the girl. ‘She’s disappeared like all the rest,’ thought Xena. Of course her first instinct was to go back to the place where they’d rescued Kaija to begin with. The two men they’d left unconscious were both gone, as was the man Tai’gee had killed. It was easy to put together that when the man’s comrades had come to, they had each gathered the departed under an arm and dragged him off. Two sets of staggering footprints were accompanied by a deadweight drag trail – nothing backtracked. Those men had learned their lesson; they hadn’t come back for Kaija.

Xena started to turn back towards camp when she decided on a whim to look through a small line of bushes. Gabrielle, who’d been searching nearby saw Xena’s dark head duck down, and she motioned to Tai’gee to join her, thinking Xena had found something.

The raven-haired woman was crouching down behind the line of bushes and young trees when the other two searchers joined her. The warrior heard Gabrielle coming up behind her and signaled her to keep quiet. Gabrielle and Tai’gee squatted down behind the bush as well, careful not to make a sound. They pulled a couple of the branches away and saw, just below them, a small glen, empty except for one timid deer hiding at the far edge.

“You’ve seen deer before, Xena,” Gabrielle whispered.

“Shh. Look to the right, down by that hedging.”

Gabrielle strained to see what Xena had pointed out. She saw the small outcropping of brush – much like the one they were hiding behind – and very faintly through a cluster of high grass they made out a slight brown blur.

“I don’t see anything but some grass and a rock.”

By now the deer had warily stepped onto the flat. The shadows were getting long and the red light of sunrise had brightened into yellow morning rays, filtering lazily into the glen over the tall trees. Xena had watched the person enter the flat, so she knew the rock was flesh and bone. ‘Someone hunting on supposedly protected land has nerve – maybe enough nerve to kidnap an injured girl for bounty.’ Brusquely she whispered to the others to wait and watch the rock.

Tentatively the deer continued into the glen. It sniffed the air, looked around anxiously, then lowered its head to crop the short green grass. That’s when the person shot out like an arrow from behind the bush. ‘Now that’s a surprise,’ Xena thought while Gabrielle gasped, as neither expected the rock to move. From their distance, Xena couldn’t be sure, but she thought it was a woman shooting across the field. The figure pulled herself to a thundering start from all fours where she had been hiding and in her next movement was sprinting across the flat.

An instant too late the deer broke, headed towards the woods to the three observer’s left, but the hunter was right on its heels. When the woman had the animal in her sights, she evened her pace to match the deer’s – ‘to match the deer’s!’ – and suddenly threw her legs out from under her. The tangle of limbs tripped up the animal, and sent it tumbling into the grass. Before the deer could scramble to its feet again, she had wrapped her powerful legs around the animal’s neck and methodically squeezed and turned her hips. With one loud crack the animal ceased its thrashing and lay still in the darkened end of the glen. The three women released their breath.

Easily the mystery woman slid out from under her limp prey, pulled herself to all fours and walked spider-like around the carcass. She raised her head to sniff the air, then scooped the animal onto her back and stood up. Two long legs dangled over each of her shoulders and her small figure effortlessly walked over to a nearby tree, dropped the carcass, then grabbed it again by the nape of its neck in one hand and reached out for the lowest branch of the tree with her free hand. She pulled herself and the deer into the tree with one easy motion and worked her way up, disappearing momentarily in the thick branches and leaves. In a few moments she dropped back to the ground, and rested at the base of the tree while examining herself. Satisfied, she tossed her head to get the hair out of her eyes, then stalked back across the glen with an easy gait.

“Wow,” Gabrielle breathed. It took them a moment to recover from the amazing sight. “I have never seen anyone move that fast. Ever.”

“Amazing isn’t she?” said Tai’gee, knowingly. Xena shot her a surprised look.

“That was Kaija?” the woman exclaimed. Tai’gee only nodded. “You’re sure,” Xena pressed. Tai’gee nodded again, giving Xena an openly critical look.

Gabrielle looked between the two of them and back at the line of bushes. “But... it couldn’t be. She was hurt.”

“Call her over,” requested Xena. “Moves like that should have split that wound wide open. Not to mention her ribs.”

“But Xena, she didn’t look all that much in pain to me,” noted Gabrielle. “She’s just... walking off,” the blonde pointed weakly to the bushes. She really didn’t know what to say if it was truly the girl they’d rescued just hours earlier.

Tai’gee merely shrugged – she wasn’t going to pretend like she knew what was going on; she only knew she recognized her friend, recognized that hunt, recognized everything the girl had done to the point of predictability. There was no doubt in her mind that was Kaija, regardless of whether or not she should have been able to do it. She stepped passed the bushes they had been hiding behind. Kaija was just getting ready to disappear into the woods again, and Tai’gee called out to her using a signal they had arranged years earlier. The half-human girl looked up from her light stride towards the sound. Tai’gee called again, and Kaija, convinced that it was her friend, ran over. The others had only a few moments to wait for her arrival.

Tai’gee stepped aside as her friend entered the clearing. She walked forward with strong, powerful steps, letting the limbs of the bushes push against her. She looked warily at the two unknowns standing with Tai’gee – the ones she had been warned to stay away from. Then she looked to Tai’gee for an explanation.

“Xena, Gabrielle – this is Kaija, daughter of Cerebrius the Sphinx, and my best friend. Kaija, this is Xena, the Warrior Princess, and her friend, Gabrielle. They’re the ones that helped you yesterday.”

Gabrielle studied the girl closely. She had a leather thong tied around her forehead to hold back her mane of brown hair. Her hair draped high cheekbones and a sharply angled jaw; her nose was somewhat flat and wide at the nostrils. Thick lips were pulled awkwardly closed, hiding long, sharp incisors behind them. Her eyes were larger than a normal human’s, and their gold shine was half-hidden under hooded lids; Gabrielle felt mesmerized looking into the golden curiosity. The girl blinked and, realizing she was staring, so did Gabrielle.

Xena noticed the fine tone of the girl’s slender body. She was all muscle, slightly bulging under her tight skin, her shoulders and thighs massive for her size. Her tight brown halter held the girl’s body close together and brown coulots rippled with the contour of the girl’s thighs. She had a good pair of leather boots, laced to her mid calf. She also had leather palm gloves held in place by one finger sleeve over her middle fingers, and lacings traced up her arms to a well worn strap stretching across the back, over her shoulder blades to keep the gloves in place as one piece. Around her neck, Xena could see the thin piece of leather that must have been the necklace for the arrowhead she’d seen the night before, now tucked down out of sight. The girl’s gear was light and she carried no weapons except for a small shearing dagger tucked away in her boot that Xena noticed with her well trained warrior’s eye. There was no sign of the abuse and blood that had painted the girl’s body the day before.

Kaija also checked out her new acquaintances. The one named Gabrielle did not seem at all imposing. Curiosity shown in her bright blue-green eyes, as did benevolence and sympathy. Her expression was open, inviting, wonder-full. She was smaller than her friend, more petite and had a knowing component to her. Kaija got the feeling from Gabrielle that she was wise, despite all of her seraphic features, and could be trusted.

Kaija maintained her expressionless assessment as she looked Xena over. The woman's penetrating blue eyes held no expression; they were as empty and uninviting as Gabrielle's were warm and open. But behind them was activity, thought. Kaija could see the woman thinking, measuring, calculating, planning. She was storing information, saving it for later use. This woman, decided Kaija, was dangerous – was a threat. Secret prowess and quiet determination radiated from her, making Kaija uncomfortable. Kaija would watch her still, then make her decision on the woman's trustworthiness.

"How do you feel?" asked Xena, breaking the silence between them.

"Fine," answered Kaija. Her voice was clear, a very clean, very precise tone. It still had a slight high pitch to it, like Tai'gee's; Xena suspected it hadn't dropped yet, as a woman's will in her late teens or early twenties.

The warrior stepped up to the girl. "Would you mind if I saw for myself?"

The girl stood straight and steady while Xena examined her. She unwrapped the bandages she had applied the night before and found nothing – not even a scar. She prodded the girl's stab wound, then ribs, first gently then with increasing pressure but there wasn't so much as a glance of discomfort.

"Amazing," Xena breathed. "She's completely healed... in less than a day. The wounds are totally gone." Tai'gee and Gabrielle stepped closer to see for themselves. Kaija didn't look the least surprised.

"Kaija, are you sure you feel alright?" asked Tai'gee.

"You really had us worried... you were hurt so badly..." Gabrielle added.

"Do you have a headache or any pains anywhere?" asked Xena.

"No."

"Anything feel out of joint?"

"No."

"Any feeling at all?"

Kaija eyed Xena warily and said curtly, "I am hungry."

Tai'gee's brow furrowed as she watched the check up. Strange didn't even begin to cover what she was witnessing... "Do you remember what happened last night?"

Kaija looked away, getting bored with all the attention. Disinterestedly she pulled down her shirt, ending the probing at her torso. "I remember getting cornered by men." She had tried to rescue a dog from a cliff ledge, but they pulled it to safety first and let her step into a net. She got out of the net before they closed it, but she couldn't run anywhere because they had her surrounded at the edge of the cliff. So she charged into one man to break their circle and then ran for the woods. "Something flew into me when I ran. It bit me." Kaija rubbed her back, where the others knew there had been a large knife; she assumed it was some angry bird whose nest she'd squashed as she ran carelessly for the woods, but her only thoughts at the time were to get away. "I ran."

"You don't remember Xena and Gabrielle taking care of you?" pressed Tai'gee.

Kaija only shook her head but rolled up her eyes to think on it more. She did not recall any rescue. Only her flight through the woods and the terrible pain the men caused her as they beat her. She winced at the memory. "I remember what you told me about them – to stay away because they are dangerous."

Tai'gee flushed and looked at the two warriors, laying a hand on Kaija's shoulder. She explained that some things had changed since they last talked and she was wrong about what she said. "It's ok now. They aren't who I thought they were."

Despite Tai'gee's affirmation, Kaija didn't look convinced, especially where Xena was concerned. Still, she nodded slightly and waited while Tai'gee asked what they were going to do next.

Xena continued to study Kaija. It was possible the girl was immortal – she knew sphinxes were. But had that been the case, Kaija would have healed from her wounds instantly, not suffered them and healed quickly. She squinted at the girl while she thought, while Kaija's attention was set on Tai'gee. Xena had many questions for her – she could sit down right where they were and just start firing off one after another, however only some of them were pertinent to their mission. Laying her other inquiries aside, Xena forced the relevant questions forward and schooled her expression before the half-human looked back at her.

"Kaija, did you know that twelve young children are missing from Tai'gee's village?"

Kaija shook her head. She looked at Tai'gee for confirmation and received a grim expression. "Why are they missing?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," said Gabrielle quickly.

Xena continued. "You see, the villagers think you may have had something to do with it."



“That’s not true!” stamped Tai’gee. “You know that’s not true.”

“Yes, yes,” Xena hissed at her. “I’m just starting with what we have.” The warrior looked back to Kaija. “You don’t know anything about the children?”

Kaija shook her head. “I do not. Sometimes I find children here but I will take them back. Now I only see hunters in the woods. They are looking for me I think.”

“What about your father. Would he know anything about them?” pressed Gabrielle.

Kaija shook her head at the blonde. “I do not think Pawpaw knows this; he stays at home and does not come out. He is tired.”

“Tired?” Xena looked for Kaija to explain herself further, but the girl only nodded and let it go.

“If they’re in these woods, Kaija can find them,” offered Tai’gee. “Kaija will you help us find the children?”

“We could use your help,” Gabrielle hinted, giving her warrior friend a nudge with her elbow.

Xena, not overly willing to admit she was having trouble, agreed with Gabrielle. “I’ve got to say we’re having a difficult time figuring out what’s going on. We would appreciate your help.” “See Tai’gee – I’m offering to let someone else save the day - - do I get points?”

Kaija didn’t object, though Xena did sense she wasn’t exactly eager to join them in their search. Admittedly, Xena was intrigued by this girl; if nothing else, she would like her to hang around just so she could watch her. Kaija’s abilities as a huntress were remarkable; excelling past even the great Atlanta. Obviously her father had trained her well. Xena found she was even picking up a few pointers as she watched her. As Kaija and Tai’gee led the way back into the woods, Xena, with controlled excitement, pointed out to Gabrielle what she noticed.

“Look. One foot right in front of the other, so she stays in a straight line and doesn’t risk making a lot of extra noise. And see how she walks on the balls of her feet. That makes her even quieter.”

Gabrielle threw in her own observation. “Watch her ears,” she said. When Xena looked closer she could see the girl’s ears rising and falling, pricking back when she heard various sounds from the forest. The girl didn’t even seem to be doing these things consciously, which fascinated Xena even more. When she was tracking it always took her utmost concentration to do what Kaija wasn’t at all taxed to do. If this was who had been watching and following them, Xena was no longer surprised she couldn’t figure out who was out there.

It didn't take Kaija long to find the trail of the children. She picked it up a couple of miles from where Xena and Gabrielle had been looking. "They were here," the girl announced. "The trail goes farther back into the woods."

"How do you know that?"

"Here." Kaija picked up two leaves from different places. "Smell. They are different."

Gabrielle and Xena both sniffed, but smelled nothing out of the ordinary. Kaija tossed them aside.

"I guess you cannot smell it. I can. It goes that way," she said again, then waited for Xena's decision.

"It's getting dark," Gabrielle pointed out. She rubbed her bare arms as the evening breeze blew over them, cooling in preparation for the night.

"Yeah. And we haven't eaten yet. We probably should head back for the village and come back tomorrow to keep looking," suggested Xena. She looked to Kaija. "How old would you say that trail is?"

"Many days. The scent is not very strong. It will be even less tomorrow."

"Days?" Gabrielle blinked at Kaija. "You can smell a scent trail laid down *days* ago?" The youngster merely furrowed her brow at the blonde, as if she were going to ask with annoyance whether Gabrielle had not just obviously seen her do this. Gabrielle got the point, and blushed slightly; but she was still impressed.

Xena frowned. If they waited till morning they would be risking losing the trail. But she knew there wasn't anything they could do in the dark, even if Kaija found the children for them. 'Wherever that trail leads, we can't run a mission in darkness with so many children involved.' The woman looked to Tai'gee, who had become very docile by Kaija's side. She said nothing while Kaija led them through the woods, and she said nothing while Xena thought about what to do next. The warrior thought it was funny how the girl, so aggressive and resolute in protecting her friend, had backed off so quickly from her quick-tempered, hotshot, tough-girl act once that friend was there to defend herself. Now she looked tired, but determined to go wherever everyone else went, no matter how drained she was. Kaija looked particularly indifferent, bored really with the whole affair. Gabrielle, as always, was ready to do whatever Xena decided. The warrior frowned deeper.

"I hate to put it off, but I think we'll do best to wait till morning. Besides, we need to get Tai'gee home to her family. They're probably missing her."

Kaija told the others to follow her, she would lead them out of the woods. Xena's main impression of this human mix was that she was a creature designed for the woods – the way Kaija moved through the dark, uncertain foliage was true testimony to her feline heritage. At

any moment Kaija could dart off into the trees, Xena felt, and the move could neither be predicted nor prevented. Their young guide seemed like she was allowing them to follow her more than actually leading them – she moved down the chosen paths quickly, without looking back, and picked a route that Xena would have chosen if she'd wanted to lose someone. That wasn't to say that Kaija meant to lose them – to the contrary, she brought them right back to the place where Tai'gee had led them into the woods the couple nights before. However, Xena suspected there was a much easier way to get there; the way Kaija chose was the way the half-cat would've gone even if she hadn't had someone with her.

Tai'gee was no slouch either, she easily kept up with her friend. The lanky girl had a surprisingly efficient walk, not the long, lolling gait that could be expected for the drawn-out limbs of a gangly teenager. She, too, appeared to be taking keen notes about her surroundings though what those notes were Xena could only guess. The dark haired warrior wondered how much of Tai'gee's expedient following was strictly because she knew the woods and its various trails like the back of her hands and how much was cultivated athleticism. 'Not that Tai'gee'd tell me – or maybe she would, if it came to a matter of her pride.'

When the group reached the edge of the woodline they stood for several moments quietly studying the field spreading before them in a solid gray mass. On a breath, Xena made the first move, followed by Gabrielle, out into the unsheltered, high grass. Tai'gee turned back to her friend, who stayed hidden in the dark shadows. "Are you sure you're ok, Kaija? Absolutely positive?"

Kaija nodded firmly. Xena noticed she wasn't one much for conversation. 'Could just be the girl's nature,' but in case it was because she had an audience she casually moved herself and Gabrielle off several steps towards the village in an attempt to give the girls a little more privacy.

"You can tell me if something's wrong," Tai'gee whispered to Kaija when she thought the others were out of earshot.

"I am fine. But I do not know what is going on – the children missing... Pawpaw is getting more tired... he tells me now to stay out, just bring him food sometimes. And these two," the cat-girl nodded slightly towards the warriors, "one day you tell me to keep away, and then you tell me they are alright. All these hunters in the woods..." She let the end of her list of worries hang between them.

"We'll get to the bottom of it. We'll try to make things better – we can find the kids and that'll show the people they can trust you." She searched Kaija's unconvinced face. Then, "If nothing else, you and I can leave, remember? We can just go somewhere else where the people are more accepting – or where there aren't any people at all. There's nothing for us here, and you'd be safer."

"But you would not be happy, Tai'gee. You will want your home. We will see what happens here."

“I’d be happy being wherever you are. That’s what makes us friends.” Tai’gee smiled at her friend through the growing darkness, reached for her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze before moving to join Xena and Gabrielle. Xena told Kaija they would come back to the woods as soon as they saw Tai’gee home, and she promised to wait for them. Then the girl melted into the woods and was as invisible to them as night.

Xena and Gabrielle pretended not to have heard the conversation between Tai’gee and Kaija. It was the same story they’d heard a million times – the same story they’d told themselves when they were young. Gabrielle nudged Xena a little while Tai’gee’s back was turned, looking up to her friend. They remembered thinking when they were younger that their only out was to leave *their* villages. They had to find themselves in the greater wide world and discovered much more than they anticipated. Xena found a life of cold-hearted murder, deceit, and war, then discovered love, redemption, and wisdom beyond her barest expectation. Gabrielle found not all experiences in life were as the stories were told – there were complications, times when life and death decisions had to be made in an instant, and death was as real and tangible and scary as nightmares could be. They both found a friendship that bonded them together stronger than any earthly force, and they now were finding their way in the world together.

But they also knew that a lot of eager youngsters didn’t fare as well as they did. Some are foolhardy and are killed in their first month away from home. Some don’t realize the necessity of providing for one’s self, and end up in positions they would never have desired for themselves just to survive. Some find they just can’t make it on their own, that they need the security and protection of their hometowns, so they go back. Here again was the age-old tale. Xena and Gabrielle thought at the same time that they would try and show the girls other options first, before they ventured out into the unpredictable world.

Back at Tai’gee’s home everything was in an uproar. Thalkus and Patrach were pacing agitatedly around the main room, while Mian sat nervously at the table – her loose bun hung looser with constant head turning. They had been looking for Tai’gee for the two days she’d been gone. That day’s search was defeated by darkness, and they came home angry and distressed for a second night.

“I told you, we should have sent out a search party,” said Patrach angrily as he stomped across the floor. His dark eyes shone with irritation, matching his brother’s in hue and expression.

“You and the twelve other fathers,” said Thalkus. “Everyone wants to send a search party, but no one really wants to be in it. Besides, where would we look? We’d be lost in those woods. And The Sphinx...”

“My Tai’gee is out there somewhere, I know it,” said Mian worriedly, wringing hands made her knuckles white with stress. “She has no business out there. Where is my girl?”

“I’m right here Auntie,” said Tai’gee as she walked into the room. All three adults looked up at her voice, froze for a second before rushing as one over to the girl and bathed her with welcomes and scoldings.

“Tai’gee, where have you been? What happened to you?”

“Do you realize we have been looking for you for two days? We’ve been worried out of our minds!”

“Are you alright, dearest? Are you hurt at all? I’m so glad you’re home!”

Xena and Gabrielle waited patiently in the doorway for the three of them to finish their lamentations. Tai’gee didn’t really get a chance to say anything. She only stood, looking in their direction in hopes of giving the adults the indication that they had company. Eventually the three elders looked towards the door, and the realization of the added presences doubled the excitement sudden relief inspires. They were glad to see the warriors and immediately the questions flew in all directions.

“Have you been with Tai’gee all this time?”

“Did you find the children? Are they alright?”

“Have you destroyed the beasts?”

Xena held up her hands to end the bombardment. “Hold on a minute.” Once the room was quieted Xena continued. “It’d probably be a good idea to feed a hungry girl. Tai’gee hasn’t had anything to eat in a while.”

Mian wasted no time moving to remedy that. She warmed some leftovers she had stored in the darkroom. She offered some to Xena and Gabrielle, but they politely declined. “We haven’t finished our business in the woods yet, and we really need to be going,” said Xena.

“So you’ve found something,” inferred an eager Patrach.

“Well, yes and no. We found the trail of the missing children, but we found it too late to follow it. We want to get back to it before we lose it,” explained Xena. She didn’t want to give away too much of their information to the anxious trio. It was in all of their best interests to keep as much to themselves as possible, if only to protect Kaija.

“You’ve found the trail?” repeated Thalkus, something like disbelief coloring his tone. He quickly asked where it was. “We could send reinforcements with you; you’ll probably need them to help destroy the animals that stole our children.”

Gabrielle noticed that Thalkus seemed to have a one track mind about Cerebrius and Kaija. He seemed much more concerned with their destruction than the safe return of the children – she squinted a bit; there was, if she really wanted to believe it, an undercurrent of manic obsession, a despairing possession to see Cerebrius and Kaija’s ruin. She wondered about that for a moment and decided to point it out to Xena later – if the Warrior Princess had not already noticed. She hoped that Xena had, indeed, noticed it on her own – Gabrielle didn’t want to be the one defaming the one living result of goodness from the warrior’s dark past.

“What reinforcements?” asked Xena with a raised eyebrow.

“What do you mean what reinforcements? We’ve got bounty hunters and soldiers coming from all corners of the world looking for the beasts!” boasted Patrach. None of Tai’gee’s relatives noticed the teen’s deep frown of disapproval from her place at the table and the ‘I told you so’ look she gave Xena and Gabrielle over her bowl.

Thalkus seemed anxious to add to Patrach’s boast. “Since word has gotten out about the children, people have been coming from all over to offer assistance. The temple has been almost overrun with well-wishers and offerings to the gods for the children’s return. These other men are just here to offer a service in our attempt to restore the children to their families.”

“I’d prefer if those ‘other men’ could be kept out of the woods while we’re working. They might destroy whatever evidence is there that could lead us to the children and who took them.”

It was Thalkus’ turn to frown. “You say that like you don’t know who has them. We all know it’s the sphinx that has them.”

“That’s who you think has them,” corrected Gabrielle. “We don’t know that for sure.”

“But who else would want our children,” asked Mian. “We are simple villagers and our children are our simple descendents. We’re nothing special. Why would anyone bother us at all?”

“There’s always an explanation, and Gabrielle and I are working to find that explanation. Don’t worry. We’re doing our best. We’ll find the children and bring them back – and find whoever is involved with this. That’s a promise.” Xena looked confidently at Tai’gee.

“You’d do better to find the beasts first,” advised Thalkus, “Then you’ll find the children.” The man’s forehead began glistening with beads of sweat. His long, thick hair was becoming greasy with his perspiration, making the strands curl at the ends nearest his shoulders.

“How can you be so sure Cerebrius has got them?” asked Gabrielle.

“How can you not be? It’s just like Mian said – who else would do such a thing?”

“Anyone could have a reason.” Gabrielle maintained her position, which earned her three pairs of disapproving looks.

“Look, we’ll find the children, that’s all that matters right now. We’ll get to the who and why later,” said Xena firmly. “Come on Gabrielle.”

“Those demons don’t deserve protection, Xena,” Thalkus called as they had turned to leave. “They do not belong in our world among innocent humans.”

“What does that mean,” demanded Tai’gee. The girl set her bowl down hard on the table and stared disbelievingly at her oldest uncle.

“It means just that,” he answered as though Xena had asked the question and not his niece. “Those creatures are evil incarnate, sent to make the world unpure. They are a curse and a plague and should be destroyed before they infect other villages.”

“Thalkus –” Patrach tried to cut in on his brother’s impassioned rant, but Thalkus turned on him angrily.

“No! You know I’m right Patrach. They do not care for humans, except to destroy their spirits and make them miserable. The God of War has forsaken this village for some reason, and this is his punishment for some crime we have committed to him. We either must appease him or destroy his beasts!”

“Thalkus, calm down.” Xena walked over to the heated man. He had become enraged, furious at the dissension in the room. Together they walked off to the side, Thalkus heaving in anger.

“Thalkus, there’s something you’re not telling me. Do you know something about Cerebrius and Ka – the cat-girl?”

“I know only that they don’t belong here, either of them. They have no place here.”

“Why are you so angry?”

“Because no one seems to realize how dangerous those beasts really are; how menacing and conniving! It killed my brother! Not just mine, but hundreds of other brothers and sons and husbands and fathers and uncles – it’s probably killed women too for all we know. Where’s its wife? Where’s the mother to that thing’s child?”

“Where do you think she is?” asked Xena softly.

“Dead’s my guess. Dead as all the rest of them; she probably did something he didn’t like and he killed her for it. Why is it that because something is rare people think it’s so special? I’ll tell you what’s special about it – it’s especially dangerous! It needs to be exterminated!”

Xena thought of pressing him for more, but decided against it. The perspiration that had been small beads of aggravation had swelled to great balls, rolling in revolt down the reddened forehead and into anger-bulged eyes. She was concerned, but tempered that his reaction was more than likely due to being taxed with having to keep the village in one piece amongst all the commotion. The healthy dose of prejudice was undeniable, but Xena liked to think she knew Thalkus well enough to know he wasn’t a particularly hateful man. ‘Stress brings things out in people.’ And with extra visitors pouring in everyday, she was sure his job was taking a toll.

“Why don’t you rest? Tomorrow maybe you’ll feel a little better.”

“I will only feel better when both of those animals are dead,” stated Thalkus. He brushed passed Xena and left the house, fuming.

“What’s up with him?” asked Gabrielle quietly. Xena only shrugged, and looked curiously at Tai’gee, who also shrugged, then Mian and Patrach. The last two were staring uncomfortably at the floor, Gabrielle noticed.

“Do you know what’s bothering him?” the younger woman asked.

Mian looked like she was about to tell them something, but Patrach stopped her.

“It’s not our place to say,” he said, shaking his head.

“It is your place to say if it has something to do with all of this. Tell us,” said Xena.

Mian looked at her husband and when he didn’t say anything further she looked up to Xena.

“Can you blame him for being so upset? The Sphinx took the only woman Thalkus ever loved. The beast took her as his own, despite their marriage arrangements.”

“Marriage arrangements?” Xena lifted an eyebrow.

“Nadiyah and Thalkus were to be married,” said Patrach, taking over the explanation. “Nadiyah was a beautiful woman, a singer – no finer voice within days of this village. Thalkus had loved her from the moment he heard her voice and we all thought she loved him. But then Nadiyah started wandering off at random, going into the woods and coming back whenever. Not long after that started, Cerebrius showed up, claiming he wanted to stay in the forest. One day, after one of her regular disappearances, about a moon before the wedding, Nadiyah came back refusing to accept Thalkus as her husband. When he asked why she said because she didn’t love him, right there in front of the whole town; not that it wasn’t obvious – she was so pregnant she could’ve burst. Thalkus said he followed her the next day into the woods, tried to talk her into reason – the sphinx’s spell on her was too strong though. She was his. We never heard from her or saw her again – don’t know what happened to the wench. I think the sphinx changed his mind about her and it’s not like she could bring her shameful self back here. Maybe he did kill her. Anyway, that’s what really sealed Thalkus into becoming a priest; he said he had no more physical desire in this world. He’s never been the same since. They destroyed him,” Patrach finished sadly.

Mian shook her head in agreement. “He’s got every right to be the angriest of all of us,” she said heavily. “Because of Cerebrius, he doesn’t even have a wife and child to worry about like the rest of us.” The silence in the room was heavy. After enduring several moments of the uncomfortable quiet, Xena and Gabrielle said a final goodbye and headed back towards the woods, giving a last glance to Tai’gee. Before they had walked into the house, Xena promised Tai’gee they would come back to get her the next day, unless they were really busy.



“I’ll try to get away, but I have a feeling they’ll be watching me extra close now,” said Tai’gee. Xena assured her that at the very least they would get word to her on how things were going if they couldn’t come back in person.

“You’ll take care of Kaija?” she entreated.

“Of course we will,” pledged Xena.

“Hey, she might even wind up taking care of us!” added Gabrielle.

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Back in the woods, Xena and Gabrielle looked around where Kaija was supposed to have been waiting for them. Crickets and some tree frogs were the only creatures making themselves immediately available, leaving silence and darkness as the two’s only other companions. The newcomers looked at each other – or rather, towards each other; the darkness didn’t really allow for the distinction of features beyond obvious blobs – and were just about to heave twin sighs of frustration when their guide appeared from the darkness, surprising them both. She told them to follow her and she led them to a small clearing where a sizeable cut of deer was roasting over a low burning fire. Kaija silently took a seat beside the fire and turned the spit.

“Where did this come from?” asked Gabrielle, who had planned on having a small piece of trail jerky before turning in for the night. An actual dinner was a welcome surprise.

“It came from the woods,” said Kaija flatly, never ceasing her turning of the spit. She didn’t look to either of her companions.

“Is this the same one you caught earlier today?” asked Xena. That earned the woman warrior a quick glance.

“You saw me?” asked the girl.

“Oh yeah, I saw. You were quite impressive.”

Kaija looked confused and paused from her rotisserie. “Impressive? What is that?”

“The way you caught it was quite a show. I liked watching you.”

The girl processed this information, then, “I do not think I like you watching me,” she said quietly, and great muscles flexed to get the spit turning again. Kaija’s tone was flatly distrustful and suspicion and apprehension put a fine edge on each word, but Xena thought there was a minute hint of pride hiding more in the girl’s posture than in her voice. Still the youth’s shortness couldn’t be missed – she spared nothing in conversation, no extraneous details, no long descriptions, and it teemed with terminating statements that extended no invitation to keep a conversation going. Judging from the fact that the girl was half cat, she could have inherited a

distaste for conversation and small talk, tending toward only what was immediate and necessary. ‘Or she could just be being curt,’ added Xena in thought; ‘her own version of rude.’

When they had finished eating, Kaija gathered what was left of the food and started to move into the woods. Gabrielle, who had started spreading the bedrolls looked up and asked her where she was going.

“You must be careful with your food, or you will get company.”

“Like you raided us last night.”

Kaija smiled a little. Gabrielle felt a thin shiver run up her spine – she wasn’t sure it was a real smile more so than a lift of the lip to show just the tip of a pointed canine, expression enough to say ‘I could have done more.’ When their cook turned to hide their leftovers, the blonde woman shot a glance to Xena. The larger warrior merely raised both eyebrows and went to open her pack.

Kaija decided to do some watching of her own before returning directly to the camp. From the underbrush she peered into the fire-lit setting, never disturbing a leaf to give her away. Gabrielle was wrapped in her bedroll sleeping comfortably. Xena was sitting off to the side, sharpening her sword. Every so often the warrior would hold out her weapon, look at it critically, then go back to work again. She was singing softly as she worked. These were no people she’d ever encountered before – most people who realized they had wandered too far into the woods were overanxious to get back out. The ones that dressed like these two, carrying weapons, looking for her were ones *she* was overanxious to get away from. Her desire to retreat and return to her more familiar part of the forest, to the den she shared with her father, was almost overwhelming – a flight reaction honed to a sharp point that had saved her many a nasty interaction with hunters. She was fighting that impulse every moment she stayed in these newcomers’ company, and attempting to justify her refusal to bolt was trying. But just when she would feel her heart and body make the decision to run for it, a voice, calm and deep, would hum in her mind and encourage her to stay and watch, to study. ‘Wait,’ it would purr calmly, in much the same way her instincts would instruct her as she stalked something she intended to capture – ‘Wait... wait...’ Besides, the woman was singing and the sound of her soft voice and the gentle tones was... encouraging and soothing... and interesting.

Xena didn’t know Kaija had returned and was startled when a voice spoke behind her. “That is nice, your singing.”

Xena’s own finely tuned reactions didn’t allow her to jump in surprise, but she muttered a curse and wondered if Kaija was naturally too quiet for her to hear or was sneaking on purpose to challenge her. “I don’t like people walking up behind me like that Kaija; I tend to get edgy when I talk to people I can’t see.” ‘See this sword? You’re small enough – maybe it’d be a good size spit for *you*...’ Xena frowned at herself. ‘You’re just jealous...’ ‘So what if I am!’

Kaija didn’t apologize. She moved from behind the warrior and stood on the opposite side of the small fire warming their camp, complacent and docile. Xena watched out of the corner of her

eye; it was unnerving to see eyes flash an eerie green in the firelight from something as human as Kaija looked. In the night, shadow helped mask a lot of the features that would make obvious Kaija wasn't entirely human; sharp shadows distorted the planes of her face so the bulging incisors weren't so obvious, the lines of smooth muscle were blurred making her look thinner – but the glowing eyes were a sudden reminder that what was standing very close by was not to be mistaken for 'just a girl.'

Kaija looked around her suspiciously before finally squatting down and focusing a studious gaze on her new campmate. Xena hid a smirk at the very catlike settling and resumed her work on her sword.

“Why do you sing when she is asleep?” asked Kaija flatly.

“Why wouldn't I?”

“She cannot hear you when she is asleep.”

“I think she can. Didn't someone ever sing to you? Your mother?” Xena looked up from her sword work.

Kaija looked blank. “No.”

“Your father?” asked Xena carefully.

“No.”

“It's nice to sing sometimes,” Xena said, returning to her work with a shrug. “It can make a person feel better.”

Kaija watched Xena's measured task for a few minutes, quietly. The sword glinted in the firelight, and the shine intrigued her, not to mention the rhythmic *shing* of each swipe of the whetstone down the blade. Xena was tempted to see how long she would stare at her weapon if she started to weave it about like a toy – the halls of Egypt were full of people playing with cats that way, waving objects in front of them so they could pounce and chase it like a mouse. The warrior didn't though – she didn't want to offend or tease her company. Instead, she continued to smooth away any nicks that could weaken her sword in a fight.

“Are those things heavy?”

Xena looked at her sword thoughtfully, then stretched it to Kaija over the fire for her to examine. The young girl held it, felt the weight of it and nodded. It was not only heavy to her, but awkward – she wouldn't want to wield one in a fight for fear of it getting in her way.

“I have seen some use these.” The girl looked to Xena's chakram and asked if that was a sword as well.

“No. It’s called a chakram. You throw it.”

Kaija nodded and returned the sword. “These are weapons. You use them to protect her?”

Xena smiled. ‘My, she’s inquisitive tonight; isn’t that interesting? Definitely better than the wary guardedness.’ The great warrior suspected her young... acquaintance?... wasn’t at all aware of just how threatening her restrained, cautious attitude was. She wasn’t exactly standoffish, but the air crackled with the threat that at any moment Kaija could sprint off never to be caught, or take a damaging swipe at whoever was closest. That position seemed relaxed just now, and Xena wasn’t going to take it for granted. “Lots of times she protects me.”

“She has a sword, too?”

“No. Swords can do a lot of damage. Gabrielle doesn’t like to hurt people. She carries a staff. That big stick over there.”

“You protect each other? That is why you are friends?”

“Is that what you think friendship is about?” asked Xena, looking up from her sword. When Kaija didn’t answer Xena looked down again but didn’t work on her weapon anymore.

“Friendship isn’t just about protecting one another. It’s about doing things together and loving each other. That’s the most important thing, love. Love is what makes a friendship.”

“What is that?”

Xena wasn’t entirely sure how to answer that question. She stammered before she could draw her thoughts together. “Love is...It’s...Love is where you feel like someone means so much to you, more than anything else, and if they were taken away from you, if there was anything you could do to get them back, you’d do it.” Kaija didn’t look like she understood. Xena fumbled for an example. “Don’t you and Tai’gee love each other?”

Kaija looked confused. “We are friends. Tai’gee says we are best friends and we are close. I do not know love.”

“Tai’gee’s never used the word love around you before?” Xena nodded at Kaija’s continued look of vagueness. “Love is what makes you two friends. You care about her, right? You worry if she’s alright whenever you’re not together? You try to keep each other safe. That’s all a part of loving someone.”

“Oh.” Kaija raised an eyebrow and looked over to Gabrielle. “You love her?”

“Yes, very much.”

“You love her because she keeps you safe?”

“We’ve loved each other for a long time – and not because of any one single deed to protect the other.”

“But–”

“Protecting each other is only a part of love,” clarified Xena. “When you love someone you talk to them; spend time together; you make each other feel good when you’re together. You do things together and for each other because you know it will make them happy.”

Kaija looked at the fire in thought. “This love is confusing,” she mused. Xena smiled while Kaija wasn’t looking at her. “You sing to her when she cannot hear you because it makes her happy?...”

“Yep. We do all sorts of things together: we play, fight, fish, talk, take care of each other. That’s all part of loving someone. When you love someone, you can’t help but try to make each other happy.”

Kaija nodded as though coming to a decision. “I like for Tai’gee to be happy. Can you love more than one?”

“What do you mean?”

“My Papaw. I like him to be happy, and I do things for him. And the villagers. And the children. Is that love, too?”

“There are many different types of love,” Xena said, laying her sword aside. “You can love many people many different ways.”

Kaija nodded, seeming to have gained some confidence over the subject. Absently she started playing with something hanging around her neck. Xena asked her what it was. Kaija stretched a stone arrowhead mounted on a leather thong to show Xena. The black rock glistened in the firelight, and Xena suspected it was onyx now that she could see it better. She hadn’t seen an arrow tip made of stone in her entire life – she knew humans used to knap out weapon points from rock regularly, but it was completely obsolete now that they could use metal. There was something more to the stone though, that caught Xena’s attention just as it had the night she’d operated on Kaija – the rock seemed to have an inner glow, much like amber with sunlight behind it, but it was faint and could just have been the way the firelight shone on it.

“From my Pawpaw,” Kaija explained. “He gave me this so I can tell who is safe and who is not. ‘Wear it always.’” She tucked the jewel back to hide safely under the fabric of her halter. “I am to stay away from someone with something like this.” She looked up suddenly, gave Xena a hard look, narrowed her gaze as she searched the woman’s face.

“What?” asked Xena uncomfortably.

“He said you would hurt me. Tai’gee said so, too. That you are dangerous.”

“Is that what you think?”

Kaija waited before answering. She looked back to the fire and said, “You are dangerous. But I think maybe not to me.” Then she rose from her squat and moved to leave.

“Where’re you going?”

“I sleep up,” the girl said with a nod towards the forest canopy. She approached a large tree and jumped up to the first branches with fluid ease before nimbly working her way farther up. Xena watched as the girl selected a large bough overhanging the camp and sprawled out on it, leaving one hand to dangle down and the other as a pillow. The woman laughed in spite of herself. ‘She was almost dead last night and tonight she’s jumping into trees...’ She laid down next to Gabrielle and waited for the younger blonde to open her eyes.

“Did you hear all that,” Xena whispered.

“Yeah,” Gabrielle whispered back. “I heard.”

“Goodnight Love,” bid Xena with a smile.

“Goodnight Love.”

#### IV

Kaija was the first up in the morning. When Xena was awakened by the warming morning breeze she saw Kaija sitting with her back to a tree, chewing on some of the deer from the night before. The girl looked up from her breakfast momentarily then looked back down.

“How long’ve you been up?” asked Xena stretching.

“You sleep too long,” said Kaija.

‘Guess that answered that question,’ Xena allowed.

Gabrielle stirred but did not awaken. It would take more than a mild conversation to get her up.

“We are going to get Tai’gee now?” asked Kaija with a sharp pull at the venison.

“No. We’ve got to get started looking for the children. Tai’gee said she would wait for us to get back.”

Kaija looked like she wanted to object but she didn’t. She went into the woods and came back shortly with the rest of the deer meat, dried and cut into strips for trail food. She handed the mass of meat to Xena.

“For the rabbit,” the girl said, and moved away without further comment.

Xena remembered how to get back to where Kaija had said the trail was, the last path of the missing children. She led the way through the forest, intent on wasting no time that day. Xena moved quickly through the trees and underbrush, leaving Gabrielle and Kaija several steps behind.

“Do you do other than look for children?” Kaija asked her new companion.

“I’m a bard.”

“What is that?”

“A bard is a story teller.”

“What is that?”

“What do you mean? I’m a story teller - I tell stories.” Kaija looked at Gabrielle blankly. Gabrielle sighed. “You don’t know what stories are. Ok. Stories are – well – they tell about something that’s happened, maybe what someone has done. Umm... Look at it this way, if someone starts with ‘I sing of...’, or ‘Long ago’, or something like that then they’re getting ready to tell a story.”

“What do you do with a story?”

“You listen to it; you listen to the person telling it. Usually there’s some lesson in it that will help teach you something about life. Or just information that’s useful.”

Kaija looked confused and annoyed. “If it helps a person, then why not just say it?”

“Because not everyone likes to be told what to do,” explained Gabrielle with a smile. “I just kind of suggest; besides, it’s more relaxing to learn with a story sometimes. People learn better when they’re relaxed.”

Kaija was not entirely convinced but she nodded. “You are a teacher. Teachers are good.”

Gabrielle couldn’t help blushing a little. “Who taught you? To hunt? To track so well?”

“My Papaw. I watch him. I listen. I practice.”

“Practice makes perfect.”

“It does not,” Kaija objected. “Practice makes permanent.”

“Ok,” said Xena stopping at the place where Kaija had shown them the day before. “Here it is. Start tracking.”

Kaija looked around her briefly, ears pricking to and fro. The woods felt strange to her, but she said nothing. Everything seemed strange the last few days. She knelt to find a leaf to smell, sniffed it, and confidently led them west, farther into the forest.

Kaija worked without a word. She ran along the trail picking up bits and pieces of debris to sniff and continuing on. Every now and then she would stop and look around, Gabrielle thought to get her bearings. Xena, on the other hand, thought Kaija looked nervous as she searched the forest. The girl's golden eyes darted quickly from tree to tree before she ran on down the path. They followed her, swiftly and quietly.

They followed the path for hours, both Xena and Gabrielle having to jog to keep up with Kaija. Finally Xena stopped them. The sun was high overhead and they needed to rest. Grateful for the reprieve, Gabrielle flopped down by a large boulder, letting out a long "whew!" She was used to keeping pace with Argo, Xena's trusty golden mare, when Xena rode her, but it was never at such a rate for so long. She really wished for her waterskin at that moment, but she'd left it at camp.

"We should not be stopping," said Kaija. The girl paced anxiously, watching the trees. Sweat glistened on her sun-browned skin, but it didn't trickle in rivulets like it did on Gabrielle and a little on Xena. She stayed at the head of the trail, walking back and forth – it was more than obvious Kaija was not comfortable where they were.

"Kaija, it feels like we've been going in circles. Are you sure you're following the right path?"

"I am sure. I can smell it. It is stronger now. We should go."

"Why? What's wrong?"

Kaija's anxiety seeped over to Gabrielle who stood up holding her staff tightly. Xena watched the girl, who wouldn't focus on just one spot and paced back and forth, every muscle in her body taut.

"You've been pushing us hard all morning. What is it?" asked Xena again.

"It is not safe here. We are too close to the village. There are too many people in the woods. We should go. The path is this way."

"We're all the way back to the village!" exclaimed Gabrielle. "After all this walking?"

"It is the same trail. It is the same scent," Kaija insisted. The longer they delayed the more agitated she got. She scooped up a handful of ground cover and brought it over to them hastily. "You can smell yourself now – it is strong; stinks of burned herbs."



Kaija held the debris first under Gabrielle's nose then Xena's. They did smell a faint scent, like incense. Xena frowned. Kaija dropped the sample and began pacing again, trying to edge up the path.

"I have smelled this scent before, many times. Sometimes in the woods, sometimes near the village, sometimes on Tai'gee. This is the right trail," she said adamantly.

"Ok, ok," soothed Xena. She wanted to keep the girl calm and get a little more information from her before they started again. She needed information to try and put together what was going on.

"Where does the trail seem to be going?" asked Xena.

"Back to the village. The scent is strong, like being traced many times. Only there is not the smell of the children any more. Their smell stopped back there." Kaija waved impatiently to the interior of the woods in the direction from which they had come.

Xena knitted her forehead. "It stopped? Just stopped?"

Kaija nodded.

"Then isn't that where we should be looking?" asked Gabrielle.

"No. Kaija was right to keep moving. You say the scent smells like it's been retraced?" Kaija nodded again, practically prancing in place while Xena took time to piece things together a little more. "Then that means someone keeps coming back to that spot where the children went missing. Someone from the village knows what happened to those kids."

"Yes. We should go now," insisted Kaija with extreme perturbation.

"Alright, we'll –"

Kaija's head snapped to attention, her eyes focused on a spot over Xena's shoulder. In an instant the girl jumped from the trail into the woods. Not a single branch or leaf stirred to betray in which direction she had gone. Xena pulled her sword and Gabrielle moved closer to her friend as they heard footsteps approaching them from farther up the trail, from the direction they had just come. The steps were quick, rustling through the foliage, running – they sounded almost like...a dog.

A medium-sized, mottled dog jumped from the underbrush onto the path. It was surprised into motionless at the sight of Xena and Gabrielle, then instinctively started barking at them. Its bay was deep and bellowed across the trees. Xena thought it could probably be heard for miles around them. There was more rustling in the woods, and a huge man accompanied by six younger men emerged. Each was heavily laden with weapons, traps, and supplies; each piece of equipment was holstered in a belt or sash, and could be easily and conveniently accessed in one move. Xena sized them up. They were experienced trackers she could tell, professional bounty hunters, and from the looks of them, they had been tracking something for days.

“Hush dog!” commanded the oldest and most heavily equipped man. The dog quieted and started sniffing around.

“So,” the man huffed, “you’re who my dog’s been following all morning. A crafty pair you are – leading me in circles.” He looked the two over with a heavy stare. Momentarily, his eyes sparked recognition and he smiled a disgusting, rotten toothed grin. “Ah. Xena. I’d heard you were here.”

“Why are you following us?” Xena asked evenly.

“I don’t want to follow you. I want the cat-girl. I guess old Sniffer there thought your smell was hers.”

Gabrielle’s eyes flashed worry, but, as Xena had taught her, she controlled her expression. She hoped Kaija was far away from them by that point. Just to be safe, she decided to try and buy her some time.

“What do you want her for? It’s the children you should be after.”

The man huffed. Gabrielle was glad she was several long paces away from him – by his looks, his breath was probably as rotten as his teeth.

“What children? Is there a reward out for them, too?” The man sniffed hard and watched his dog pace back and forth a little up the path, then continued. “I don’t know about any children – only the girl that’s half cat. Instincts of an animal, mind of a human; you won’t find better prey. Huhha!” the man’s heavy laugh shook his gear. “The price for her will make me a rich man, huhha! If you’re here, Xena, my dog must be on the right trail.”

The creature bayed then jumped into the woods, the same way Kaija had gone.

“Ah!” the man huffed. “Sniffer’s onto her.” The tracker started to push his way past Xena and Gabrielle, but Xena put out a hand to stop him. *They put a dog on a ledge – when I tried to save it I was trapped.* This was the group Kaija’s three attackers had come from, and apparently this man and the others didn’t realize just why they were three short.

“Look, we’re working this side of the woods,” Xena informed him. “You can take your little search party somewhere else.”

“Huh? Ohhh, I see. Children, eh? Well, I don’t care if you are on her trail – all’s fair in bounty hunting. Step aside.”

Xena didn’t move. She watched the younger men start sneering at her, hungry for a fight. That was fine with her – that would give Kaija more time to get to safety. And anyway she hadn’t really had her morning workout yet.

The dog bayed again in the woods – deep and long. The big man’s eyes virtually lit up with pleasure. “Ha! Treed! Outta my way!”

When the old tracker tried to muscle his way through again, Xena stuck out her foot so he tripped over it. With all his gear, and belly, he never saw it coming. As he lay there, huffing on the ground, Xena smiled menacingly at his companions. They had all dropped their gear to brandish weapons.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” the man yelled. “Get them!”

Gabrielle was lucky enough to get a man twice her size. He was slow and about as graceful as a headless chicken. He swung a huge mace at her, intent on crushing her skull. The awkwardly weighted weapon was to his disadvantage, however. Once he swung it he couldn’t keep control of the momentum and bring it around again quickly enough to protect himself. Gabrielle, with her trusty staff in hand, struck him once behind the back of the head then stuck the staff between his feet to trip him up. The man crashed to the ground with a thud, but got back up quickly.

“You really should give this a second thought,” Gabrielle cautioned. The man pulled a small dagger from his boot and went for her again. “Ok. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

With a quick snap of her wrist, Gabrielle knocked the man’s weapon away. She felt the bones crunch at the end of her staff, breaking, which made her wince a little. She always hated to hurt someone like that. The man howled, but didn’t give up. He made another attempt, to Gabrielle’s dismay, and got a staff blow to his crotch, one across the middle of his back, one to his face, a sweep to his knees, and a finishing blow to his stomach. The man was out.

Xena was making short work of her group. Taking on two at once she twirled her ever-ready sword and beckoned them. Not knowing any better the two charged her at once, swinging their swords wildly. She blocked one blow with her sword at the same time she jumped away from a swing from the second man. She gave the first man a sharp sweeping kick to send him flying backwards. As he landed heavily on the ground before her, Xena took a running start, jumped off the man’s stomach and gave the second man a powerful spin kick to the head, sending him tumbling in a useless heap to the ground. The first man, whom Xena had jumped off of, lie gasping on the ground, unable to move until he got back his breath. Xena smiled a little as she returned her sword to the sheath on her back. A good fight always made her feel a little better.

But there was something missing when she looked up. There were too few people lying on the ground. Looking down the path she saw the older leader running as best he could up the path. He turned into the woods after Kaija.

“Come on, Gabrielle!” shouted Xena as she charged into the woods. Gabrielle plunged in after her.

Once they got off the trail the woods turned into an unpredictable tangle of trees, vines, high roots and potholes. Surprisingly, the heavysset head-trapper was pretty agile in the woods. ‘I suppose everyone has their element.’ The man had a good lead on them and he wasn’t slowing

down to look behind and see if he was followed. Xena sped up, the thrill of the chase exciting her and the need to get to Kaija before the hunters did driving her. Gabrielle, unable to run as fast as her companion, did the best she could to keep up, but was soon several yards behind.

Xena cleared one fallen tree, then another, dove through a wall of vines, almost turned her ankle in a blind hole before emerging into bright sunlight. All of a sudden she was standing on a grassy cliff, stunned momentarily by the blinding light. Gabrielle, also not expecting the sudden recess of the forest, ran right into Xena. Looking up they saw Kaija holding three men at bay: two of the younger hunters and the fat man. The dog jumped wildly at their ankles barking and baying.

“Come on Xena!” shouted Gabrielle, ready to charge in.

“No, wait,” said Xena pulling her back. “She doesn’t need our help yet.”

Kaija crouched low under the branches of a huge cypress tree. Her sharp, golden eyes focused on each man in turn, sizing him up. She hissed at them, growled, but didn’t move. With every passing moment the muscles in her small body gathered together, getting tighter and tighter, ready to spring. Xena could tell the hunters didn’t know how to handle her. They stood for a little while just watching the girl in front of them. For a moment the Warrior Princess thought they might just back away and give up. But of course they weren’t that smart.

One of the younger tried to lasso her, but he was too slow and clumsy. Kaija out maneuvered him – like a wet mouse through a greased mouse hole, the girl jumped through the loop, grabbing the rope as she went through and pulled it around the man’s feet. After circling him halfway she gave the rope a sharp tug and sent the man crashing to the ground. His head bounced hard on the rocky earth without his hands to brace him, and he stayed down. The second young hunter tried to charge her like he was going after an unbroken colt. The girl promptly dropped to the ground and rolled like a log at the man, tangling his feet with hers. He too hit the ground with an unpleasant thud. Kaija moved on to the last man. The bulky bounty hunter stood by watching his young apprentices being whipped by a young, wild girl. The dog had stayed out of reach but continued to bark madly. He shook his head and pulled out a huge knife, almost the size of a cutlass.

“I hit you once with one of these. I can hit you again,” the man sneered.

Kaija’s teeth flashed in the sunlight. She bared her sharp canines, growled ferociously. She remembered the man now, and she remembered the trap he had set. He saw in her eyes that she recognized him.

“Yeah. You know me, don’t you beast. Huhha. Come to Papa!”

Kaija lunged at him when he started to bring the knife back. She ploughed hard into him, sending them both sprawling to the ground. The fat bounty hunter got to his feet, but not quickly enough. Before he was standing full height, Kaija grabbed the man by the back of his shirt and yanked him to the ground without much effort. The girl held him there, studying him while he

struggled like a dying fish, before hauling him over to Xena and Gabrielle. The dog hadn't yet given up the fight; it dove in and back, snapping at the air behind Kaija's heels, still barking, but staying out of reach.

"My, my," whistled Xena. "We've definitely got something here." She watched in wide-eyed amazement as the young girl easily dragged back her prey. The man tried to wriggle free, but eventually he stopped moving once he saw it was useless trying to break the girl's grip. Once Kaija was close enough, she stepped onto a log, and held the huge man up in front of the two warriors, dangling him effortlessly before them. 'He must weigh two hundred fifty pounds,' Gabrielle's mind reeled. 'She's holding him up with one hand.' There was a slight tremble along the girl's arm, but other than that, she may well have been holding up a sack of potatoes.

"Well... look what the cat dragged in. Who are you? What's your name?" asked a none-too-friendly Xena. The hunter didn't answer so Kaija gave him a sharp shake and lifted him higher.

"You know," Xena purred, "I've seen this girl do some amazing things. She's got this neat little trick for neck breaking..."

The man's eyes grew wide as he realized his position: caught by a half-human beast who was much stronger than any man he'd ever met; and Xena, The Warrior Princess standing in his face.

"Bromentes. Exotic animal and bounty hunter. The best there is this side of the River Styx."

"Not any more," said Xena flatly. She moved close to the dangling man, got right in his face and fixed piercing blue eyes onto his. The man swallowed hard, and wondered how many men had the great fortune of walking away from that stare. "Tell that dog to shut up."

"B-be quiet dog." The command wasn't convincing enough; Bromentes' dog kept up its feverish bark-dancing. "Hush!" he yelled and this time the dog whined and was silent, cowering back, confused because the prey hadn't yet been caught.

"Now, tell me who put the price on this girl's head? Who sent for you?"

"I don't know," was the weak answer. Kaija gave him another shake. "I don't know, I swear! A messenger came through the village I was staying in proclaiming a huge prize for the capture of a beast at Cresca. Once we got here we found a proclamation on the inn in town: *For all interested the hunt consists of capturing or killing a half animal-half woman that lives in these woods. Prize of six gold bars.* Enough for me to live off of for the next three lifetimes."

"Huh," grunted Xena. "Well, I wouldn't count on that little nest egg hatching any time soon. You've got about a minute to get out of these woods; and don't come back. Next time, I might just let her have her way with you."

Kaija let the man go. Even though he was only actually a mere inch or so off the ground, when she opened her white-knuckled grip to let him drop, Bromentes' knees buckled when he hit land;

he crumbled like rotten wood. He scrambled to his feet and started for the woods as fast as he could go; his whimpering mottled dog out paced him and disappeared into the brush first.

“And if you see anymore hunters, tell them the reward is off!” Gabrielle called after him.

Before he made it to the woods though, the man stopped in his tracks, stumbled back and fell. He made no move to get up. ‘Ah jeez, he’s probably had a heart attack or something. At least it wasn’t me scaring someone to death for a change...’ Xena smirked at her own brand of sympathy.

They all ran over to him, Xena reached him first. ‘Not a heart attack.’ A large arrow stuck obnoxiously out of his chest – a perfect kill shot. Kaija knelt by the man and looked at his wound. Gabrielle stood behind Xena. Xena looked into the woods, then darted in after a shadow she spied.

“This does not belong here,” said Kaija looking at the arrow in the man. She grabbed the stalk in one hand and put her other hand on the man’s chest to brace herself. But before she gave an initial tug, she drew her hands back, stared at the blood that stained them.

There was a rustling in the woods that quickly resolved itself into a full blown commotion. Gabrielle and Kaija looked up to see Xena pushing a disgruntled Tai’gee, arm twisted behind her, out into the sunlight. The girl was armed with a full quiver and a bow, which Xena had confiscated and threw down to the ground as they emerged. Tai’gee sulked petulantly as she was dragged from hiding.

“Tai’gee? What have you done?” asked Gabrielle.

“I knew you’d let him go,” Tai’gee yelled angrily. “You let him go so he can go back to the village, get re-stocked, tell everyone what he saw, and come back with more hunters! I knew it!”

“We let him go so he could clear out the rest of the hunters for us.” Gabrielle explained to Tai’gee like she was trying to convince a child why people don’t jump into boiling tar.

“You let him go because you’re weak.”

“No Tai’gee. You can’t do this,” said Xena. Tai’gee jerked away from her. “He was unarmed.”

“So was Kaija,” Tai’gee said defensively.

Gabrielle shook her head and noticed Kaija was still sitting by the man, trying to get the arrow out of him.

“Kaija,” the young woman began gently. “What are you doing?”

At first Kaija didn't answer; only kept trying to get the arrow out. But she stopped every time she pulled because she felt muscle and bone pulling and snapping as she tugged. Finally she looked up.

"This does not belong here," she said quietly. "It is in him and does not belong."

"Kaija..." Gabrielle started but finished with only another shake of her head. She didn't know how to explain to the youth what was going on. She looked at Xena for help.

Xena looked at the distressed girl and frowned. She figured it must be pretty confusing to see a weapon kill a person when she's never used one before. Breaking a neck, strangling, even beating something to death were all very concrete actions with visible results – how does one die because a stick is in his chest? 'And speaking of a stick in the chest...' She walked over to the body, knelt beside it, then lifted the dead man into a sitting position. The warrior broke off the feathered end of the stalk and pushed the arrow the rest of the way through the body. Then she let him fall back to the ground and went back to Tai'gee, studying the arrow.

"This isn't a villager's arrow," Xena pointed out as she looked at the large, heavy arrowhead. "Where'd you get it?"

Gabrielle watched Kaija more closely. She was still looking at Bromentes, confused. She touched his wound then looked at the blood on her hands, then touched him again. Each time she did this the girl looked more and more bewildered. She looked at the man's face and into his unblinking eyes. She reached out to make them blink but jerked her hand back when her fingers left red spots on his skin.

"Where did you get these?" Xena repeated in an impatient demand.

"I was given them," answered Tai'gee sourly. "By a man who said my target would never walk away from them, like they were with my old arrows."

"What man?"

"I don't know. I never saw him before. I'd thank him if I ever saw him again though. He was true to *his* promise."

Xena rolled her eyes. "Despite your misguided beliefs, helping others does not include killing everyone in sight just because we can. We're not murderers."

Expectedly, Tai'gee was not convinced. She folded her arms sullenly and scowled. Gabrielle shook her head and turned her attention back to Kaija. The look on the girl's face was unmistakable incomprehension. She stared at her hands, at the drying red liquid, then back to the wound where more of the same sluggishly seeped out. The girl looked panicked. She looked up, at Gabrielle, at Xena's back, at Tai'gee, who hadn't seemed to notice this man lying there. He didn't move. He didn't breathe. He didn't look through his open eyes.

“Tai’gee,” Kaija called quietly. “Tai’gee.” Kaija finally stood, her hands out in front of her, looked beseechingly at her friend. Tai’gee looked up and immediately put her head down when she saw Kaija coming towards her. Xena turned around.

“What is this Tai’gee?” asked the girl plainly, holding out her hands farther.

Tai’gee couldn’t answer, just looked away.

Xena frowned. “It’s just blood Kaija. The man is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes. The arrow killed him.”

“Killed?”

“Yes, Kaija. Killed.”

“Xena, she doesn’t understand,” said Gabrielle, coming up behind Kaija.

Now Xena was confused. How could a hunter, a predator not understand a kill? Then she thought maybe Kaija didn’t see dead humans the same as dead animals. It was instinct for her to go after game – but maybe she didn’t understand that humans could die, too.

“Tai’gee,” called Kaija again, still walking towards her friend. “What is killed? What is dead? Tai’gee –” the girl moved still closer pointing back to the man on the ground, as if to show Tai’gee for the first time that he was there – “He does not move, or breathe. He was – he *just* was. He does not talk. Tai’gee, and this...” she pleaded, thrusting her bloody hands to her friend.

“Kaija, stop it! Just stop, alright? He’s dead. I see him. I killed him!” Tai’gee yelled as loud as she could, throwing her hands over her ears to keep her friend’s pleas for explanation at bay. She stomped her feet and closed her eyes to block away Kaija’s entreating expression. “I did it to save you,” she yelled. “They let him go, and he would have come back to do to you what I did to him. He wanted to kill you! But not now. I stopped him!”

Kaija looked back to the man then at Tai’gee, then at her hands. “He would make me like him now?” she asked in a whisper. “But why would he? I would not do that to him.”

“For who you are Kaija! Why can’t you understand? For who you are. For what you are! You aren’t human! That’s why!”

“Tai’gee, that’s enough!” yelled Xena.



“She’s got to know,” insisted Tai’gee. She grabbed her friend by the shoulders and shook her a little. “Think Kaija. Does your father look like the village children’s fathers? That’s why you’re different.”

“I said enough!” Xena grabbed Tai’gee by her arm and spun her around, away from Kaija. She jerked her hard to make her be quiet and stared at her angrily. Kaija snapped from her bewilderment and jumped to Tai’gee’s defense. The girl charged Xena, knocking Tai’gee free of the woman’s hold. Then she grabbed Xena’s breastplate and lifted her from the ground, just like she had Bromentes. Xena hung motionless, trying to show she meant no harm. She stared calmly at a spot off and below Kaija’s defensive line of sight, a submissive stare to show she wasn’t a threat. Then the breastplate slipped from the girl’s hands, letting Xena drop lightly back to the ground. The blood coating Kaija’s fingers made the metal too slick to hold.

Once again Kaija looked at her hands. “It is on everything I touch,” she said as her throat tightened. She looked up, afraid, not knowing what was happening to her body: why were her eyes burning, her throat closing with a throbbing ache, her nose tickling uncomfortably, and her hands shaking? She looked at Xena, the closest to her, for explanation.

“It’s just sadness,” explained Xena, gently. “A human emotion.”

“Human? But – I am not – I –”

Kaija looked down, at the blood on her and saw the arrow in Xena’s hand. It was also stained red. The tip of it was sharp, pointed – it was what she had taken out of the man – the dead man – what killed him. It looked like her necklace – what her father said people would use to hunt her – to kill her – because she was different – she was not human. Kaija shook her head emphatically, staring wide-eyed and fearfully at her hands. Insentient panic overtook her, and the youth bolted for the woods as fast as she could, disappearing in seconds. Tai’gee started to follow her but Xena grabbed her from behind and threw her back. The girl stumbled over herself and fell on her rear with a loud “Umph!”

“No you don’t. You’ve said enough to her for now.”

“Tai’gee, how could you talk to Kaija like that?” asked Gabrielle.

Tai’gee’s eyes burned with fury. She stood up quickly and clenched her fists tight.

“This is all your fault.” She pointed sharply at Xena.

“My fault?”

“Yes! If you had just killed him then I wouldn’t have had to be the one to do it. Then I wouldn’t have had to explain to her that way! I had it all planned out, exactly what I was going to say, so it wouldn’t hurt her so much. And now look what you’ve done!”

Gabrielle stepped forward, looking for a way to salvage what she could of the whole ordeal. “There’s no reason you can’t explain to her now...”

“No!” Tai’gee yelled. “I’ve already messed up. I’ve ruined the whole thing. I wanted to help her understand slowly and easily and now it’s all gone wrong. She’ll think she’s a monster, and it’s all because of m- because of you!”

Tai’gee ran by Xena and into the woods, but not in the same direction as Kaija. Xena watched the girl run into the shadows then disappear, recklessly crashing through the underbrush. The warrior frowned, sighed, looked to Gabrielle.

“Well, we’ve definitely got a mess, haven’t we?”

“I’d say so.” Gabrielle leaned heavily on her staff and tried to think of what they should do next. Apollo had turned the sun past its highest point and was now heading for his resting place under the earth. They only had a couple hours left before dusk arrived. Xena suggested they go back to the village.

“Why the village?”

“Because Kaija said that’s where the tracks led and from where they’d been retraced. We’ll need to poke around a bit there and see who knows what.”

V

Once back in the main square, Xena and Gabrielle could see why Kaija had been so nervous to be close to the village. The place was swarming with hunters, soldiers, woodsmen, adventure seekers, anyone who thought they had a chance at capturing the mysterious animal-girl. She wouldn’t have been surprised at all if Atlanta herself showed up. Xena recognized many of those who were now milling about for supplies and information. Many were former acquaintances of hers, men she’d rather not remember having known. Many more were unknown to her, younger men who were just getting a taste of the world outside of their sheltered homes. Xena pressed her lips together tightly. As if reading her mind, Gabrielle mused, “All of them looking for one little girl who didn’t even know why.”

Xena looked over the hairy, well-experienced men, and the hairless, in-training boys, scowled, then looked away. Someone was definitely advertising the situation, someone who had the money to back up an advertisement. These men wouldn’t be paid off with a grateful thank you and a strong handshake. The woman grimaced, trying to think who in the village could have those kinds of resources. There were no rich men to speak of in Cresca, and from the looks of the unembellished buildings and shacks around them, even if all the merchants pooled their money they still wouldn’t be able to come up with six bars of gold. No, this reeked of a wealthy person – or she thought with widening eyes, someone with easy access to a great deal of wealth.

“What is it?” Gabrielle tugged lightly at Xena’s arm when she saw her friend’s eyes get larger with enlightenment. Secretly, Gabrielle hated when Xena got that look because it meant she had

just figured out something she herself could have figured out if she had only thought a little harder. She tried to call up all the information they'd gathered over the last few days and do some quick thinking, but it was too much. She settled on nagging Xena for what the warrior had just come to.

“The path back there, that we were just following – where do you think it was heading?” Xena asked slowly, still pulling her thoughts together.

“Back into town, I guess,” said Gabrielle with a shrug. She knew there was something to Xena's asking, but she didn't know what it was. Xena had that annoyed and anxious look she usually got when she came across an idea and immediately wanted to find out if it was right.

The warrior turned her back to the village and looked back towards the woods from which they had just come. “No,” she breathed. “We turned off of it too soon. He wouldn't come back this way, not through town. It would raise too much suspicion.”

“Who? What?”

Xena continued watching the woods, ignoring the queries at her elbow. She looked off to the west, stepped a few paces back from town and started to skirt the edges. Once she'd cleared the few outer buildings, Gabrielle right at her heels, she stopped and knelt by the path. The woman reached out for straw and brought it slowly to her nose, sniffing in quick short breaths then one longer one. The scent was faint to her – a light smell of burning herbs; incense. She had to know what she was smelling for though or she wouldn't have noticed it at all; much the way that Gabrielle didn't notice when Xena handed her the sample to examine.

“It has that same light scent of burned herbs,” the woman explained.

The younger sniffed it again, putting the straw close to her nose. Her brow furrowed as she concentrated on smelling the herbs, then she found it: a light trace of incense, like the kind used on altars.

“It's heading straight for it,” said Xena darkly.

“For what?”

“The temple.”

Gabrielle squinted. “Why the temple? Wait – you don't think...you don't think it's Thalkus do you?”

“That's exactly what I think, and I should have thought it sooner.” She paused waiting for Gabrielle to ask why but went ahead and explained. “There aren't any rich men in Cresca – at least no one wealthy enough to have six bars of gold bounty. So where could someone here get that kind of money? Everybody brings offerings to the temple, all kinds, especially gold – which

can be melted down if necessary. The trail smells like incense, and it's the same kind of incense I smelled when we first stepped into the temple."

"And who has the most reason to hate Kaija and Cerebrius," Gabrielle added. "But the bounty isn't on Cerebrius. Just Kaija. Why wouldn't he put it on the father, too?"

"I don't know." Xena started walking swiftly towards the temple. She always did think better when she walked. "And I still don't see how the children fit into all of it. We'll just have to ask Thalkus."

~

Xena stormed into the temple, startling worshippers and altar boys alike. The temple was incredibly crowded considering there wasn't actually a service in progress. Many were standing in line, waiting to make their offerings, but most were standing in small groups mumbling softly to each other. They silenced momentarily to curiously study the new arrivals, then continued whispering their previous conversations.

Xena started for the back of the temple, pushing her way between small groups of nervous looking villagers. A man stepped out from the crowd and held his hand up to stop her. It was Patrach.

"Xena – have you seen Tai'gee? She was gone again this morning. Did she go with you again?"

"I did see her earlier today, but not since."

Patrach's face reddened with obvious frustration. Mian stood behind him and put a calming hand on his shoulder. "That girl," he mumbled in an attempt to keep himself under control. Then he looked back to Xena. "I hope you get those kids back and kill those beasts soon. There are a lot of people here who want to see this whole thing ended."

"And we want nothing less," Gabrielle assured him. "Have you seen Thalkus?"

Patrach lifted his chin towards the back of the temple. "He's probably in his rooms getting ready for the service."

"This early in the afternoon?" asked Gabrielle.

Mian answered. "Thalkus thinks it's best to give all of us something to attend during the day, so we won't be tempted to go out into the woods. We all know we wouldn't dare venture out during the night."

"And he says this way the bounty hunters can get their work done without worrying about tripping over us. He's a smart man – good at looking after his people."

Xena didn't meet Patrach's eyes. She wished she could still have his faith in the priest, but right now that was in short supply with all of the clues lining up the way they were. She beckoned for Gabrielle to follow her. Patrach called after them: "If you see Tai'gee again tell her to come straight home!"

Xena marched around the far corner of the temple and down a dimly lit stone hall, through an elaborately decorated arched doorway, down another, thinner hallway, and into the inner sanctum. Here was where all of the offerings were kept, and here was where Thalkus stood, looking over a scroll. He looked up, startled for a moment, then settled himself with a sigh. It was only Xena. He set the scroll aside.

"You can't be in here, Xena. This is a private place where –"

"Shut up." Xena stalked up to him, backed him into a tapestried wall and breathed heavily into his face, just for effect. "This is a neat little charade you've got going here," she purred viscously. "But I'm tired of playing. What did you do with the children?"

Thalkus sputtered, looked at Gabrielle incredulously. He wouldn't meet Xena's angry stare. Xena grabbed his robe, wrapped it around her fist and hefted up, bringing her fist right under his chin. The man's face went red, his eyes bulged.

"I don't like asking more than once. I never was a patient person," Xena hissed.

"I told you already where to look for the children. They're with that beast in the woods." Thalkus' voice was surprisingly steady, despite his quivering frame. He finally brought his gaze to Xena's – his smoldering dark eyes were no match for her icy blue stare, however, and he looked away again.

Xena had his number. She wouldn't need to threaten him much more before he spilled everything he had. In one lithe motion she drew her sword and pressed the tip firmly against his soft cheek. She narrowed her eyes and flashed a brilliant set of white teeth. "I hear cats can smell blood from miles away. And they don't mind at all if the source is already dead." Xena emphasized *dead* by pressing the blade even closer to his face.

Thalkus drew in a long breath, clenched his teeth, and exhaled slowly. "You let me go once – you'll do it again," he said.

"Oh yeah, I'll let you go once you tell me what I want to hear. Otherwise..."

"No. You'll let me go regardless. The new Xena doesn't kill in cold blood." He tried to flash a confident smile of his own but it was lost before it reached his lips.

"You may be right about that. But I know some distraught fathers who wouldn't care if you were armed or not. I think they're all standing outside waiting for you to perform a service for their lost children. I know a great service you can give them."

Thalkus faltered. “You wouldn’t.”

Without bothering to look over her shoulder Xena told Gabrielle to go make the announcement that they’d found the kidnapper. Gabrielle started for the door with a light jog but stopped when Thalkus squeaked for her to come back.

“I took them,” the priest started lowly. “Aries said if I gave him the life of the beast’s daughter, Cerebrius would be destroyed. So I sent for any bounty hunters who were in the area.”

“And me?” Xena asked flatly.

“You – Aries said you were already around here and that you would be a sure bet against that demon, even if all the others failed. He said you wouldn’t come just for sport, you needed a real hero’s reason. So he told me to get the twelve youngest children of the village and he’d hide them in the woods – to make everyone think they’d been kidnapped, then you’d come destroy that inhuman creature, find the kids and all’s well. I went out every night to meet Aries to make sure the children were alright and every night he assured me they were fine. You weren’t supposed to go after the kid’s first!”

Gabrielle stepped up close behind Xena. “So where *are* the children?”

“How should I know? That was Aries’ concern not mine. I just wanted what was best for Cresca.”

Xena released her grip, letting the man go. He doubled over massaging his throat and gasped for air. The warrior looked at him with contempt as he stood again, the highest color passed from his face, leaving him only slightly flushed.

“You didn’t have anything in mind for Cresca,” she said flatly. “You were thinking only of yourself and how much you hated hearing about Cerebrius in those woods raising the daughter of the woman you said you loved.”

Thalkus’ eyes snapped to attention. He bared his teeth at her, charged her with a wordless shout, flailing his arms wildly. Xena stepped aside in plenty of time and let the man run past her. He turned back sharply, skidding across the highly polished marble floor then started for her again. This time the warrior let him come, ducked down, and threw the man over her shoulder with his own momentum. He flew into clay pot offerings of wine, grain, fruits, beads, all making a terrible crash. Thalkus pulled himself from the rubble, positively seething. He started from the mess, slipped on the wine-slick floor, regained his balance and decided to stay where he was. He pointed at her with a dark glare.

“How dare you,” he growled. “How dare you speak to me in such a way?”

Xena was quick to close the distance between them, pushing the man from the shoulders and sending him back down to the litter on the floor. “Don’t even think about it,” she threatened. “You sent trained killers after a young girl that would have smiled on you as dearly as a daughter

if you would have let her. You have no right to feel sorry for yourself.” She paused, thinking to reserve her last bit of information then decided not to. “Tell me. How long did you think your service as a priest was going to protect you after you killed Nadiah? Did you think the gods would protect you?”

Thalkas’ eyes grew wide. “How did you know?” he wheezed angrily.

“Patrach said you became a priest after you followed Nadiah into the woods and found her with the sphinx. He said you became a priest because you had no more physical desire. Then, when I was talking to Nadiah’s daughter it was obvious she had never known her mother. Her mother was the most talented singer in the whole area and she had never even heard her hum a tune. That means she must have died before her daughter was old enough to know her own mother’s voice. Died perhaps just after she’d given birth – and you would’ve killed the baby too had Cerebrius not spirited her away.”

“You can’t prove a thing,” Thalkus grinned evilly. He remained where he was on top of the broken pots and spilled wine, a perfect mess.

“You’re right,” Xena answered with a raised eyebrow. “I probably can’t find any physical evidence now – it’s been too long. But I think you would find it difficult to talk your way out of it in front of a town full of loving and worried parents; I mean now that *their* children are involved.”

The room was silent. Thalkus sulked on his bed of debris while Xena backed away to stand with Gabrielle.

“So...you’ve talked to the beast, eh?” Thalkus grimaced.

Gabrielle bristled. “She’s not a beast. She’s a girl and her name is Kaija.”

Thalkus’ laugh was thick and ominous. “You’ve named your pet then? Ha! You can try and believe she’s human all you want but you’re damned blind fools. She’s no more human than – than –”

“You?” finished Gabrielle icily.

Thalkus quieted and looked away. “Think what you like,” he mumbled. “That won’t save her from the hunters, or my townspeople. Even if I call off the bounty they’ll all still be looking for her. It’s got a life of its own now.”

Gabrielle dismissively blew from her nose and looked to Xena. They were only wasting their time with Thalkus now – he was no more use to them. “So now what?” asked Gabrielle.

“Now we take the life back,” Xena said determinedly. She looked down to the scowling Thalkus and shot him a scowl of her own. “And we give it a new direction.”

~

Xena and Gabrielle went first to Tai'gee's home. They found the girl sitting on a water barrel on the side of the house, absently fingering some stray fibers of hay sticking up from a couple of bales next to her, morosely staring at the woods. Tai'gee was none too pleased to see them and promptly turned her back when she recognized who had rounded the corner.

"What do you want?" she asked over her shoulder.

Xena let Gabrielle do the talking. Convincing the unconvinced was always her specialty. The younger woman approached the girl slowly, laying her staff against the house. She kept her voice low and even. "We need your help."

"Do you? Help for what? Make Kaija more upset? Or maybe you've got a group of warlords you want to introduce her to. Is that it?"

Xena bit back her sharp reply, commanding herself to let Gabrielle take care of things. 'She'd better hurry though, or no amount of talking's going to save her if she doesn't wizen up,' Xena thought to herself.

"Look," said Gabrielle firmly. "We aren't playing games. Your friend is in real trouble and we're trying to save her life. Now, you can help us do that and do it quicker, or you can not help us, and...well, we might not be able to help her at all. It's up to you."

Tai'gee turned around. Tears hovered in her eyes. "How can I trust you?" she asked in a small voice. "All you seem worried about is getting the children back. I'm worried about what's going to happen to Kaija. There's no where for her to go now." Tai'gee quickly wiped away her tears and looked skyward in an attempt to keep control of herself. "Everywhere she goes now, she'll know she's not like anyone else; that people will see her as less than human." She paused to swallow a sob then went on. "She – uh – always had this wish to – to go to school with all of us and learn to read. But of course she can't. Her father wouldn't let her out of the woods, and the villagers wouldn't let her into the school. And she just kind of accepted it, like it was alright for them to treat her differently because of a pair of eyes." Tai'gee swallowed hard, looked at Gabrielle with a chilly gaze. "And I did what I could. If that meant killing to keep her safe, I did it. I poisoned, I stabbed, I trapped, I did whatever I could. Kaija never knew. And then you come in saying killing is wrong and killing is bad. Now what's she going to think?"

Gabrielle laid a hand on Tai'gee's shoulder when the girl looked away. "She's going to think you're the same wonderful friend you always were. And we're all going to try to make sure she's safe from now on. Xena has a plan."

"You do?"

Xena moved closer to them. "Yeah. But first there's some things we need to explain to you. And you have to promise to do things my way. Agreed?"



Tai'gee narrowed her gaze a little, but agreed when Gabrielle reminded her it was for Kaija.

~

“So my uncle is behind all of this?”

“Well, yes and no. Aries is behind it mostly. He's using your uncle's hatred to his own advantage,” Xena explained as they headed farther into the woods. The warrior pulled back a branch from their path and held it for the others, then continued on behind them.

“So what's this plan of yours?”

Xena stopped for a moment to look around. She motioned for her companions to draw in close to her. Then she spoke in a hushed voice. “Shh. Not now. Listen.”

They all began looking around listening carefully to the woods.

“This place is crawling with hunters,” Tai'gee breathed. “They're everywhere.”

“Yeah, but what's that sound?” asked Gabrielle, referring to a faint murmuring off to her left. They all moved over to a small clump of bushes, pulled back the stumpy branches and peered down to see a man hog-tied and gagged, struggling in his bonds. Gabrielle reached in to pull the gag away from his mouth.

“Start talking,” she said in an even tone, much like the one Xena often used to get information.

“That demon girl did this! Snuck up on me and my brother. We were settin' traps. I don't know where she took him. Mumblin' somethin' about bein' a beast if that's what we want. Stupid animal.”

Tai'gee looked worriedly at the two warriors then they all turned to leave. They had to find Kaija before she did something they'd all regret.

“Hey! HEY! What are you doing?”

Xena came back, pushed the branches aside again and apologized. “Don't know how I could have forgotten.” Quickly she reached down and re-gagged the man. If nothing else he'd be one less hunter to worry about. She smiled sardonically. She really did love her work.

They didn't have far to go to find the man's brother. He hung by his feet from a giant oak, also gagged.

“Which way?” Xena asked flatly. The man indicated north with an effortful wiggle of his body.

“Thanks.”

The number of hunters Kaija had caught was astounding, thought Gabrielle. It seemed every few steps they found another then another. Then again, it wasn't like she had a limited supply. The younger woman glanced at Tai'gee from the corner of her eye and noticed the girl biting her lip. She thought she should say something reassuring.

"Don't worry. We'll find her. With a trail like this it won't be that difficult."

Tai'gee frowned at Gabrielle's attempt to be cheerful. "She's never done anything like this before. What if she —"

"She won't," Xena cut her off. "We'll find her before she gets any more ideas."

And find her they did; sitting on a rock outcropping looking at twenty or so hunters, warlords, cutthroats, adventure seekers and would be heroes, all bound together in a circle. Xena walked up to the circle slowly, eyeing its construction with extreme gravity.

"Kaija," the warrior called carefully. "What are you doing?"

Tai'gee gasped as she approached the group. On the ground spreading in an even grid was a network of knives, daggers, swords – anything with a sharp edge – with their hilts buried so that the blades jutted dangerously from the ground. The men were connected with each other by one very taut rope tied around their necks. Their hands and feet were bound so they couldn't move – only stand and wonder. Xena immediately recognized the trap; any movement one man made would make him fall, which would make the others fall, which would introduce them to highly uncomfortable bedding. The rope was so tight even a sneeze could pitch one of the men over, and it wouldn't matter which way any of them fell – there was nowhere for them to land and not be pierced.

At the head of the circle was Kaija, seated on the rock holding a piece of rope that connected to the one tying man-to-man. She looked up at the small group approaching and flashed her teeth in what would have been a smile if her eyes weren't so angry. She watched them finish their cautious approach.

"Kaija. You don't want to do this," Xena warned. She kept her voice low and even. "You don't want to do this. This won't help you."

Kaija didn't look at Xena, only kept her eyes on her trap. Her focus was on the knot that attached her rope to theirs, but her gaze was blank, empty, and emotionless. The same as her voice as she spoke. "I saw a hunter set this up. The way he made it, the rope was on the ground—"

"Kaija —"

"- and an animal would step in, get tangled —"

"- Kaija —"

“- and fall over onto sharpened sticks. I thought it was a game – I watched them set their trap and wait for me to come...”

“- Kaija!”

“But,” Kaija held up a finger to Xena, sweat glistening off her forehead. “They never get me.”

Xena stopped trying, she wasn't getting through. She'd have to wait.

“You know why they never get me?” Kaija licked her lips then pulled her tongue slowly over her sharp teeth. Her eyes remained on the rope. “Because I was not the other animals. I saw what they did and I think ‘there is a way to undo it.’” Kaija gave a short laugh. “They were always so mad I messed them up. I wanted to tell them why it did not work.” The youth's gaze focused for a moment before returning to a distant chilliness. “Today I think... ‘it would work if I was deer and did not notice the trip cord; or if I was fox and did not see the muzzle snare; or if I was rabbit or wolf or hog or any other *animal*.’ They wanted me like all the others. And I did not know why. But now...I know.”

She fiddled with the rope in her hands a moment, looked up, her golden-green eyes holding a curious expression Xena couldn't quite recognize, the narrow split of pupil gave nothing away. “Now I know.” She half laughed again and shook her head, looked off to the side. “All the time Pawpaw tells me about hunters but he means *humans*. ‘*Humans* cannot be trusted.’ He said ‘they will never like you, they will never trust you.’ And Tai'gee said ‘They are not here to play.’ And then that man, that dead man... Now I see – now I *know* – what humans want.”

Kaija looked down at the rope in her hand again. “Animal blood and human blood, they are just alike. I did not know that either.”

It was more than Tai'gee had ever heard Kaija say at one time in all the years that she had known her. The dark haired teen looked sadly at her dearest friend, devastated that she saw herself as a monster.

Kaija drew in a deep breath. She focused her attention back on her circle. She halfway glanced at Xena and offered an awkward smile. “I have to watch my trap, see if it works – just like they do. They will be getting tired soon, their knees will be getting wobbly, their heads will be sagging. It is their own trap and they cannot think how to get out of it.”

“But you know they can't get out of it Kaija. They're doomed like that,” said Xena carefully.

“Yeah,” the girl smiled with sad pride. “They set traps perfect for the animals – the men set the traps, the animal gets caught. The men set the traps, the animal gets caught. Only, look. The men are caught, so what am I?” Golden eyes focused again, sparking darkly. “There is not a word for me! I am a – I am a – a –” Kaija shook her head unable to finish her sentence. “I am a creature,” she finished weakly. With a look of vengeful determination, she started to give the rope a good yank.

“Kaija no! Listen,” Xena moved right to Kaija, closing the distance between them in moments. “Just listen to me for a minute.” Kaija slackened her rope. ‘Good,’ Xena thought. “You are what you let yourself be. You have a physical body like all the rest of us, and yes it’s a little different. But it’s what you feel inside and what you do outside that decides if you are animal or human. You would be much more than human if you let them go and came with us.”

“They will come back, like Tai’gee said. She has kept them from coming back for me. Now I can do it myself.”

“And then more will come. And more after them. That’s all that ever comes of killing; it’s a circle that keeps going round and round; as long as you keep fighting, more people are going to keep coming to fight. It won’t ever stop. You’ve got a chance to make it stop. You can end it – starting with them.”

“Why them?” With a sardonic look she asked, “If that was full of deer would it matter to you? You mind Tai’gee killing the man, but not when I kill the deer. That was – ‘impressive.’”

Xena bit the inside of her cheek. ‘Gotta watch what you say warrior – mince words with a sphinx’ kid and get them thrown back at you like dart points.’

“Killing is bad when it is unnecessary – unwarranted – uncalled for. We need to eat, but we don’t kill more than that just because we can. Not good people, not honorable people. You’re comparing yourself to the wrong humans; these men think with their weapons and greed, not their heads or their hearts. But there are many more people than them in the world. What about the people in the village, about Tai’gee? She said you wanted to go to school with them – do you think you would ever get that chance as long as they’re afraid of you? You and Tai’gee will have to keep your friendship a secret forever, with her risking her life to sneak out here and see you. Is that what kind of life you want?”

Kaija faltered. She put her head into her free hand. “I just want to be like everyone else.”

Xena saw her chance. She put a comforting hand on the girl’s shoulder and spoke as gently as she possibly could.

“We are going to try to make you be liked by everyone else, which is better. ...If you’ll let us.”

Here the woman reached out her other hand for the rope in Kaija’s hand, reached for permission to help. Kaija didn’t stop Xena as she reached over farther, letting the woman cautiously, and gingerly take the rope. The sighs of relief from the men were audible. Tai’gee smiled tearfully beside a grinning Gabrielle. Quickly, before Kaija could change her mind, Xena pulled her chakram and launched it at the rope that tied the men together. The circular weapon whistled through the air, cut the ropes like a knife through a spider’s thread and whizzed back to its owner’s hand before the men realized they had been freed.

“Don’t go anywhere boys,” called Xena coolly. “We aren’t done with you yet.”

~

It wasn't hard for Xena to convince the men from Kaija's trap to gather their partners dangling in various positions throughout the woods and promise never to return to Cresca. In fact, the men were quite willing to concede to whatever Xena would have suggested they do.

"You should have had them jump around like monkeys for a while – make real asses out of them, before letting them go," Tai'gee pouted. "Maybe that would have taught them a thing or two."

Xena paid little attention to Tai'gee's remark. She finished coiling a piece of rope, then picked up the last length and began coiling that one.

Gabrielle, on the other hand, tried to take the opportunity for reasoning. "And what good would that've done? If anything it might have changed their minds about leaving, then we'd've had to start all over again."

"Well I would've enjoyed it."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. Some people were just no reasoning with, she decided.

The dark warrior shouldered her coil of rope as she leaned on Gabrielle's shoulder, a beatific gleam in her eyes, and spoke lowly into her friend's ear. "What I should have done is let those guys know that if they'd all sat down they'd've been just fine."

"What?" exclaimed the bard.

"Oh yeah – as long as they'd done it at the same time, they could've knelt down, cut the ropes, untied themselves and walked away without breaking a sweat. Think they'd appreciate knowing that?"

Fine blonde hair swayed in amusement, and green eyes closed while she chuckled quietly. "I think," Gabrielle said, "that you are a troublemaker."

"What – *me*? Would you prefer they jumped around like monkeys?"

"I'd prefer that you didn't tease the... uhm..."

Xena smiled slightly as she sauntered off, letting her arm drop heavily from Gabrielle's shoulder as she swaggered away. "Now who's the troublemaker?"

Gabrielle smiled as she watched the last of the hunters skittishly enter the woods; a middle aged man with nothing particularly distinct about him. 'Just a man out to try his luck.' She shook her blonde head. Since he was the last she predicted he'd come alone – if he'd had anyone he cared even a little bit about he would've hurried off to go find him. 'Just a man out to try his luck by

himself...I wonder what that means about his life.’ Maybe he was a desperate husband looking for some way, anyway, to find money for his destitute family. Maybe he was a rogue bachelor with no one to look after, nothing to lose against an appealing challenge. ‘Well, or so he thought. He was certainly about to lose a great deal just a few minutes ago.’

Without the hunters and their clanking weapons and grumbling mumblings, all around them was quiet. Not a peaceful, comfortable quiet, but an unsettled, disturbed quiet – birds and other animals were waiting for it to be ok again for them to sing. The grassy cliff where they stood as they regrouped, lazily baked in the late afternoon sun, the tufts of grasses glowed red in the lengthening sunlight. The rock Kaija had been sitting on was now occupied by a couple of basking lizards, silent, watchful but overall unconcerned. Above, a couple of red tailed hawks coasted over, just as watchful and unconcerned.

“So now what?” the blonde asked.

“Now we go back to what we were doing – find the children.” Xena tossed her coil of rope aside and turned to survey their position. They were one short. “Where’s Kaija?”

“What, again?” ‘This is getting old,’ Gabrielle groaned. As one, the warrior and bard looked to Tai’gee.

“Why do you two expect me to know where she is every moment?”

“Because you’re the one who would.”

“This is typical for her. She does this, she goes off, then she comes back.”

“She just went off,” Xena said, “or did you not notice the twenty men she almost killed.”

Thin shoulders lifted in a nonchalant shrug. “Maybe she went to make sure they actually leave.”

Xena frowned and physically swallowed her frustration. The truth was they didn’t know what Kaija was out there doing or not doing; they didn’t know what she wanted to do; they couldn’t even say they were sure what she was capable of doing. The blonde bard beside her watched the warrior grind her teeth and picked up on Xena’s train of thought. “She’s just had her understanding of the world ripped to pieces. Now’s not a good time for her to be alone I don’t think.”

“That doesn’t bother you?” Xena eyed Tai’gee. The dark haired teen had been moodily standing off to the side ever since Xena had released Kaija’s captives. The willowy length of her body was rigid and defensive, much like when they had first met her. “You saw her leave,” Xena breathed.

Tai’gee lifted one thin eyebrow ever so slightly, and shot Xena’s irritation through the roof. “What is your problem, Tai’gee?” she demanded, coming very near to shaking the girl.

“My problem is how you do your business,” the teen snapped back. “My problem is you letting a bunch of killers go without punishment, without even an example of what will happen if they return. You’re my problem Xena – you trust in mind games too much.”

“You don’t think having the girl they were hunting catch them and dangle their lives in front of them like a toy didn’t scare the Hades out of them?” Gabrielle watched the girl’s face for response. As expected, the teen was unimpressed. “You wanted Kaija to kill them?”

“I wanted them to die, yes,” she admitted without delay. “They wouldn’t have hesitated; they weren’t hesitating, that’s why they were here in the first place.”

“I don’t believe you’re really that blood thirsty, Tai’gee. Especially to want your best friend to commit murder.”

“I could’ve done it. You could have. I can’t believe you honestly think they won’t come back!”

“Ok, let’s do this your way,” Xena bullied in. “We kill them. We kill them all. No one’s coming back from the hunt – then another man comes to find his missing brother, a son comes looking for his missing father, a town comes for its missing children, a legion comes for its missing captain. And they come looking for us because we killed them all.”

Tai’gee looked down and away.

Xena continued. “Now we do it my way. We send twenty plus hunters streaming out of these woods, running for their lives and telling everyone they pass to stay out or die... You think on that while we go looking for your friend – again.”

“Xena.”

“What?” Arctic ice blue eyes turned sharply to the interrupter of her tirade.

“Maybe we should just wait...you know...for her to come back.”

Thinly arched eyebrows lifted with offended surprise. “Why do you think we should wait Gabrielle? You do realize that there’s an unstable, half animal prowling around out there capable of doing the gods only know what?”

“She is not an animal, you pretentious bacchai spawn!”

Thinly arched eyebrows lifted higher. “That’s a new one.”

Greatly affronted, Tai’gee drew her throwing knives with practiced dexterity, shot them at her antagonist, and smoldered all the more as she watched her previously invisible knives materialize harmlessly in Xena’s hands. The warrior caught the projectiles with even greater practiced dexterity, flipped them indolently, and slung them back to be buried to the hilt by either foot of their original owner. A smug smirk from full lips lacked any sort of humor. “Next time try not

to roll your wrists over so much; they'll go faster that way. Why should we wait Gabrielle? I'm getting a little antsy being around all these homicidal teenagers."

"Really Xe, how're we going to find her?"

'Hm...true.' "Fine. I'm going to go find the rest of our gear. We can make camp here for tonight."

~

The forest ignored Kaija as she meandered through the deepening shadows; it had had enough interruption for the day and refused to be concerned about its top predator's presence. She appreciated that: the tree frogs' screeches, and quails' chits, and crickets' gree-gree-grees, the sporadically energetic rustlings of foraging wood rats, and the stretching of great, powerful wings overhead as the flying hunters awakened were her music and solace. Taking a deep breath she smelled water, moist and static air, and expected a storm sometime that night. Above her the sunlight flickered in and out of building clouds, glimmered brokenly through the canopy; the brightness and darkness played about the treetops to make them look like torches or candles, light, shade, glitter, glow, dim, dimmer, sunset.

Golden eyes cut to a sound sensitive ears picked up from a nearby bush, delicate nose identified a nesting hen as yet unaware that her death could be only one pounce away if she didn't stop moving at once. No babies, not the season for them.

*"If you're in a dire situation, eggs will do. You won't like them, but they can be good for you; better if there's actually something grown inside already. More meat that way."*

*"Pawpaw, Tai'gee does not eat like we do. She says she likes her food cooked."*

*Broad brow furrowed. "Everything has its preference. Perhaps you might like some things –" a disgusted shiver – "cooked. Most every good thing likes its food as it is though, fresh pulled or fresh killed; you should wonder about that."*

*"Tai'gee is good."*

*"She is a villager; that raises questions on its own."*

'But no one questions her. No one questions these creatures I pass. I am questioned. I am a question.'

Kaija shuddered in the evening breeze and moved closer to denser foliage, using it as a windbreak. She did not like to feel the wind blowing against her; she felt she was being touched by something invisible, without her permission or control. 'No one questions the wind. I am a question and cannot even answer myself.'

'You are half sphinx; you could come up with an answer.'



The deep, sultry voice was so obvious, so real, and yet the forest continued on as though nothing had been said at all that would warrant disturbance. But the voice was real, she had *heard* it. Or maybe she hadn't, maybe she'd thought it – it was a familiar voice, the voice of her instincts; her Pawpaw had already explained to her they'd talk to her. But they hadn't talked to her like this before, this was new. All of the past week her instinctual voice had not instructed her so much as it usually did with when to strike, when to wait, when to run; now her instincts talked to her about things, like a conversation in her mind. It encouraged her, questioned, guided, and, she thought, taught her. *“Learn from yourself Kaija, you are going to be your best teacher.”* Perhaps this is what her Pawpaw meant.

‘There is only one of me,’ her mind’s voice replied.

‘Then there is your answer.’

Outwardly the space between her eyes pinched together in thought. ‘You are not satisfied with your answer,’ said the voice.

Bright golden eyes had been reduced to a slim rim in the darkness so that dark pupils could absorb as much light as possible; there was no moon yet, so there was little light. Ears picked up what eyes could not. ‘Listen to you instead.’ Obediently Kaija closed her eyes and studied herself. The very first thing she noticed was a burning in her chest, mild but insistent; her first thought was to ask Tai’gee what it was, and the burning wavered; she remembered Tai’gee was with Xena, and the burning reinforced; ‘Xena and the hunters,’ and the burning inflamed. She ground her teeth against it and her eyes opened to what an observer would easily identify as a glare. ‘What is that? What is the burning that changes with who I think of?’

‘You know the word; Tai’gee has used it many times.’

Kaija growled, and the world silenced.

‘You are angry.’

‘Angry.’ The burning hardened, and her lips pulled so tightly over her large, sharp teeth, that the dangerous canines peeked out. ‘What is that?’

‘Were you glad to see Xena let the hunters go?’

‘The burning was there while I watched them.’

‘What were you thinking as you watched them leave? Why are you angry?’

The growl deepened; the burning deepened; the stance deepened, Kaija lowered to her all-fours, seething and irritated. ‘It is not alright for them to come for me,’ she stated firmly to herself. ‘I want them to know that it is not alright for them to hunt for me.’

‘What do you want?’ the voice purred.

‘I want,’ the growl grew ‘them to know “I will kill them if they come for me.”’

A warm smile in her mind at the self-revelation. She realized she had ground the bark of a thick stick into sawdust as she thought and snapped the remainder in two as she spoke. The burning still festered within her breast, and the silent, wary forest only poked at it like a fire stirrer. She wanted to hit something or tear something – the stick wasn’t enough, she hadn’t been aware of that; she wanted the satisfaction of *knowing* she was destroying something and to see that register on the faces of others.

‘Go home.’

Kaija hesitated on the idea. This was her forest, and she wanted everything in it – right down to the worms – to know that. ‘Because I can destroy anything if I want to.’ She looked around. The quiet was being penetrated by one brave cricket, and its uneven and sporadic grees signified that even it wasn’t really sure it was safe yet. What could she expect of the cricket? They did not speak the same language, it was nothing she would ever eat – it was just a creature of the forest. How could the cricket help her? ‘It quiets when it does not feel safe. Either I am too loud or something else has scared it. That is helpful.’ And when she thought about it, everything in the woods had been her help, teacher, guide, and nourishment, so there was nothing for her to impress upon the forest or its inhabitants. But as things were at that moment was how the forest was supposed to be – no humans. They were the ones that disturbed everything; they were the ones who needed to know whose forest this was, and by whose rules life here would be lived by. Or else.

‘Go home.’

~

When there is nothing to do in the wilderness, the wilderness becomes an intimidating place. All other manner of creature has occupation, whether that be sleeping or burrowing through the dirt; but all Xena, Gabrielle and Tai’gee had to do was sit and contemplate. The night had long been set. They’d eaten of the mass of smoked venison Kaija had given them, arranged their two blankets for three sleepers, then scrambled to put up shelter as a cloud burst overhead. They had one small hide tent, much too tight for three people to sleep in, but a cramped space of dryness all the same.

“When the wind breaks, I’m going to rearrange this tent.” Xena sat back to the entrance, knees drawn up, and rubbed in oil to condition the leather strips encasing the hilt of her sword. She’d already smoothed the blade; that had only taken moments since she hadn’t used it for any great fight since she’d last sharpened it.

“I think Zeus might be trying to drown us,” said Gabrielle with weak humor. She wasn’t necessarily uncomfortable with silence, but she was with tension. She figured there was so much of it right then they didn’t really need the poles to hold up their tent. She would’ve liked to

spend some time writing, but she never did when it rained – it was too risky that her parchment would be destroyed. So she'd pulled out a needle and some thread, and busied herself with repairing her skirt while she sat, stewing in the tension.

Tai'gee, of course, sat doing nothing more than pick at the tattered hem of her long skirt. She wasn't sleepy, and even if she was there wasn't room enough to stretch out, or even curl up, and entertain the state of sleep. This was her second night camping with the warrior duo, and she was neither impressed with, nor particularly appreciative of, their overnight arrangements. In short, she was bored. Had it been just herself and Kaija, or even if Kaija had been with them – somehow – in the mouse hole of a tent, she would have had some measure of entertainment. She wasn't sure what of though – dark eyes peered up to search through her memories of the dark nights the two friends spent together. There hadn't been anything in particular that they'd done to pass the time; nothing specific came to mind to explain why Tai'gee enjoyed camping with Kaija so much, other than the mere fact that Kaija was there. 'Where is she now I wonder... She's probably made it back to her den by now; hope so with all this rain.'

At that point in Tai'gee's thoughts, Xena decided the wind had calmed enough to her liking to perform her promised rearrangement. Without ceremony or warning, the warrior stood up, and swiped the tent aside with one arm, sending a spray of water right onto her companions. "Hey!" the teenager shouted at the indignity; Gabrielle just gathered their things and stood back while her partner did her thing. Rearranging, it turned out, meant instead of having the tent pitched on both sides, Xena thought it would be better to set it up like a lean-to. She positioned the taller end of the lean-to under a giant, shading fig tree, and left the lower end to stick out from this canopy and usher the run off away from the occupants. Since the rain wasn't blowing in sideways and swirlways anymore, there wasn't a need to worry about having only a roof now and no walls. The fig had done an excellent job keeping the ground beneath it dry, and Gabrielle spread their blankets without fear of water seeping through as they lie on them. 'And now we *can* lie on them!' thought the blonde with a measure of satisfaction. Xena pounded down the last stake with a sizeable rock, then motioned her campmates back underneath. "Welcome to our humble abode," she deadpanned.

It was a fairly narrow set-up, but much longer than the space they had. Gabrielle scooted down so her feet were nearest the low end of the lean-to, Tai'gee followed suit, and they both laid straight while Xena, being much taller, worked her feet down between the two of them and had her head almost sticking out from under their shelter. "No one's allowed any bad dreams tonight," the warrior said and she shrugged her shoulders to get a bit more comfortable, "there's no room for tossing and turning." Gabrielle laughed a little, and content as she was, reached a hand up to hold Xena's shin before wishing her goodnight. "Night," the warrior grunted back. Tai'gee rolled to her side and stared out into the sodden darkness, admittedly more comfortable, but no less awake.

'Nothing prowls around in the rain' the teen thought idly, 'Kaija won't be out in this.' What really bothered the teen however was the fact that she knew Kaija wouldn't have let her spend an unguarded night in the woods, especially in the rain. 'She's left me here. She's never done that before.' Of course, Kaija could be assuming Tai'gee would be fine in Xena and Gabrielle's

company, or maybe that they'd all gone back to the village; but it was unlike Kaija not to make sure one way or another. 'I wonder what she's thinking about that's made her forget me.'

~

Kaija wasn't thinking, she was telling. She'd been surprised enough to come back to her den and find it swarming with village children, but it didn't stop her from pouring her story out to her father while the youngsters played and dawdled about. They pulled her fingers while she explained the bounty on her head. They asked her to play while she described the fights for her life. They wanted stories while she wanted justice. "They are looking for the children, Xena and Gabrielle. They will not leave until they find them."

The great Sphinx listened quietly. He was particularly interested in Kaija's little trap but he did not let her know that. Instead, he asked the children to settle down. He studied his daughter: she was angry and uncertain, and he was neither pleased nor unhappy to see it – 'it is good she is learning just what danger and threat are, that will serve her. But. My daughter is in danger.' "Bring them here."

The trek back to find Tai'gee and the warriors was difficult for Kaija. She didn't like to go out directly after it rained; the ground was thick, slick and finding spongy moss or patches of grass or rocks to step on in an effort to strengthen and quiet her footing was practically impossible with the abstract appearance of the moonlight. Her father's den was in no easily accessible place, even for a knowledgeable and skilled hiker, and sodden ground seemed to make the trekking field level between her and any other humans that would be moving through the forest. She was unhappy with everything, with how everything was going; she was unhappy that everything seemed to focus around her but she had no control of any of it. There was too much instruction, too much information, too much variance coming from this person compared to that person, compared to her father or what her friends said, so that she really wasn't sure at all what she was supposed to do. She had an urge to do something, many urges actually but while she knew the urges were there, she had no idea what they were for. It was worse than waking up to a perfect afternoon after a long nap, being over-energetic and entirely directionless; bored and restless – could there be a worse state of being?

'Nap. I would like to sleep,' the young teenager thought as she trudged on. She brushed by a sapling maple, reaching limber, wiry branches wide from its spindly trunk, and fat rain droplets sprinkled down from its broad leaves to pat loudly on the not quite over-soaked ground beneath it. 'I like that sound,' the half sphinx decided, and deliberately brushed by another tree and another, just to hear the rain fall, to make it fall. 'What else can I make happen?' She spied a particularly low branch hanging across her path, and sprang onto it, jumped on the drooping limb and made a minor cloudburst of droplets, much to her satisfaction. The tree bark was slick however so she couldn't stay in her elevated position or risk falling off. She carefully brought herself back to the ground, took a deep breath of moist earth and night air and started on her way again.

When she'd left the bantering crew as they released her entrapped men, Kaija hadn't really meant to wander – it just sort of...happened. She was thinking, and when she'd paused from that

she realized she'd gone quite far indeed, and there was really nothing for it but to keep going. She hadn't really wanted to go back as she thought more about it, she was sure she'd have to explain why she'd left in the first place and she wasn't altogether certain. Just to move. She didn't really want to see her trap foiled; she wanted to see it work; or, rather, to see if they would have figured out her simple exit. That was what she'd really wanted, for them to find her exit. She'd left them a way out, purposefully, unlike any of the traps set by them for her or any of their other intended targets. She had wanted them to escape. But Xena had let them go. She'd cut them loose. She freed them. No one had freed her from a trap, but Xena got all of them out because... 'Because why?'

'She did not try to help you with the other hunters, did she?'

Golden eyes jerked up to focus on her internal voice, she stopped in her tracks so she could hear it better.

'She let you fight alone and bring that hunter to her.'

'She let him go, too.'

'You had him. He was yours, you caught him, you caught the others, and she let them all go.'

'The other hunters kill what they catch.'

'There are two kinds of hunters: the ones that kill to eat and the ones that kill for sport. There is no one here to kill you for food.'

'Xena let them all go.'

'Xena is not here for food.'

'She is here for the children.'

'She needs you to get them.'

'I am going to take her to them.'

'Be careful she does not trap you.'

'Me?'

'Be careful of what is yours, your catches, your friends, your family. She is not here for food.'

'She is a hunter who is not here for food.'

'There are other traps than ones with spikes and nets. She has other traps, she will use other bait.'

‘I do not kill for sport. What I said before – ’

‘You kill for survival. You must.’

‘Survival.’ The word felt right in her mind and body.

‘She will endanger you. She will not save you. She will not save Tai’gee.’

‘Survival.’

‘You must protect what is yours. You must survive.’

The moon shone bright and briefly through a break in the thick clouds, and glowed a soft white on Kaija’s hard face. Then it vanished for the rest of the night behind unrelenting clouds of tumult.

## VI

“I found the children.”

She reunited with the bedraggled group close to noon the following day, finding them sitting idly in the same place she’d left them, a little damp but overall no worse for the wear. They’d asked her how she was, where she’d gone, as she had expected, but “I found the children,” was all she offered as explanation. Kaija noted that the offering placated any further questions into her wellbeing or whereabouts. She stiffened even more. “Pawpaw has had them for many days. He said they are abandoned. Not stolen. They are in our den.”

“Why don’t you take us to them,” Xena ventured. She earned an ironic grin for her request.

Kaija was very subdued as she led them through the woods to her father’s cave. Tai’gee walked beside her friend, quiet as well, but Gabrielle noticed the older girl sneaking glances at her younger friend every so often. Gabrielle felt sad for them; even though Xena had been able to talk Kaija into sparing the lives of those trapped men, the death of Kaija’s innocence was much more profound to the young blonde.

‘I remember when I realized I didn’t belong in Potedia,’ she thought. ‘It was a very lonely feeling. And even though Lila was there and loved me, she could never quite understand how hard it was.’ She took a breath as she stepped over a high root in the path. ‘But, it was one thing not to belong in a little village – to suddenly realize you don’t even know what manner of being you are, to realize you may be the only one of your kind in all the world... I don’t know how I might handle that if it were me...’

“You’re going to chew your lip off if you keep worrying it like that,” Xena purred into her friend’s ear. The sudden interjection into Gabrielle’s thoughts startled the petite blonde.

“Oh Xena! I was just thinking about all this... Kaija’s got to be going through a lot right now.”

Xena hummed in agreement but kept her thoughts to herself for the moment. She had been thinking the same thing, though not as deeply as Gabrielle. She was more concerned with what they were going to do with both Kaija and Tai’gee once the children were returned to the village and the whole charade was exposed. With Thalkus’ expansive advertisement of Kaija’s attractive challenge, her ‘target’ status wouldn’t just evaporate. And given how protective Tai’gee was of her friend, Xena imagined the older of the two would become a world class assassin in a matter of moons if the intrusion persisted at this rate. She didn’t want that life for either of them.

“I’ve never met a sphinx before,” said Gabrielle. “It’ll be interesting I think – it doesn’t sound like he’ll be happy to hear about all of Kaija’s adventures these last few days though...”

“No, I don’t think so at all. Sphinxes tend to be eccentrically single-minded, Gabrielle – they have one goal, one interest in their lives. Cerebrius’ seems to be Kaija. We’re going to be in a cave with a very, very big creature we already know has no qualms killing anyone he sees as a threat to his daughter.”

“What’s your point?” Gabrielle asked with wariness, and though she tried to keep accusation out of her tone, she was not altogether successful. She had worked very hard to prove that she could manage being on the road with Xena, not just to herself and observing skeptics, but also to the Warrior Princess herself. The dark haired warrior tended to jump towards protecting Gabrielle from, well everything – often unfairly depriving her of the chance to stand up and defend herself, the blonde thought. “I’m not a little kid Xena, I can take care of myself,” was a very common argument between them.

“I’m just saying that with Cerebrius, Kaija and Tai’gee *and* all those kids there’s going to be a lot to pay attention to. No time to ponder the mysteries of the sphinx.”

‘Ah... phew... it wasn’t that old argument again.’ Gabrielle sighed mentally. Xena was just reminding her to keep her intrinsic curiosity in check. “I guess if he’s warned Kaija about us – and you especially – then we probably won’t exactly be welcome company huh?”

“Not at all. I’m really hoping Kaija has explained things to her father and can just go in and walk out with the kids in tow – that we won’t even have to be a part of the whole affair.”

“Well, why would we need to be? There’s no need for us to introduce ourselves.”

Azure eyes looked skyward. “Something’s not adding up,” she said stopping in the pathway. “Something still doesn’t make sense.”

Gabrielle turned to face her. “Aries is an asshole. He used Thalkus to get you here by taking the kids. Cerebrius has the kids Thalkus abandoned because he thinks the village doesn’t want them. We’re here to get them back, make the world a better place and throw it in Aries’ face.”

“No, that’s just it. Aries is an asshole but he’s an asshole with an agenda. Thalkus said Aries took those kids, Kaija said Cerebrius hasn’t been out of his cave – that means Aries *took* those children *to* Cerebrius. Now why would he do that?”

Gabrielle chewed on that question for several moments, resuming a ponderous stroll along the trail. “Hmm... yeah... Thalkus wants Kaija dead... Well, given how aggressive Cerebrius is where Kaija’s concerned, maybe dumping all those kids on him would keep him too distracted to protect his daughter, making it easier for Thalkus to get Kaija killed.”

Xena shook her head, discarding that theory immediately. “No, Cerebrius was already out of the way – it sounds like he’s bed ridden. Kaija’s been wandering the woods on her own all this time, bringing him food every so often and checking on him.”

“Do you think Aries could have made some larger deal with Thalkus? He did say he’d kill Cerebrius for him if Thalkus took care of Kaija.”

“No...” The answer was close, Xena could feel it floating just outside of her awareness, and it infuriated her to be on the edge of understanding, but on the edge none-the-less. “Thalkus has nothing to offer Aries. Nor does anyone else in that village.”

“So...we’re going to have to ask Cerebrius.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

‘Ugh, this is just got *really* messy.’ Gabrielle mused, tucking an errant lock of blonde hair behind her ear.

~

When Tai’gee noticed Xena and Gabrielle had fallen back out of earshot behind them she decided to try to talk to Kaija.

“You know, it was really a good thing that you let those men go,” she said tentatively. She bit the inside of her lip when Kaija didn’t respond but persisted anyway. “When all this is over, you’ll be able to show everyone how merciful you are. How you could have killed but didn’t.”

Kaija mumbled that it didn’t matter. “So now they think I will not hurt them, and they will come back because they think they can get away.”

“Well, then we’ll leave – go somewhere they can’t find us.”

Kaija shook her head definitively. “I am not leaving my Pawpaw, and he is not leaving here.”

Tai’gee had forgotten Kaija’s increasing reports that Cerebrius was staying in their den more and more, and that Kaija now brought him food because he no longer came out to hunt for himself. She hadn’t seen Cerebrius since she was a child, since he’d killed her father really. To be exact,



she hadn't seen him up close since then: Tai'gee had hidden whenever Cerebrius had come nearby while she and Kaija played, and if she ever went to their den, she waited on the topmost ledge over the entrance so she could be sure Cerebrius couldn't see her. She had considered that the great sphinx could probably smell Tai'gee's scent on his daughter whenever she returned home, and Kaija assured her that her father knew of her and their friendship, but Tai'gee had decided years earlier there was no need for her to test Cerebrius' memory or tolerance.

The older girl sighed heavily, her desperation beginning to weigh on her. "What are we going to do Kaij'? I mean, we're in trouble here."

Kaija shrugged, continuing on her way with no indication of interest. Tai'gee let her go, falling back to walk by herself until Xena and Gabrielle caught up to her.

"How much longer till we get to this cave?" asked Xena.

"A few more miles. It's pretty difficult to get to," answered Tai'gee absently. Gabrielle asked her what was on her mind, though she knew full well of what – or rather, of whom – the young woman was thinking.

"She won't talk to me," she said sadly. "She's never just ignored me. This is all my fault." Her voice hitched on a sob but she clamped down on her emotions, determined not to let them through. Mid-stride she swooped down to grab a stick from the ground and began hitting trees with it as she passed.

"This isn't your fault," Xena attempted to assure her. It didn't seem to make any impression on the girl however; either she was still mad at Xena about other issues, or she just didn't believe her. So the warrior looked to her companion for help. 'Come on bard, here's one of *those* chats for you, all lined up and ready to be handled...'

Gabrielle quickened her pace to keep up with the brooding teenager. "It's no one's fault you know. Not really – well Thalkus maybe, but even still..."

Tai'gee's stick broke on a particularly hard strike.

"Look, you can take the blame if you want, not that it'll do any good for anybody. How is it your fault that Kaija didn't understand? You couldn't make her understand, you can't make anyone understand. People only hear when they're ready to."

Tai'gee relented finally, tossing the remaining broken end into the forest. "I just think this all could have been handled so much better."

"Maybe," Gabrielle said obligingly. "But Kaija's got a lot of really hard lessons to learn – no matter how she learns them it's going to be difficult, and probably painful. I mean – and don't take this the wrong way – you say she's your best friend –"

"She is."

“But does she know what that means?”

Gabrielle could see Tai’gee’s first reaction was to insist Kaija did, but the bard was proud to see her new young friend hold back to think about it. “I’m not sure,” the young woman admitted with a tired sigh.

Gabrielle let that hang between them for a space before continuing. “You’ve known her for almost her whole life, but I think everything she’s learned so far – every significant experience she’s had – has fallen in the realm of her instincts. She’s only worked with those animalistic responses and reactions – she understands things as a sophisticated animal might. Now she’s coming to a point where she’ll have to work with emotions and concepts that are totally foreign to those instincts. She can’t do that until she’s ready, no matter how you handle it.” Gabrielle placed a supportive hand on Tai’gee’s shoulder. “You can only be there for her and help her as she comes to every step.”

Xena watched all this in fascination. ‘Damn she’s good.’ She smiled affectionately at her friend but Gabrielle didn’t notice. ‘She has a gift, and thank the gods she’s learned how to use it like she has.’

“Xena and I are here to help, too – both of you.” Tai’gee felt herself warming up to Gabrielle’s genuine sincerity. She appreciated Gabrielle’s gentle green eyes and matching touch. And despite her spat with Xena the day before, Tai’gee found herself moving from willing adversary to begrudging comrade with the Warrior Princess. Yes, Xena’s focused, cerulean gaze and razor analysis kept her on her toes, but Tai’gee couldn’t say she felt anything other than a dedicated compassion for them and their situation from the dark woman. It wouldn’t be fair of her to refuse to acknowledge that their appearance had brought Kaija more help – in some respects – than Tai’gee had expected.

Tai’gee released a heavy, healing sigh. “You know... she’s never told me she loves me.” She could feel tears prick her eyes at the admission, but ignored them. “Even when I tell her I love her. She just nods, like I had said ‘Thank you’ or something.”

Gabrielle smiled warmly at her. The girl’s dark eyes glistened like wet pebbles as they misted over wistfully. “She will come to understand Tai’gee – as long as you don’t give up. And it will be a wonderful day for both of you once she does.”

Tai’gee nodded, using the motion to help blink away her rebellious tears. “I know. That’s my biggest wish right now is for us to really experience a range of emotions, like good friends do. She keeps me warm at night when I sleep out here, holds me when I’m sad or scared, but she doesn’t really get it. I want her to. I think it will make her that much more powerful – I know it will.”

“Are you coming?” the girl of discussion called impatiently from far up the trail. “We will not get there before dark like this.”

“We’re coming!” Tai’gee called then started up the path in an appealing trot.

“Wait.” Xena stopped them all and beckoned Kaija to join them. The warrior took an appraising look around. The dropping sun glittered through the dense foliage and the denser places under the trees were already very dark. She’d heard Gabrielle’s stomach growling in the past hour which was another sign that it was getting late in the afternoon. “How far are we now from your home?”

“Many hours at this rate,” Kaija answered with catty irritation. Tai’gee twisted her toe against the fine, dry evergreen needles discarded seasons earlier, grinding them into trail dust. She found Kaija’s unfamiliar rudeness uncomfortable and embarrassing, but Xena seemed to ignore it.

“How far are we from the village?”

“Pretty far,” Tai’gee jumped in to answer. “We’re actually about on the far opposite side of the forest now. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking we should find a good place to make camp and just finish all this tomorrow.”

“That sounds good,” agreed Gabrielle readily. “Even if we make it to the cave it’s not like we’re going to leave with the kids in the middle of night and walk them through all of this in the dark.” Green eyes looked to Tai’gee and Xena for support. She avoided looking at the antsy, aggravated Kaija. “What do you say?”

Tai’gee looked at her suddenly twitchy friend. “Kaija?”

“We should cross the river first.” She turned on her heels and resumed her hasty hike. Xena watched her suspiciously.

“What’s up with her?” Gabrielle breathed in question on Xena’s back. The Warrior Princess shrugged then followed after her, keeping her senses peeled for anything telling. She had a familiar and uncomfortable tingle shooting up and down the top of her back.

~

“So when you left Potedia, when you were walking down that road after Xena, was there ever a moment when you thought to yourself ‘What am I doing?’”

Gabrielle seriously considered Tai’gee’s question, twirling her staff idly. “No…” she answered after several moments of reflection. “I mean I was spending so much energy on convincing myself I wasn’t afraid and the next thing that Cyclops dropped a cage on me. There was really just one thing after another, and in between *things* I was trying to process each situation. And getting to know Xena and Argo. I didn’t have time really to question myself until that landslide where I froze. I thought about what I was doing the whole way back to Potedia.”

Tai'gee nodded throughout Gabrielle's response. "So you've basically known all along that leaving was the right thing to do? I mean, if you never thought about it until that one time you must have been satisfied with your decision..."

Blonde hair waved rhythmically as Gabrielle shook her head no. "Don't confuse a flood of adventures with a well thought out, deliberate plan. I didn't have time to question myself – running away like that is the wrong way to go about it. I'd say I'm very lucky, having seen so many who acted on that same impulse and didn't make it."

The young bard snuck a glance at her inquisitive companion out of the corner of her eye. She knew Tai'gee had a mind to leave Cresca but the girl also wanted to find justification and support for her decision. "You shouldn't use someone else's experience to make your own decisions by." Gabrielle kept her tone mildly suggestive so Tai'gee wouldn't get offended or feel she was being lectured.

"I know," she answered flatly. "I'm just asking. It's not like I know what it's like out there."

"It's scary and uncertain."

"But you can be who you are—"

"Only when we're on the road – not when we come to a place where everyone wants to lynch Xena; and believe me there are more of those places than I really care to know about."

Tai'gee kicked a large rock in her path. Her expression was sullen, pouting. 'Come on Gabrielle,' said the bard to herself, 'you remember how much you hated when people told you how life away from Potedia wasn't for you – how angry and frustrated you got when Lila and Xena kept saying how the outside world wasn't all glamour and stories.'

The blonde studied Tai'gee's long dress. It was worn and dirty, tattered badly at the bottom from running constantly in the woods. Her dark hair was held back from her face in a long braid, but many errant locks refused to be bound. 'She doesn't belong in that dress,' Gabrielle decided. 'It doesn't fit who she is... and I think even if Kaija wasn't here, Tai'gee still wouldn't belong here.' In some ways this young woman was as strong, fierce, and independent as her feline friend.

~

"Hey Kaija, what's on your mind?" Xena had to call after the young girl tromping ahead of her as she tried to avoid running to keep up with the ground eating pace she was setting.

"My skull."

'Ask a sphinx a question, it'll take it as a riddle...' She'd learned that years ago, but it was a lesson she was finding difficult to apply to a sphinx as human looking as Kaija. The youth hadn't really used her sphinxyness yet to address either her or Gabrielle, this seemed new to the

warrior compared to their previous interactions. *Kaija's got to be going through a lot right now...* 'Maybe I can go with that.' "What are you feeling?"

"I feel nothing."

"Kaija, I'm just trying to talk to you. That's what friends do, they talk to each other – especially when they're upset about something. You have every reason to be upset about a bunch of somethings."

"Upset is a thing humans deal with. We have already established I am not one of those." Kaija's voice was bitter, but a brittle bitterness. Had she still been a warlord looking for strong recruits, Xena would know in that moment Kaija would've been ripe for the picking. 'Vulnerability is the easiest thing to appeal to if you want to pull someone over to a side they're not convinced they want to take; but prideful vulnerability requires more delicate handling.'

"You're at least half human, so I guess that means you can be at least half upset. I'd be pretty upset if I were you."

"You are not me. You do not know what I am so you can not know what I should be."

The brittleness stiffened, thickened, resolved itself into something more like fragility. Kaija's narrow pupils widened to oblong, just a little slimmer than ovals. The dramatic planes and angles of her face however hid anything else that Xena might look for in a smooth faced human for indication of emotion – her broad lips pulled so oddly against her large canines, a frown, for example, wouldn't be readily apparent. And the height of her cheekbones and the wide set of her eyes would also hinder a scowl. 'Talk about a blank slate. She'd be a great gambler.'

"I'm trying to help you; I want to understand; I just want to talk."

"I do not."

Xena took a deep breath, ordering her patience into place. She took another look around to give herself time to rein in her temper. 'The forest is getting denser,' she noted. That usually suggested a sustained source of water nearby, probably the river Kaija mentioned earlier. It was quite a pretty forest Xena thought – everything was green and vibrant, the terrain was pleasantly undulating, the canopy provided even shading. Cerebrius had claimed a very nice territory. It was a living forest, teeming with life, teeming with-

The Warrior Princess jerked around to see where Gabrielle was. She and Tai'gee were probably thirty yards behind them deep in conversation. She hissed at them, then waved her arm emphatically once she got Gabrielle's attention, directing them to hurry up. Gabrielle urged Tai'gee up the path to meet Xena. Worriedly, she asked Xena what the problem was as they reached her.

"We're not alone. Hurry up," was the only explanation the dark haired warrior gave before ushering them all down the path after their trotting friend.

As they caught up to Kaija, they could clearly hear the sound of many people crashing through the woods, the intermittent shouts of a hunting party. Xena's trained ear picked up the sound of weapons clinking against each other as well as some plates of armor. There wasn't enough metal sounding to be any well armed army or outfitted militia – those that had gear took it, and anyone else grabbed what was available. Realizing the party was for them, they all together broke into a run, fleeing down the path.

Suddenly they burst into the sunlight as the forest came to an abrupt end. A sizeable river roiled in front of them at only twenty paces. Their path led right to a bridge – or would have had the bridge not been washed out.

“You've got to be kidding!” Xena cursed as they skidded to a halt.

Tai'gee pointed upstream – “there's some stones up there where we can cross!”

But before they could turn for the crossing stones, the mob plunged out of the forest cover, and spotted them immediately. Xena and Gabrielle instantly pushed Tai'gee behind them, who pushed Kaija behind her as they turned to face the crowd. Only a few weren't men from Cresca – Patrach was among them Xena noticed, brandishing a peasant's bow. He stepped forward pointing an accusing finger at their small party.

“There! Just as Thalkus said! Give her to us Xena!”

“Uncle Patrach you shouldn't be here!” Tai'gee yelled over Xena's shoulder.

“You shut up girl,” Patrach yelled back. Anger made his voice thick and scratchy. “You've no business in this, but you can't see that for the spell put on you. Give up that demon!”

“Where's my boy, beast!” one man yelled, then other calls followed, and the mob pushed forward.

Xena started walking calmly towards them, hands out in a display of non-aggression. “I know you boys must be tired, after being out all day. Don't you think your wives'll be wondering where you are by now?”

“We told them we wouldn't come back till we had our children and this monster. Now hand her over,” demanded another gruff voice.

“No, I don't think I can do that. You see, she's helping us and we kind of appreciate it. I think you all should just go back to your homes and let us work.”

“Just like Thalkus said – she's got them under her power,” said Patrach as he turned a suspicious glare on them. “We can't trust them.” The mob shouted their agreement behind him and shook their weapons as they made another threatening surge. “Get them!”

Gabrielle tried to make herself heard over them. “We aren’t under any spell. Kaija’s helping us find your children. You’re mistaken –” but they weren’t listening to her even if they heard her.

“Run for the river,” Kaija hissed from behind her human shields.

“Kaija no,” refused Gabrielle over her shoulder, “if we can just reason with them...” She held her staff ready, body poised for battle, but she hadn’t yet given up on talking their way out of this. The group continued to push forward, and Gabrielle finally had to concede that they didn’t care for discussion. She could feel the anticipatory tension building in Xena’s muscles as they coiled in preparation.

And then, to all of their surprise, Kaija made a sound none of them had heard before. Turning slightly at first then whirling in shock, they saw Kaija crouched on all fours, fingers spread wide, teeth gleaming in a menacing splay of sharpness, eyes a sparking glower, the arrow point glowing at her chest. They all moved away from her, a primal, very elemental fear encouraged distance as the girl emitted danger in hot, raging waves. Her snarl changed to a low growl as she began easing forward in tense, energized steps. Tai’gee felt the hairs bristle on the back of her own neck.

“Kaija... don’t kill them,” she said in a whispered prayer more to herself than as a request of her friend. Xena and Gabrielle were at a momentary loss.

Kaija sprang at the mob, roaring as she charged forward, snapping and clawing as she bowled into the group. Like a rock thrown into standing water, the girl plowed through them, parting them into two dumbfounded groups before running up the sandy river shore then zipping into the trees. For a moment they all stared after her, then some took off in pursuit, screaming cheers, jeers and orders as they went. Patrach was among that group. The others, mostly the peasant farmers, looked back to Xena, Gabrielle and Tai’gee, confused, questioning. Those three spared only a couple more seconds of their own before pulling an about face and running in the opposite direction heading for the step stone crossing.

“Careful,” Tai’gee warned as she grabbed up her skirt and started across first. “They’re slime slick.”

Gabrielle went next, followed by Xena and all three tiptoed across the swollen river, arms waving for support. Xena hesitated when she was approximately a third of the way across, hearing the shouts of the mob get louder.

“Just get across the river,” Tai’gee yelled back to them. “They won’t dare cross it – it’s Cerebrius’ final border!”

Xena continued to wait, watching the tree line for Kaija. She didn’t think the girl would kill any of them – no, she *hoped* she wouldn’t; if Kaija got the chance she may very well take it. But given the size of the hunting party and the lack of time needed to establish a defensible position, Xena figured the girl shouldn’t have had a real opportunity to do more than lead them on a goose chase.

A moment later, her calculation was confirmed – the smaller, latent group that seemed too stunned to follow the others into the woods began running up the shore trying to cut Kaija off as she re-exited. They were too late however – Kaija exploded from the underbrush near the exit they had previously taken. In an impressive display of raw strength the girl powered up the beach, arms and legs flying in an all out, four-legged sprint. Her pursuers also burst from the cover, some colliding with the beach party, but all much slower than their prey.

Several tried throwing lances and bolas but none could get a steady bead on Kaija. One man employed a slingshot, grabbing large river pebbles as fast as he could and flinging them after the girl. He came close, but also couldn't hit the mark. When others started lining up their arrows, now free from interfering underbrush and branches, Xena yanked her chakram from her side and sent the shining, circular razor on a beeline to cut the arrows down, buying Kaija a few more steps. What the Warrior Princess hadn't yet noticed were the several men lining up to take shots at *her*.

Two arrows shot by her, one just missing her head, the other grazed her arm guard. "Son of a bacchai!" She couldn't turn around yet, not until her chakram completed its round, or it would become another weapon to dodge. She still had a couple more seconds before her precious weapon reached her outstretched hand and she chanced a glance to see that Kaija had started across the stones. Just as she caught the returning chakram, a huge, black object lobbed into her field of vision and promptly knocked her unconscious.

Gabrielle had turned just in time to see the rock slam Xena in the side of her head and she watched her partner drop uncompromisingly into the river. She screamed before she had a chance to compose herself and Tai'gee made a wobbly turn to see what had happened.

When Xena resurfaced she was already well on her way down the river with the swift current quickly pulling her farther out of reach. The cold water shocked her into wakefulness but, while her eyes were open, she still could not focus enough to orient herself towards a rescue. She sank again, swallowing a mouthful of water and only really noticed that Gabrielle was getting farther away.

A splash near her caught her attention and then something clamped onto the back of her leathers. She felt herself being drug through the cold waters. 'This current is too strong – I'll be over a fall in no time, if there is one,' she thought sluggishly. Instinctively she began trying to swim against the drag.

"Stop struggling," a half-drowned command wafted to her ears. Like a scolded child she froze, then realized someone was saving her. 'This is great,' she thought dizzily. 'And they don't want my help...'

Soon she felt a rough sandy bottom under her feet, then a couple pair of hands drug her up the river bank. 'I hate getting my leathers wet,' she grouched.

"What? Xena are you ok? Can you hear me?"



Gabrielle's seraphic, worried face blurred into view, and Xena tried to pull her head back to give them some distance. Her head banged on the ground in the attempt, and she gusted an unhappy grunt. "I'm fine," she muttered. After several moments of getting her bearings, Xena sat up stiffly and looked around with a squint.

They were on the opposite shore of the river, the mob had dispersed it seemed, and it was quickly becoming dusk. There was something else, a huge amount of splashing, like a struggle at the water's edge. Looking up, Xena watched Kaija and Gabrielle pull Tai'gee from the river and lie the unconscious young woman on the beach.

'Oh no,' she thought and Gabrielle said at the same time. Xena swayed badly as she made her way over to them, falling to her knees once she'd gotten close enough and sent a spray of sand everywhere.

"What-" she started to ask, but Gabrielle cut her off with a quick explanation.

"She jumped in to try to help you, but once her dress got wet it was too heavy and pulled her down."

Despite her lightheadedness Xena took two deep breaths then bent over the lifeless girl. She pinched her nose shut then covered Tai'gee's mouth with her own, blowing hard to try to replace the water with air in the girl's lungs. The warrior didn't have the stamina yet to keep going, immediately getting dizzy. Gabrielle took up the effort, pushing Xena aside. Bending over Tai'gee, she breathed then pounded on her chest as she'd seen Xena do for many others before. Again and again Gabrielle tried, but nothing changed. Tai'gee's ashen face retained a slight blue tint, her eyes closed. Gabrielle tried to ignore Kaija's desperate scrutiny and continued working, chanting mentally 'Come on, come on,' encouraging one of the breaths to work.

Soon Gabrielle felt herself exhausting and was getting no response. Kaija looked up from her worried watchfulness when Gabrielle sat back. Beleaguered, Gabrielle shook her head, not wanting to accept defeat but too tired to keep fighting. She looked first to Xena, tears welling in her eyes. Xena looked back at her groggily, sad. They both looked at Kaija.

"Dead?" the girl asked with a very meek voice.

The girl's usually wild mane sagged heavily around her face, soaked and dripping with river water. She stared back at them with wide golden eyes, waiting for an answer. Gabrielle couldn't find words, her mouth was dry and useless. Xena lethargically reached out to hold her friend's hand.

Kaija's head snapped up as if she heard someone shout her name. Gabrielle and Xena both looked around, startled, but saw and heard nothing.

"...said so-" Kaija started to say, then looked down at Tai'gee. "No..."

Kaija grabbed Tai'gee by the shoulders, shaking her – “Not dead, not dead!” Before Gabrielle could stop her, Kaija picked up her friend and threw the girl over her shoulder. The force of Kaija's broad shoulder jamming into her stomach did the job – Tai'gee coughed up the water in her lungs, took a ragged breath then coughed up more.

“Kaija, put her down! She's alive! Lay her down!”

But Kaija didn't listen to Gabrielle. She backed up with Tai'gee draped over her like a wet rug. “No,” she said distrust shining in her eyes. She looked between the two women on the beach as she continued to back up, her eyes settling on Xena finally. “It said – I said you would not save her. You cannot touch her.” With that she turned into the woods and fled, nimbly carrying her friend away.

Gabrielle hastily brushed some errant hair from her face as if that would help her to better understand what had just happened. She looked at Xena who had lain back down on the shore with another wave of dizziness.

“Xena, are you alright?”

“Yeah, just give me a minute.” She sighed. “Next time I try to go for a brisk dip while we're being chased by a bunch of crazed villagers, stop me ok?”

Gabrielle was glad Xena could attempt some humor, but she asked “what just happened here,” as soon as Xena had stabilized herself enough to sit up easily.

“My bet – Aries.”

A deeply wicked laugh reached out from the darkness of the woods. In the deepening evening there were only questionable shadows, any of which could be the nemesis Xena really didn't care to parlay with at the moment.

Once Aries had calmed his bellowing laugh to rolling, antagonistic chuckles he stepped smugly from the tree line, one hand resting on the huge hilt of his sword. “Xena, Xena, Xena... You know, you really shouldn't fall into rivers like that; you could drown.” Xena gave him a trite smile from her place on the sand, refusing to rise to his bait. He tisked in disappointment. “You can't say I didn't warn you; I did tell you to leave.”

“You did this you-”

“Ah ah ah, temper temper. I may have helped a little,” he smiled as he pinched his fingers together.

“Why?” Gabrielle demanded. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why not? I am the God of War. Kaija will make a great addition to my little legion.”

“So that’s it...” Xena fairly spat in disgust. It made sense now – ‘gave him the life of the cat-girl’ – he didn’t want her dead. “You can’t have her. I’ll stop you.”

“You can try, and I hope you do try. But that kid that just left, I’ve been in her mind Xena – you don’t scare her. You don’t scare her father either, and unlike some of your other opponents, he’ll make sure to protect his interests no matter the costs. She’s a lot like him that way... just doesn’t realize it all quite yet.” With a whistle Aries turned and the dismissing blue flame that accompanied his departure began to climb up his legs. Abruptly he turned back with a second thought. “Oh by the way, have you ever seen a cat turn man-eater? It’s quite scary. It only takes one kill really, just enough to get blood in the mouth. After that, the thirst is... unquenchable.” He laughed after forcing a dramatic shiver and disappeared leaving an uncomfortable silence behind him.

Xena pushed herself to stand up, cautiously testing her balance. Not feeling wobbly or dizzy anymore she went to the river to kneel and splash water on her face. “He’s been meddling in this from the beginning.” Gingerly she touched the place the rock had hit and lifted an eyebrow in approval. “It all makes sense now.”

“How is it?” Gabrielle came to stand by her friend, placing a supportive hand on the small of her back.

“I’ve got a nice knot but no broken skin.” She smirked, “probably shouldn’t do any running or heavy lifting for a while.”

Gabrielle smiled back. “Well, if Kaija were here you definitely wouldn’t have to. She pulled you across that river like she was swimming by herself, then went back for Tai’gee; I thought cats hated water.”

“Popular myth. I’ve seen many big cats go fishing just like bears. And don’t forget – she’s not all cat, despite Aries’ threats.” Xena looked towards the new patch of woods they would be trekking through. “Come on,” she said through gritted teeth. “We’ve got to find them fast before Aries makes more trouble. And keep her away from Cerebrius.”

~

Kaija sat quietly by the now sleeping Tai’gee’s side. She was afraid for her friend. Even though Tai’gee had awakened and told her she was ok, tired, needed to rest, Kaija was afraid to let her go to sleep again. “It all looks the same,” she said to herself. “How will I know?”

A man walked silently into the small clearing. Kaija didn’t know he was there until a pair of shining, black leather boots entered her peripheral vision. Jumping to a defensive crouch, she bared her teeth and hissed at the intruder. Her hackles rose as she stared into his dark, unreadable eyes, and she placed herself possessively over the body of her friend. The man raised strong hands in a calm, easy motion; the leather neither creaked nor cracked as it flexed with his obvious muscles.

Aries knew as a god he naturally possessed all the qualities that would make him virtually invisible, even to a creature as sensitive as Kaija. He lacked a smell, he could move with total silence and without displacing a feather floating past him if he wanted. Unlike a shade from the underworld that would be noticed by someone with Kaija's sensory acuity, he could even cloak the energy of his essence. Those advantages would get him close to Kaija, but they would also make him untrustworthy to her – at least initially. 'Time to gain some confidence.' He smiled charmingly and touched his deep, sonorous voice with tender compassion. "It's hard to know the difference between death and sleep, trust me I know. Sometimes a bloody, headless carcass is the only way to be sure."

Kaija was unmoved, tense muscles corded throughout her body. She lowered her head giving her eyes a very deadly expression.

Aries gestured to a small pile of wood off to the side with an open hand. "May I? You're going to need to keep her warm." A shot of fire flew from his open palm, igniting the wood to make a small and pleasant blaze. "Swallowing all that cold water like that opens a body up to sickness. I can show you what plants to use to help prevent that..."

"Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"Just relax. I'm a friend. I'm here to help."

"Tai'gee is my friend." Kaija eyed him warily. The man didn't move, kept his hands out to the side away from his body. His posturing suggested a willingness to let her lead, which she liked, and his voice was soft and soothing and...familiar... She looked down at Tai'gee – he had talked to her before about this very thing happening. "Wait. I know you. You are the voice in my head."

"Very good. You're a smart kid. My name is Aries. I've been watching you." He smiled warmly, then knelt in front of the two forms carefully and smoothly. At first Kaija looked like she was going to take a swipe at him to keep him away from her friend, but she checked herself and waited for him to get into a comfortable position, then backed off to sit on her haunches.

"You know you could have avoided this," he said as a point of fact.

"I know... If I had just stayed behind Xena like she said –"

"Listened to Xena! Are you kidding? Xena's the reason your friend is lying there. Xena's the reason you were ambushed – she'd already found out who was responsible for kidnapping the children and let him go."

"How do you know this?"

"Are you serious? There's a bounty on your head – Xena's stopped whole armies before, but she won't get rid of a bunch of measly treasure hunters and dispatch a lowly priest to help you?" He shrugged, "Tai'gee killed for you; she thought it was necessary," he pointed out while subtly

changing his voice to sound like Xena's had as they were on the cliff edge that previous day, gentle, reasonable. "Should make you wonder."

"But Xena... is supposed to be my friend."

"Friend? Have you forgotten everything your father taught you? You don't need friends. All this love and emotion – it only gets in the way." Arias swatted his hand like he was batting at an extremely annoying fly. "You can do anything you want – Xena's just holding you back. She'll get you killed, believe me."

"Why should I?"

"Tai'gee did."

"What?"

Arias forced a replay of a scene into Kaija's mind. *"I knew you would let him go!" screamed an angry Tai'gee. "You let him go so he can go back to the village, get re-stocked, tell everyone what he saw, and come back with more hunters."* Then he added something Kaija hadn't seen or known about: *"My arrows aren't very effective. I don't have the money to buy the better ones." The dark man stood before a wary Tai'gee, his black leather armor made the girl's thin, waify dress look all the more drab and inadequate. He waved his hand and a solid, massive bow appeared before her. "This might help some." "I can't pay for that." "You don't have to. Just use it, that's payment enough. I guarantee they won't walk away like they have been. You'll be able to protect your friend." Tai'gee crouched just inside the wood line, determination set into the lines of her face – she watched a man approach, fat and heaving, drew back the bow string with ease, and released...*

"She and I talked a few times. Anyway, this isn't about Tai'gee. It's about you and your future. That mob is still waiting for you. They want you dead, and if you keep listening to Xena, you will be. You were right up there on the cliff when you had all those hunters together – that mob would never have convened if they'd thought you'd kill them all. I felt your instincts – they were telling you what you should do and you let Xena talk you out of it. Don't forget your instincts kid. They're the only true friends you've got. Your father's taught you all this – how to look out for yourself, protect yourself, defend yourself. He's taught you that you're better than *any* human."

"How do you know my father?" the girl asked dubiously.

"We've talked... He thought I might be a good teacher for you one day. At least *I* would keep you alive."

“You taught Xena.”

“Yeah. I did a good job too. She’s relentless.”

“He told me to stay away from her...”

“Your father has great plans for you and so do I. He didn’t want you running into Xena before you’re ready to deal with her. Now you’re ready – and you’d better deal with her soon before it’s too late for you and your little friend. It’s your choice. You can call me anytime – you saw how helpful Xena was when you needed her. You’d be better off to get rid of her.”

Kaija sat quietly while she processed Aries’ words. Idly she played with a few strands of Tai’gee’s dark hair, twining it about her large, square fingers. “She will be getting sick?”

Aries smiled inwardly much bigger than his face displayed at the tentative question. “It’s a possibility. Sickness in the lungs, very hard to overcome.” Kaija put her head down, trying to decide what to do. Aries watched the effortful battle between the girl’s feline instincts to just drag her friend to some secluded place and keep her warm and dry and call it a day, with an emerging human awareness and insight into health and future and care for another person. “Tell you what, I’ll make sure Tai’gee here doesn’t get so much as a sniffle.”

“You can do this?”

“I have some connections. No problem at all – it’s just...”

“What?” Kaija was all interest, ears perked as far forward as possible. ‘Perfect,’ Aries purred to himself.

“It’s just, there’s not much point for me to do it if you keep Xena around and let her endanger you two. I mean, what’s the point in me saving your friend if Xena turns around and kills her anyway?...”

Kaija’s eyes narrowed dangerously and she moved closer to her friend, re-establishing her protective position. “No killing my Tai’gee.”

Aries smiled gently. “She says the same about you – that’s why I was glad to help her. I can help you, too. Listen to me, listen to your father. We’ll give you everything you need.”

~

Xena was right – Kaija didn’t take Tai’gee far into the woods. What really surprised her though was just how close the two happened to be to the main path. Kaija sat next to Tai’gee, mute and small. A fire crackled invitingly nearby, illuminating all of the cozy clearing. Gabrielle preceded the warrior into the space. Kaija didn’t look particularly concerned they had arrived.

“How is she?” ventured the petite blonde. She bent down to a crouch to get a better look.

Xena stepped cautiously up to the small group. Her senses tested everything around her, even the very darkness being held back by the firelight. She felt wrong here, that this place had been polluted or profaned somehow.

Kaija flagrantly ignored Gabrielle’s attempt at conversation. Tai’gee looked like she was resting peacefully. Naturally, Gabrielle reached out to brush the girl’s dark hair back from her face. As she reached across a sharp whir, a flash, and a cold hunk of metal grazed her outstretched fingers. Wide green eyes stared at the dagger now buried to the hilt in the path her hand had been taking. “Kaija,” she breathed in surprise.

“Do\_not\_touch\_her.”

Gabrielle was taken aback. She’d never been seen as a threat before, at least that she’d known. “Kaija, I’m not going to hurt her.” Xena could hear the true hurt in her bard’s voice, which made her bristle even more at Kaija’s actions. Kaija continued looking at the ground – or at least facing the ground; it was obvious the girl’s attention was covertly roving all around them.

Xena frowned. “We should see if we can get something for dinner,” she said flatly in an attempt to shift the focus.

“I suppose you want me to go do this.” Kaija’s accusing tone cut through the night air as sharply as her knife had.

Xena narrowed her eyes at the girl. “No, you can sit there like a lump if you want. Gabrielle-”

“I’ll wait here Xena.”

The warrior bit her tongue, then nodded before turning and stalking off into the night. Gabrielle doubted she would actually find anything, especially making as much noise as she was, but she suspected Xena wanted time to cool off and look around more than a good shot at dinner. Once the dark woman had left, Gabrielle decided to try her luck with Kaija again.

“Look – I know you probably got pretty scared back there, but everything’s ok now. Really.”

“Everything will be ok when you and she are gone.”

“What is this? Where is this coming from? We’re here to help.”

“You are trouble. You do not keep us safe.”

Gabrielle was at a loss. Xena had explained to her as they left the river that Aries had probably been interacting with Kaija, planting seeds of doubt and trying to mold the girl’s emerging self awareness into an image he wanted. “He wants Kaija, and I think he’s enlisted Cerebrius to help get her.”

“With the kids?” Gabrielle had asked doubtfully.

“No, I think the kids are either a shield to keep us from hurting either Cerebrius or Kaija, or the beginnings of Kaija’s own little army. Maybe both.”

“That’s crazy.”

“That’s *just* Aries’ style. Kaija loves kids, whether or not she knows it – that’s one of the things she is tuned toward protecting, just like her dad is of her. It would be so easy to get the youngest ones together and preach to them their subservience to her, and she’d walk right into the role of leading and caring for them – making me helpless.”

Gabrielle hadn’t liked the reasoning at first, but the more she mulled it, the more sense it made. Thalkus had just been a pawn, and, like always, Xena was Aries’ bait. Unlike their other encounters with Aries however, the God of War wasn’t focused on trying to get Xena back into his command – he seemed to be shifting his focus towards showing her up. “Xena – you don’t think Aries is trying to take you out... do you?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” she sniffed. A faint scent of wood smoke caught her attention and she directed Gabrielle towards it suspecting they’d caught up to their quarry. “I wouldn’t raise a hand to Kaija – what better adversary to pit against me.”

Gabrielle studied Kaija. The girl’s profile was rigid, practically seething. Which begged another question. “Why did you come back to us then?”

The girl shot her inquisitor a contemptuous look. “What?”

“If we’re such a threat, why did you come find us this afternoon? Why did you make it so easy for us to find you now? Why did you let us walk into your camp?”

“These are my woods – you leave.”

“Ok – give us the children and we’ll go.”

“No.”

“Then you’re stuck with us.”

Kaija stood up, retrieving her knife in one easy motion. Gabrielle felt a tendril of fear shoot up her spine seeing the weapon in the girl’s hand in combination with her cold countenance. Then her internal voice reminded her that Kaija didn’t need the knife to kill her; the girl was perfectly capable of doing that barehanded. ‘Still,’ Gabrielle swallowed in an attempt to resettle her nerves. As brave as she tried to look, she knew Kaija wasn’t deceived – and she was certain when the girl’s nose flared and a quick cut of her eyes and twitch of lips suggested she could smell the blonde’s fear.



The girl spoke plainly, slowly, providing no illusion to her antipathy. “You will not take them back to be hunters. If you try, I will stop you. *You* cannot stop me; this is why I do not run from you.”

With a fierce jerk of her wrist, Kaija threw her knife to a spot at the edge of the firelight, effectively pinning a squirrel to the ground and killing it instantly. Nonchalantly, the girl walked over to retrieve what would more than likely be her dinner.

Gabrielle was speechless. What could she say? Not only did Kaija know they wouldn't hurt her, she knew they were no match for her. Aries had gotten to the girl, that was quite clear, and he appealed to something in her that helped establish a very solid confidence and self-possession. Gabrielle could easily imagine she was looking at the next Callisto, and that terrified her. Feeling cold and vulnerable, Gabrielle slid back from Tai'gee, tucked her knees up to her chin, and waited for Xena to come back.

~

Xena hadn't, in fact, gone anywhere. Gabrielle, she was sure, wasn't aware of her presence, but she knew Kaija was – especially once Kaija threw the knife practically at the warrior's feet. When the girl came over to claim her kill, Kaija looked directly past the foliage shrouding Xena and straight into her eyes. The golden orbs were a sinister combination of confident challenge and intrepid condemnation. The girl picked up her kill cleanly, without taking her eyes from Xena's, then turned her back and returned to her place by Tai'gee's side.

The Warrior Princess looked to her own friend, who had removed herself to a position of solitude by the edge of the camp. The young blonde had just realized what Xena had. ‘We're in big trouble.’

~

Gabrielle couldn't help it; she was too tired to stay awake all night. Once Xena returned, the powerful warrior went straight to her bard, bypassing the still brooding Kaija and the still sleeping Tai'gee, and wrapped the small blonde in a secure embrace. Gabrielle was so grateful to have the strong arms encircling her, and having Xena so close that she could feel her breath on the back of her neck was all the comfort she needed to allow her body to relax and finally drift off into slumber.

Xena supported the heavily sleeping young woman against her, keeping a tight protective hold. It wasn't long however before the extended, exhausting hours of the day started weighing on Xena's own resolve to stay awake, and Gabrielle's easy, rhythmic breathing and soft warmth helped relax the warrior to a point that made wakefulness much more of a chore than she wanted to endure.

As she sat fighting her own weariness, Xena tried to think of what they were going to do – what they could do. Kaija obviously was no longer going to take them to the children. As long as the

girl remained passively hostile Xena felt like she and Gabrielle were safe, but there was no telling how long that passivity would last. Likewise, Kaija's maintenance of restraint suggested to Xena she wasn't entirely committed to Aries' path either. 'She must be trying to work something out, or many things,' Xena reasoned groggily. 'She must still be wondering about something. And what could that be?...'

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Kaija watched the warrior closely, and once Xena's eyes finally slid closed as she quickly delved into Morpheus' world, the girl took her chance and left the camp, leaving them all to whatever the night would bring them.

~

It was still dark when Tai'gee finally pulled herself from her deep sleep. She was cold and stiff. She vaguely recalled Kaija sitting with her in the woods asking her if she was alive – she'd said yes, but now she wasn't so sure. Using her stiff arms to push her heavy body up to sit, she thought she couldn't be dead – 'it hurts too much.' She immediately spotted Xena and Gabrielle curled tightly together in the dim moonlight, sleeping soundly. She spared a very wistful moment to wonder where Kaija was, and why she wasn't like wrapped with strength and warmth, especially since it wasn't an unfamiliar position for the two friends. She spotted a burned out fire off to the side and wondered if there were any coals still smoldering at the bottom with enough heat left to rekindle a warming blaze.

Gathering her strength, Tai'gee pulled in and then stretched all her limbs, working blood and flexibility into her taut muscles and joints. Then she took in a deep breath, stretching her sore lungs. That reminded her of those terrifying moments in the river, sinking to the bottom and being unable to pull herself up. She remembered Kaija powering through the murky water, blurred by the silt and sand Tai'gee was stirring in her struggle to swim to the surface. Kaija had grabbed her by the back of her dress and yanked her upward through the water, easily cutting through the current and the weight of all the fabric Tai'gee was wearing. But Tai'gee couldn't hold her breath any longer – her lungs screamed against their collapse at the lack of air. Fighting to keep her mouth closed and the darkening spots of unconsciousness from encroaching at the edge of her vision, in a weak moment Tai'gee's body spasmed reflexively demanding she at least go through the motion of breathing even if there was no air. Unstoppable amounts of water rushed into her lungs, choking her, giving her aching lungs no relief and her brain no oxygen. That was all she remembered, and it was enough.

Finding a promising twig laying nearby, Tai'gee poked at the smolder, stirring it and turning over the coals. Unfortunately the whole pit was cold. Giving up on finding a starter coal, Tai'gee slumped by the char and wondered again where her friend had gone. She looked up into the trees with big, long boughs weaving overhead, but there were no sleeping forms nesting in them – at least not of the semi-human form. She sighed. She might have gone hunting, though she doubted it somehow. Hunting wasn't a major part of Kaija's life – she didn't like to spend all her time stalking and chasing. Tai'gee was the only one, besides probably Cerebrius, who knew Kaija actually spent much of her time sleeping. 'Zeus knows she hasn't done much of that

lately. She may have gone ahead to the cave so she could catch up without us waking her for whatever reasons.’ They weren’t far from Cerebrius’ cave. Even in the darkness she recognized the small glen as one where she and Kaija frequently met before running off to spend time together.

From the darkness surrounding her Tai’gee surmised it would be at the very least an hour before dawn, and for all she knew it could be in the dead of night. As she sat by the fire pit she took stock of herself – she was thankful her dress was dry; she’d much rather be cold than cold and wet. She had some scratches and bruises, probably from being drug onto shore. Her midsection just below her ribs was very tender for some reason she couldn’t guess. ‘All in all – not bad.’ She sighed. Satisfied with her assessment, Tai’gee stood again and began to pace. Sleeping through coldness was one thing, but being awake to know she was cold was something else. With no fire and no Kaija she’d have to find her own way to keep warm – snuggling up with the Warrior Princess and her sidekick wasn’t really an option.

On Tai’gee’s second pass through the camp, Xena stirred at noticing the new movement through her slumber.

“How’re you feeling,” Xena asked in a sleep-hoarse huff.

“Fine other than freezing,” came her tooth chattering reply.

“C’mere.” Xena waved a heavy arm at the pacing girl, inviting her over to bundle with her and Gabrielle.

“That’s alright, I’m not sleepy anymore. I don’t want to keep you awake from fidgeting.”

“Well, in that case let’s see what we can do about getting that fire going again. We just got you out of a river, we’re not going to let you freeze.” Xena smiled a little then pushed herself up from Gabrielle’s side. The sleeping bard immediately noticed a difference and tucked herself into a tight ball as her human blanket moved away.

“Where’s your friend?”

“Dunno. She was gone when I woke up. I’ve only been up a little while though.”

Xena absorbed this. For a moment she debated whether or not to let Tai’gee know right away everything that had transpired that evening. There was no reason not to tell her; she was going to have to soon if not now. “Hey, grab up some kindling and we’ll get this thing going. Shouldn’t take long. We need to talk.”

~

A new numbness settled over Tai’gee. It was different from the cold numbness that had overtaken her fingers, toes and nose. She felt an internal, tingling numbness around her guts and heart after Xena explained everything.

“So the guy who gave me the arrows –”

“Was Aries. He was using you as much as he used Thalkus. That’s how he works – he likes to exploit people’s cares.” Idly Xena stirred the fire, sending up a flurry of sparks as one of the larger logs resettled. Blue eyes lifted to look through the popping and crackling flames at her young companion, watching her assimilate this new information and decide what to do with it.

“You know,” she said at last, “the worst part is I can’t say I know her any more. I can’t say ‘Oh, we’ll be fine, Kaija’ll do such and so.’” Tai’gee shook her head. “She’s always reacted to everything defensively, never seeking out trouble, never even really hurting anyone even when fighting back. If Aries gets to her... He could turn her into a killer. How would we ever get her back?”

“Kaija’s a smart girl. She’s really thinking about all these things, deliberating... She’ll do the right thing, I know it.”

“Yeah... Well I mean I’ve always known she’s smart and all, but this stuff is new. You said so yourself, and Gabrielle; it’s all new to her. How will she know the right thing... from... well from anything else?”

A moth flew in, attracted by the blaze and fluttered its seemingly weak wings just outside of the flames that would greedily incinerate the flapping fabric. Xena watched it for a while as she thought. “Aries is trying to appeal to her animal instincts, trying to keep her thinking primal and reactionary. I think that’s where we have our chance. We’ve got to appeal to Kaija’s higher order thinking. We have to remind her of her humanity – show it to her.”

“And just how do we do that while she’s ripping us apart?” Tai’gee asked with derision. “I don’t want her to be a killer – but what can I do to stop her? I mean, let’s face it Xena, you may not even be a match for her.”

Xena was surprised at how much that stung. A very familiar thrill of indignance and challenge raced up her spine, but she quickly pushed it aside. This wasn’t about her and her pride, it was about survival, and Tai’gee was right. Kaija had natural abilities that could exceed even the great Xena’s, and she was sure the half-human hadn’t even tapped into everything she was capable of doing. “You’re right,” she agreed with a sigh. “I may not be, and truthfully, I don’t really want to engage her that way in the first place. I don’t think fighting is what’s going give us any advantage. We have to keep her off balance enough that we can keep talking to her. Gabrielle’s better with these kinds of talks than I am.”

On cue the blonde rolled over, cracking one green eye to sleepily survey the situation in camp. Satisfied no one was getting their butt kicked, she easily drifted back off to her dreamland.

“She sleeps pretty hard huh?” Tai’gee chuckled when Xena did. It was true – Gabrielle’s biggest challenge being on the road was pulling herself to full wakefulness, or at least in all appearances, in order to fight or flee or both.

The moment of levity was short lived. Tai'gee took a breath through clenched teeth. "It makes me so mad to think that guy has his hands on Kaija and is twisting her into something she never wanted to be. He has no right to do this."

"The gods never consider that. They do what they want when they want. That's why it's our job to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions and do what we can to keep their influence at bay."

"We need to get the children," Tai'gee said flatly. "I can take you to the cave – but how're we going to get to them?" Tai'gee quickly explained that there was only one entrance into the cave, the ceiling was low for an upright human, and the whole space wasn't very big. "It's not some deep and winding tunnel with rooms and all kinds of space. You can see when you go in where it was originally hollowed out of the rock by wind and rain, but since then it's kind of been dug out by Cerebrius. It's pretty much a wide hole, probably... fifty feet deep?"

"What do you know about Cerebrius?" Xena tossed on another log, not really needing too, but wanting something else to do.

"Not much. I've always tried to stay away from him. The only time I've actually seen him clearly is when he killed my father. I try to stay out of his way."

Xena hummed a little, considering. "He knows you though, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"He must know you hang out with his daughter, I'm sure he can smell whenever you're around. You're a familiar scent after all these years I'll bet."

"Kaija's said she's told him about me, that we play together and everything. I've just never cared to test how much he approves of his daughter hanging out with one of 'those villagers.' Anyway, Kaija's also said he hasn't come out of the den in ages."

"Yeah, why is that do you think?"

Tai'gee shook her head. "I don't know for sure, but I get the feeling he may be dying. She said he doesn't go out, sleeps a lot. He's pretty old... doesn't sound good."

That was interesting to Xena. She knew that sphinxes were immortal, so if he was dying it had to be because of some wounding he'd suffered – and not just any wound; some kind of magic or god inflicted injury was the only way to get past immortality. The prospects for their success in getting the children back were not looking great. 'So now we're supposed to go into a wounded cat's cave to get his daughter and adopted offspring...'

"Xena, even if we're able to get the children from Cerebrius we still have to get them back to Cresca. With all those people in the woods – what if they attack us?"

“One thing at a time.” Xena stretched. The cool dawn breeze pricked her skin bringing her to full wakefulness. She always liked the smell of morning. There was just something about morning fresh, damp air that really invigorated her. Or maybe it was the scent of a difficult challenge looming at the beginning of her day... Gabrielle would probably be able to tell her which it really was. She smirked as she yanked her young partner from a sound sleep.

## VII

Xena, Gabrielle and Tai'gee snuck up to the ridge overhanging Cerebrius' cave. There were no trees to shield them from the morning sun. The breeze blew against them ensuring none of their scent would filter into the cave. Lying face down, staring at the heavily trampled ground just before the entrance, Xena took stock and tried to develop a plan.

“If twelve little kids are in there it's awfully quiet...” Tai'gee whispered.

Gabrielle nodded in agreement. She appreciated Tai'gee's sharp observation, especially here and now – Tai'gee was the most familiar with the area and would be able to point things out and make suggestions they wouldn't have considered on their own. She could tell Xena agreed too in the way the Warrior Princess grunted.

“I don't think the kids are here; Kaija's probably told Dad about everything, or at least run off with the kids before we could get here. We're going to have to find them all over again.” She gritted her teeth, frustration hoarsening her whisper even more. “If we could do this without engaging Cerebrius that would be great.” Xena began to consider her options as her nose twitched at a faint but unpleasant smell.

“And deprive me of the opportunity to meet the great Warrior Princess?” A phenomenal voice boomed behind the prostrate trio. Tai'gee flinched, Gabrielle gasped, and Xena cursed. All three stood and turned around, Xena plastering on a deprecating smile for her first expression to this new adversary.

Huge was quite the word for the sphinx. He sat back casually on his haunches, and was easily taller than Xena – perhaps taller than Hercules who himself was a good six inches taller than the warrior. His massive, ropy tail curled around to twitch in front of his great paws; Gabrielle recalled the comparison to wagon wheels and didn't think that was far off. His broad chest had an arrowhead shape burned into his fur. His duny, golden fur was silvered in spots, in the places that indicate advancing age, but it still gleamed in the sunlight. White tipped feathers peaked over the top of his head and the breeze rustled them around the edges. His face was broad. He had full lips, and like Kaija's they pulled awkwardly over no doubt large, sharp teeth. His cheekbones were not only high but wide, and, unlike Kaija, his nose and eyes were solidly feline. The distinctively deep set of a cat's eyes in combination with his pale skin made his gaze very dark. Xena wasn't sure of the color of his eyes, but it didn't really matter – the expression in them was easily identifiable, and her nose flared slightly at his projection of capture.

Very slowly, Cerebrius pulled a large pink tongue across his great teeth, then waited for Xena to make her move. She figured direct was her best shot.

“We’re here to bring the children back to their families Cerebrius, that’s all. We don’t want any trouble.”

He smiled... sort of. It was small, and feral, but Gabrielle thought it did fall somewhere in the category of a smile.

“What you bring and what you want aren’t two very different things.” Lazily the great beast laid down, primly crossing his forepaws before resting his chin on top of them. He studied each of them briefly and then settled on Tai’gee. “You’ve grown up nicely. The last I saw you, you were a little scrap throwing rocks at a man who was throwing rocks at my daughter.”

Tai’gee audibly gulped. Gabrielle put a supportive hand on her shoulder but continued to watch the sphinx who returned his studious gaze to their group at large.

“I’ve grown rather fond of these little humans. They were a gift to me from Aries, why should I give them up?”

“You know the answer to that, Cerebrius. If the villagers had Kaija you’d have destroyed Cresca by now.”

“Perhaps,” he said with that same smile. “But they have not come here for their children – they prefer to hunt mine. I see no reason to give them back. And you... you’ve been pumping my daughter full of poison – trying to take advantage of her – calling yourselves her friends.”

“We are her friends,” said Gabrielle defensively.

“My daughter needs no friends,” he rumbled at them. “She is completely independent and self-sufficient. I taught her to be that way. Aries will continue that teaching.”

“Kaija’s half human,” Xena pointed out nonchalantly. “You can’t take her humanity away from her, and you can’t teach her to ignore her emotions. They are a part of her as much as you are.”

“She is young still, and has much to learn. Kaija is the ultimate being. She is smart and strong. She knows no right and wrong, only necessity. When she has fully matured, she will be greater than you Warrior Princess. She will be able to out think and out fight any opponent, and she will take her rightful place at the head of the human race.”

“She doesn’t want that,” said Tai’gee with quiet determination.

Cerebrius’ great tail thumped impatiently behind him, sending up a small cloud of dust. “I grow tired of this. You cannot understand. Her mother thought the same as you – she should be raised among humans, exposed to their treachery. Kaija would be ridiculed and tortured for who she is. When her mother was killed...” Pain flashed in his eyes. He visibly steeled himself against it

and growled out the last of his commentary. “Murdered not long after she’d given birth, when she was weakest. That is the malignancy of humanity – weak cowards who must make their move when it is least likely they will have to take responsibility for it.”

“Not all humans are that way.” Tai’gee stepped forward, pushing Gabrielle’s hand away gently. “I’m not that way. I’ve loved Kaija for years.”

Cerebrius’ stormy countenance softened a little as he focused on Tai’gee. The growl in his voice dissipated to a more natural rumble. “I let Kaija see you, Little Scrap, because of the service you paid her. Even in your young mind you could see her for who she is. But make no mistake,” he said with gentle sternness, “just because you need her does not mean she needs you. She needs no one, not even me – which is fortunate because I will not be here forever to protect her.”

Xena’s nose twitched again. Now the slight, wafting smell became familiar to her – Cerebrius really was dying. The great cat recognized the realization in her eyes and smiled. “Yes Warrior. Athena allowed me to give up my immortality for my daughter who was born mortal like her mother.”

“Kaija’s immortal?” Gabrielle squeaked.

“No, only a very fast healer. As long as she bears the point of persecution she will be protected from injury, recovering much faster and more completely than humans. Athena felt with the strength of all of her other characteristics it would not be fair for her to be immortal and completely dominate you humans in that regard as well. I tend to disagree, but a father does what he must to protect his child.”

Tai’gee’s eyes flitted to Cerebrius’ chest, and that didn’t go unnoticed by him either. He smiled at her, but said nothing as their gazes met.

“Cerebrius,” Xena resumed, “the children are not yours. You and Aries have no right to destroy twelve innocent families so you can manipulate your daughter into a life she doesn’t want.”

“That’s right,” Gabrielle chimed in. Her higher pitch made the sphinx’s ear twitch, but he waited for her addition with a patient expression. “Aries will turn her into a vicious warlord, a killer, a murderer. Is that who you want your daughter to be? She’ll spend the rest of her life being hunted and challenged, she’ll become sport for anyone daring and stupid enough to take her on, and one arrow – one sword swing – one sip of poison will be all that’s needed to drop her. Is that the life you want for her?”

“That’s the life I lived, and it’s no exaggeration, Cerebrius.” Xena shifted behind Gabrielle, drawing herself up to her full height as she felt she had the great cat’s weighty attention. “Yeah sure Aries can teach her how to fight, how to lead armies... He can’t teach her how to deal with the constant paranoia of not being able to trust anyone.”



“He can’t teach her how to deal with her emotions – only how to tamp them down and cover them up – then one day, they’re going to explode on her in the middle of some desperate situation and she’ll be totally unprepared for it,” added Gabrielle.

Xena continued. “Don’t forget Cerebrius, Aries is the God of *War*. Once Kaija conquers the world, he’ll get bored. Then he’ll look for someone else to train and pit against her. Maybe he’ll set up her own army against her, just to see how she’d handle it. It’s all sport to him, he doesn’t care about anybody.”

Cerebrius seemed to consider this. His tail twitched idly behind him as he thought quietly. The three in front of him were nervous, the two smaller ones were outright afraid – he could smell their fear as though they had sprayed it on like a perfume. He liked that; he appreciated the fact that even in his ailing state he still inspired cautious distance, that others recognized his homicidal prowess. The Protector people had once called him, and that was who he had been to countless villages and individuals, roaming the world in his youth providing advice and power where it was needed and requested. It earned him many enemies. Vengeful people began tracking him, stalking him to seek retribution for whatever he’d done to hinder them.

Here in Cresca at last he’d found a quaint, happy village that had never heard of him, and a woman who had loved him unlike anyone ever had before; a woman *he* had loved. After many years Cerebrius thought he had finally managed to disappear from his stalkers, that it would be safe to accept Nadiah’s love and settle down. She’d never mentioned her betrothal to Thalkus, and that had angered him extremely. ‘Another human short coming – you should have said something! Now we will have to deal with this angry, bitter man. Did you think our love would just wipe away your responsibility?’ She’d said no, but she’d never felt any sort of commitment to Thalkus; it was he who had pushed the engagement while she wasn’t even around to contribute. She didn’t feel she owed him anything. ‘He won’t bother us; we can live out here and raise our child and have our own home and family and village.’ But Thalkus had turned into a great bother, and when Cerebrius’ back was turned as he went to get damp rags to clean his wife and newborn, he made his move and bashed Nadiah’s head with a stone. He would have done the same to Kaija but Cerebrius had turned back just in time to save his daughter and drive Thalkus off. He’d never had time to retaliate. Raising his daughter in the woods by himself under constant torment from hunters and the like made it difficult to have a moment’s peace, let alone leave her while he went after the leader of a town that had cast out and forgotten one of its more prominent members without interest of investigation.

‘The villagers are not to be trusted Kaija, you must stay away from them,’ he drilled into her almost daily. He’d known her natural affinity for them though, especially the children and he knew she would help them with little bits of their daily lives, taking the kids back to their homes when they got lost in the woods and helping the townsmen with their hunts. ‘A little protector, just like her father,’ he had thought with some pride and a larger degree of worry. He didn’t want her to be persecuted for helping, to be tortured because people didn’t appreciate what she would and could do for them. The best protection he saw against that was to be fierce, dispassionate, unaffected by human influence. For the most part, Kaija appeared to embody those teachings as a child, but little bits of humanity kept popping up, and moreso once she’d befriended that little scrap who threw the rocks. ‘What is love, Pawpaw?’ she’d floored him

with one day when she was about ten. ‘Forget that, some things are not for you and that is one. It makes no sense so you do not need to deal with it.’ And she’d forgotten it for all intents and purposes.

Now it was back again... the scrap and the love. Kaija was unconvinced it wasn’t important, Arius had ignited in her a passion for life she’d never known before, and Xena and this bunch had confused her with emotion, right, and wrong. Cerebrius mentally heaved a heavy sigh. ‘I must be getting old. I would never have considered all this before; just killed for the sake of simplicity.’

Xena was encouraged by the long, visible thought battle raging across Cerebrius’ face. She’d checked her patience given the tenuous and delicate nature of feline consideration – the smallest distraction could bring it to a screeching halt and ruin any chance for further negotiation. ‘Oh wait...’ There was an expression she knew well – a look that said “I am not bowing down, don’t think you’ve won yet.” ‘Looks like some more tap dancing’s in order.’

“With these children I have a chance to offer Kaija the beginnings of a devoted and loyal entourage. Arius is willing to train them and her. You don’t want that, so what do you have to offer in its place?”

‘What indeed?’ Xena’s mouth worked for a few moments, but nothing came out. It was a fair and unexpected question and Xena hated the obviousness of her unpreparedness. Cerebrius’ eyes started to gather their storminess again and Xena reflexively began to reach for her chakram.

Gabrielle jumped in quickly. “A place with the Amazons.”

“What?” Cerebrius, Xena and Tai’gee all exclaimed at once.

“I am Queen of the Amazons. I think she would be a great addition to the Nation and my tribe. She will have a formal education including defense and history, math, philosophy.” Her voice raised in pitch as she became more excited with the perfectness of the idea. “She’ll be surrounded by people who would love and defend her as a sister Amazon, and who could accept her. She’d be on sovereign land, protected by Artemis, so she wouldn’t have to worry about hunters and stalkers. She would be free there.”

Tai’gee and Xena both beamed but for different reasons: Tai’gee for the opportunities her friend could have for a new and inviting life; Xena for Gabrielle’s quick thinking and an excellent plan. The Warrior Princess was very proud of her partner, and she gave the small blonde an approving pat on the shoulder. Gabrielle kept her eyes trained on Cerebrius, but a jolt of happiness at Xena’s encouragement shot through her and warmed her tremendously. Even if Cerebrius refused, Xena had approved, and that meant the world to Gabrielle.

Cerebrius was clearly impressed with that idea. He rubbed his big chin against his forepaws in much the same way a man with hands would scratch his chin. “Amazon,” he muttered to himself. Louder he said to Gabrielle, “You don’t look like a Queen; hardly even a princess.

What proof do I have of your standing? You might just be saying this and then run off with the kids and leave my Kaija to defend herself out in the world. Then I'd have to kill you." He sneered for effect.

"You can come with us if you like," Gabrielle suggested easily. "Frankly you'll be able to question every proof I give you until we actually get to my Nation, so there's no point in my trying to convince you otherwise now."

Xena only barely hid her smile. Gabrielle was definitely on a roll and she was content to let the bard do her work. Tai'gee just looked back and forth between all of them, tense and anxious for a resolution.

"True," conceded Cerebrius. "You have a point, and just then you sounded a bit more queenly. I cannot travel to your land Queen Bard, I won't make it. My body is old, tired and weak." With that he stretched his large paws out towards them, spreading his toes wide, forcing his saber-sized claws to peek out. He stretched out his great wings. They were all surprised to see the span of them was easily twenty feet, making the sphinx look even bigger. Shaking his big, shaggy mane, he recollected himself. Cerebrius turned as though he were going to amble off, as though no life altering conversation had even taken place just before. He was actually pacing a circle, turning twice before reseating himself before his three intruders.

He gave them a very skeptical look. Xena internally cringed but kept her face passive. She was in no position to defend all of them should Cerebrius decide he wanted to take a swipe at them – she had a steep drop off behind her and no resources off which to ricochet her chakram. She was limited to her sword and a hope that if Cerebrius did try to go for them he would tire quickly. She could feel Gabrielle growing nervous next to her – after several years of living, fighting, and even dying together Xena had gotten about as close to Gabrielle as she figured was humanly possible. Currently Xena suspected Gabrielle, like herself, felt backed into a corner and was trying to muster the bravado to consider herself a trapped snake rather than a trapped mouse. It was a very difficult thing to manage with a two ton animal, that had five inch canines and ten inch claws and who looked at them like he was looking at dinner.

She wondered how Tai'gee was holding up. Chancing a glance at the youngest woman, she found a very surprising expression on her face. Tai'gee was staring at Cerebrius with as much open skepticism as he was staring at them. She was poised in just the same way they had met her, stoically supportive of her friend and unwilling to accept any decision that threatened what she saw as Kaija's wellbeing. The angry, childish pouting had been replaced, however, and that was what had startled Xena's impression of Tai'gee. The youth's countenance said clearly 'I will not accept compromise where Kaija's concerned. Expect that I will not negotiate Kaija's defense.'

Xena felt Cerebrius' gaze shift off of her while she was staring at Tai'gee, and she presumed he had followed her own gaze. She forced herself to look back at the sphinx. The standoff between those two was tense and there would be no breaking it from either Gabrielle or Xena. They were coming to a mutual decision, and really, what went on between the two of them was all that mattered. Gabrielle very subtly reached over to hold Xena's hand, and the warrior gave the

slender fingers seeking hers a gentle squeeze. ‘Gabrielle should get a great story out of this one. I don’t know of anyone who ever went into a stare down with a sphinx.’ They waited for the deciding blink.

~

After she had explained her predicament with Xena and the instructions from Aries to Cerebrius, the children had been awoken. Just before midnight the sphinx had Kaija lead them out of the cave and into the night. Some had been excited, others frightened, and the rest were grumpy from the upset. Now in the bright midmorning, those children who had stayed up to play in the dark were either sleeping or cranky because they hadn’t gotten enough sleep. The younger children, the mostly three and four year olds, had huddled around Kaija, recognizing her as a guardian and were berating her with various complaints of hunger, fear and boredom. The youngest, a little boy with unruly, mouse-brown hair, had tugged on her finger to ask when they were going home. She had just looked at him, unsure if he meant the cave or the village. When she didn’t answer he had merely tucked his head down and hugged her leg; she softly rubbed his back and watched the dell of little humans be a dell of little humans.

Kaija was tired. She hadn’t gotten even a third of her usual amount of sleep in the last week, and none the previous night. The lack of rest and constant drive from place to place and turmoil to crisis were taking a toll as she sat and watched the children now in her charge. Her hands were unsteady, her thoughts jumped and skipped erratically, her eyes were flitting from place to place not only from anxiety but also as a result of fatigued, spasmodic nerves. She wanted to sleep; she just wanted to sleep.

As an overtired mind will, it started fantasizing. Mixed in with the squeals and conversations of the children were gruff, mysterious voices whispering in the shadows. Vague figures moved through the treelines, and Kaija was never sure exactly how many children were with her or where they all were. The voices would get louder every now and then, and the shadows seemed to move in closer and closer until finally they were calling to her from right over her shoulder.

“Hey!”

She jerked around to see who was there, but there was no one.

“They’re coming.”

Her ears twitched back, and her golden eyes narrowed to search but the breathy voice remained disembodied.

“They’re coming for you.”

“Hey, they’re coming.”

It was like a breeze bringing in shouts from a valley down below – the warnings were faint, broken up, but just solid enough to be heard. Turning frantically, Kaija tried to find who was talking to her.

“They’re going to take you away.”

“They’ll take the children.”

“And take you away.”

“They’re coming for you.”

“You’d better stop them.”

She turned again, squinting into the trees surrounding the dell.

“Yes – in there.”

“In here. They’ll come from in here.”

“They’ve got your father.”

“They’ll get the kids.”

“Kill you.”

“They’re coming for you.”

“They’re coming to kill you.”

“Shut-up!” Kaija pressed her hands to her ears to block out the voice. It kept shifting, moving, bouncing from place to place, she couldn’t keep up with it and she couldn’t find it. Spinning around to yell again, she ran directly into Aries.

“Hey, hey!... Chill out,” he said, placing gentle hands on her shoulders. He rubbed them a little and looked concernedly into her eyes before encouraging her to take her hands away from her ears. “You’re scaring the children. What’s going on?”

Kaija looked around quickly. The kids were indeed staring wide-eyed at her. Shaking off their confused looks she turned back to the God of War. “Where did you come from?”

“Long story,” he answered with humor Kaija missed. “What’s got you all worked up?”

Unsure, Kaija looked around again and took a step back from the dark man. “A- a voice, voices... They are coming to kill me.”

“Ah.” As though everything was now clear to him, Aries placed a hand on Kaija’s back and walked her away from the treeline. “That would be your instincts talking to you – and they’re telling you that Xena and company is coming for your hide.”

“And company?”

“The annoying blonde, your little friend, your father... It’s my guess that mob – you remember the mob? – is coming as well.”

“No-”

“Yes.”

“No. Pawpaw told me to take them, to come here and wait for him.”

“Guess he got a better offer from the Warrior Princess. Fat lot of good it did dragging your friend out of that river, too. There’s gratitude for you,” he finished with a dramatically disappointed sigh. “What’s the world coming to these days?”

“No...no...”

“Look!” Aries added a roll of thunder to his voice. “I thought you were smart. I’m not going to waste my time with some dense mutton head.”

“I am not!”

Aries raised an eyebrow. “You keep thinking people care about you. It’s going to get you killed. You’d better change your game plan.”

Kaija looked around again, trying to form some idea of what to do. Her father was the only one who knew how to get to this place; she’d never even brought Tai’gee here. It was their sanctuary – why would he bring them all here and violate their sanctuary? ‘Relentless,’ Aries had said of Xena. ‘She wants the kids,’ Kaija reminded herself, ‘and she does not care about me. She has Tai’gee, she has my Pawpaw.’ Sounds from the underbrush pricked her ears again. She made her decision.

Gesturing to the children she told him, “You must take them back to the village – you brought them here, take them back.”

“Are you sure? They could be useful to you. Keep you safe.”

“No. I cannot fight with them here. They must go back.”

Aries considered this for a moment. He wanted the kids, they were a part of his ultimate plan. He had raised armies before, hundreds of times, but he had never *raised* an army, and that – aside from any warlord he’d ever sought and trained – would be the crowning achievement in warfare supremacy. Molded and shaped as warriors, brainwashed to be unfailingly loyal, this

child army would be unstoppable as adults. But not if Xena kept getting in the way, and most important at the moment was that Kaija take Xena out. That wouldn't happen until the girl felt like she was in a good position. It wasn't like he had hand picked these kids either – they had been convenient. He could start over, pick particular ones from particular villages... it's not like he could make them grow up faster if he started a week later than he'd originally conceived...

~

“Damn Cerebrius, why didn't you just send her to Gaul, it would've been closer.” Xena huffed as she pulled herself up and over a high, rocky outcropping. ‘How Kaija got all those kids through this overnight is beyond me.’

“That was the point, Warrior,” said Cerebrius dryly. The path they were taking to the dell was very rough, to say the least. The dell was the one place he could bring Kaija as a very young child to play, practice and grow undisturbed because he knew no one who had come this far into his territory would persist through this unmanageable terrain. He also knew the way they were going was not the way Kaija took – there was a narrow, hidden ravine that led into the dell. There was no need to make it too easy for the others though, and it protected his secret. He was counting on them becoming so disoriented that they would not be able to recall how to get back in the future.

The two younger women seemed to be keeping up well; they obviously weren't in the shape that Xena was in, but Cerebrius thought they were holding their own and then some. He was impressed. He'd known of Tai'gee; his daughter had played with her for years, and he hadn't disapproved. ‘We all need our pets, and she seems a loyal and reliable one.’ He appreciated the way she looked him in the eye and confessed her devotion to his daughter. That was the look he wanted the other children to grow into so that Kaija would be surrounded by human shields and worshippers.

Though Gabrielle's offer of a place among the Amazons... Athena's sister's famed women warriors. That could be an entourage ready-made for his daughter... He liked the advantage of Kaija living on god-protected land, and getting an education. It seemed a very good idea. Now there was the matter of convincing his daughter of it, and after all of the other upsets recently he wasn't sure how open to persuasion Kaija would be.

A familiar and unpleasant tingle tickled Cerebrius's spine and he looked up ahead to the dell with urgency. Next to him Xena also looked ahead. They spared a moment to look at each other in surprise to find that they each felt the same sensation which they had thought they alone possessed. At once they said “Aries,” and hurried over the last distance to the dell. “Hurry!” Xena shouted back to the lagging Gabrielle and Tai'gee.

But they were too late. They ran past the last bit of scraggly underbrush just in time to see Aries disappearing with all of the children, a wild and defiant Kaija at his side.

“Aries no!” Xena yelled at him but he only laughed.

“Bye bye Xena! Gotta go drop the kiddies off before we begin our world domination tour!”  
Then they were gone.

“Xena!” Gabrielle looked at her friend with deep concern. “Kaija, did you see her?”

“My daughter is not well,” Cerebrius said with quiet certainty. He did shoot an accusing look at the others but quickly dismissed his anger. “She cannot stay awake as much as she has been and be expected to function normally.”

“They’re going back to the village. We have to get there,” said Xena flatly.

“There’s no way we can get there that fast!” Tai’gee threw a hand at Xena, “unless you have some magic shoved up under those arm braces.”

“Get on.” Unceremoniously Cerebrius laid down in front of them. They hesitated for a moment, but realized there was no other way if they wanted to make even a cursory effort to get to the village.

Tai’gee was first on, followed by Gabrielle. The blonde passenger tried to position herself over the ridge of bone that was Cerebrius’ back and found it quite uncomfortable. She suspected in his younger days – or at least if he hadn’t been aging – he would have been much meatier and the seating would have been more comfortable. She had a moment of true sadness for the great sphinx. ‘He’s really sacrificed his life for his daughter; he gave up an eternity for her, and we’re sitting on his back.’

Xena was last in place, and even though her legs were much longer than the others, she still had to swing one foot over, just like a horse. He rose slowly to pick them up. “Hold onto my mane Little Scrap.” Tai’gee immediately did as she was told, Gabrielle grabbed tightly onto her, and Xena grabbed onto Gabrielle. They could all feel his bones and joints creaking and cracking as he stood to full height, lifting them higher than a centaur would have. He began a stately walk forward before making a skip, letting off a grunt, and then his great wings gave a powerful thrust down and they were airborne. Gabrielle’s stomach dropped as they rose higher with each strong push.

“You ok?” Xena yelled to her over the roar of wind flying past them.

“You could have warned me flying was like being on a ship.”

Xena couldn’t help but smile. Her smaller friend got horrible seasickness. The warrior had clued the bard in on a little trick to help keep her stomach stable by pressing a particular spot on her wrist, but with her hands needed to keep her seat on Cerebrius’ back that trick wasn’t going to work. “Concentrate on the wings flapping, Gabrielle. There’s much more rhythm than on a boat.”

“Riiiiight.” But she tried it anyway. She had to force her attention away from Tai’gee’s back and look out along the plane of Cerebrius’ great wings. The first thing she noticed was that his



wings weren't entirely white. As they cut through the morning air, the flash of sunlight showed that the feathers were transparent somehow – pearlescent. They swirled with faint color just like a syrup bubble in daylight. They were truly beautiful. As she followed the feathers farther and farther out, she finally looked past the wing tips and out onto the world below them. 'Oh gods, why did I do that?' Convulsively she started squeezing her hands, gathering Tai'gee's now obscenely tattered dress into restrictive balls.

"Gabrielle you're clawing me!" Tai'gee looked back over her shoulder, "relax!"

"We're flying," she yelled back. "You relax!"

Xena chuckled again. Flying wasn't new to her. She had flown several times, expectedly and unexpectedly. She loved it. The view was always amazing; the world never looked the same from eagle's height. It looked small and the figurines of people and animals and towns looked insignificant, and she could imagine that if one always saw the world like that, and if one had a god's power, holding back from manipulating it could prove very difficult. They flew over the river they had forded the previous day – 'well, that Kaija had forded, I just floated along for the ride.' Watching the patchwork of trees, glens, grassy hills, deep gorges, and rock outcroppings could make a person dizzy, but to Xena it looked like an intricately woven blanket spread wide and inviting; it could only be appreciated for its simple complexity from far above.

Beneath her she felt Cerebrius shudder. She squinted in concern at the shaggy mane. Flying was probably no easy task for him in his ailing state, but she seriously doubted carrying three grown women at the same time was only a trifling addition. Cerebrius had gone probably a league higher than the tree tops; not far really, she suspected he could and had flown much higher. It was probably a good thing though that he didn't go much higher than that, because if he needed to make a quick landing it was better to do it with the ground much closer so they could jump off if necessary. She was tempted to ask him how he was holding up, but since he hadn't dropped them she didn't think it wise to push the issue. More than likely she would only offend him and make Gabrielle and Tai'gee nervous on top of it.

Shifting her gaze slightly, Xena studied Tai'gee, then changed her mind. She might make Gabrielle nervous, but Tai'gee was loving every moment. She was leaning out over Cerebrius' shoulder joint so she could look through the space left when his left wing was up and still see below them. Her legs had a sturdy wrap around Cerebrius, which was good because she was tipped over so far that it looked like she was trying to slip under his chest and take her chances underneath. Gabrielle didn't know it, but for all intents and purposes, her face was pressed into Tai'gee's butt, not her back. Her blonde friend was too far-gone to care though, and really, why take away her life line... even if it was an asshole...

## VIII

Ten minutes. After four days of trekking through all manner of forestry they had arrived back at Cresca in only ten minutes. From overhead, Xena could see there was a huge gathering of little multi-colored, people-shaped sticks in the center of the town. A much smaller, much less

colorful group stood at the opposite end of the town center; Xena suspected that was Kaija and the children. ‘Now, where is Aries?’

“Can you get my daughter out of that mess?” Cerebrius’ voice rumbled throughout his whole body.

“Can you hear anything?” Xena called to him.

“I am a cat, Warrior, not an eagle. My eyes and ears do not extend so far. I see weapons, which I am sure you can see as the light flashes on them. It looks like a lynch mob.”

“Go down! We have to save her!” Tai’gee kicked impatiently at Cerebrius’ sides earning an annoyed growl.

“Do not kick me Scrap. I cannot descend so fast. Do you need me?” he directed towards Xena. Gabrielle twisted to look at her friend. She was confused why Cerebrius would ask such a thing; of course they would need all the help they could get.

“We can do it Cerebrius, but you might want to hang around for a quick exit.”

“I will drop you off at the edge of town and be overhead.”

“But-”

Gabrielle gave Tai’gee a sharp poke, silencing her protest. She wasn’t sure why Xena had said what she said, but she’d learned to follow the warrior’s lead.

They dropped down, easily at first, and then a little roughly once Cerebrius got close enough to the ground to start his paws in a running simulation as they landed. He grunted uncomfortably as he came in full contact with the ground and Xena felt his right back leg go a little funny as it touched land. She was sorry for him; if he made it back to his den that day she would be very surprised, but she would do everything in her power to see that he got there. ‘He’s giving it everything he’s got.’ She admired that immensely. As he pulled himself back up into the sky after delivering his load, she sent a prayer out for his safety.

“Why didn’t you ask him for help?” Gabrielle asked with some incredulity as they ran for the square.

“Cerebrius is known by these people as terrifyingly powerful and violently murderous.”

“But-”

“Exactly,” she said and powered forward. No haggard, heaving, half-dead lion was going to help their case. She trusted Gabrielle to figure that out.

As the threesome ran towards the main square, they could see a crowd gathering at the far end of the street that they were running up. The other streets had been empty, deserted by all the villagers that weren't trying to get a better look at what was going on – people were hidden away in houses and shops, had crawled under porches and climbed into water barrels, pulled themselves underneath vender's carts. Old men tottered back into taverns after deciding the excitement wasn't worth the effort of staggering under the weight of mead and advancing age. As those villagers interested in being witness to the day's events cautiously half skipped-half tiptoed towards the end of the village they kicked up an obscuring fog of dust, leaving the three rescuers straining to see their way.

They ran into the square from the south; Kaija was to their right, the mob to their left and closing in. Aries was nowhere to be seen or felt. 'Typical for you War God.'

"Give us our children you filthy animal," one man yelled across the distance.

The mob rallied behind the shouter. Xena immediately assessed who they were dealing with – purely villagers. The outsiders were nowhere to be seen. She had to guess they were still prowling around the woods looking for Kaija. 'At least, those that were left from what we scared off yesterday. This could work for us.'

"Give them the children Kaija!"

Xena hissed at Tai'gee to shut up. "Those kids are the only thing keeping her alive right now."

"They won't attack her as long as their children are standing next to her," Gabrielle added to the girl. They were too far away to make a break for Kaija, and even if they had their sprint for the smaller group would probably be misread by the mob and Kaija. "Look at her," whispered Gabrielle.

Xena was looking at Kaija, and she was very worried. The onyx arrowhead that seemed constantly of a curious color other than black was definitely glowing now, beyond any other explanation Xena could have made. It was an irritated red, bright and sinister. It looked like it would be hot to the touch, but Kaija didn't seem at all bothered by it. In fact, Kaija was thunderstruck, her tenuous hold on her sanity and reality was breaking.

~

Kaija was staring wide-eyed at the mass of angry people, their shouts rang in her ears. They kept throbbing in and out of clarity, sometimes a handful of people sometimes hundreds. The yells for her death and threats pulsed in her ears as deafening sound bites between her pounding heartbeats. She didn't know what to do, what to feel, how to react. She could feel their hatred of her breaking through her thin emotional shield.

"Aries," she called out, "Aries, I am calling you! You said..."

A breathy, windswept chuckle flew by her ear, just like the voices she had heard in the dell. “You’ve got to kill them. Kill them all. Survive.”

“Listen to her calling on her god! See, see! Aries has sent them to destroy us! Kill her!”

At her side, the same little boy that had sat with her in the dell tugged again at her dangling fingers. His rich brown eyes were tearful as he looked up to her and reached out his small hands up to her. “Am scared.” Easily she picked him up, holding his small frame tightly. One of the older girls, blonde and petite, squeezed in to lean against Kaija’s opposite side, wrapping a shaky arm around her upper leg, and nodded her agreement with the boy. The others also pressed in, holding hands, trying to get as close to Kaija as possible.

Another voice broke in over the chaos. “Give them the children Kaija!” She jerked to look to her left, immediately spotting Tai’gee, Gabrielle and Xena hovering in an ally between her and the mob.

“They won’t help you,” the airy voice said again. “They want you dead.”

Kaija shook her head trying to sort through all of the directives. The mob was getting closer, the children were getting closer, the boy in her arms was hugging her tighter. The sounds were getting louder and the cacophony was maddening.

“She’s strangling my son!” one woman yelled.

“Let him go you monster!”

“Monster!”

“Monster!”

She thought she felt her mind spinning, everything was spinning, and then everything stopped.

~

“Xena!” Tai’gee screamed by her side.

The warrior looked back from the crowd to Kaija. A very helpless, dire plea was frozen on the girl’s face, and her fearful golden eyes were fixed on Xena’s in a silent scream for help.

A couple people shot past her as they ran for the children, and Xena moved into action. Uncoiling her whip in one move she flicked her wrist and sent the stinging end out to trip up the chargers. Gabrielle and Tai’gee took their chance to spring ahead of the others, jumping over the now prostrate villagers.

Xena positioned herself in the very small distance between the villagers and the children. She held her sword steadily in two hands, the highly polished metal glinted with a deadly shine in the sunlight. Her lip curled with menacing ferocity. “Back off.”

“Stop defending her!”

“Give us our children!”

“Help us!”

Xena jabbed at the insurgents trying to get past her, poking at the air in front of their bodies, encouraging them to stay where they were.

“She will not hurt the children.”

“She’s choking my son!”

“He is choking her!” Xena yelled back. “He’s scared. They all are.”

“She’s got them all brainwashed,” said a deep voice with certain calmness. Xena was unimpressed as Thalkus pushed his way to the front of the crowd. “Including the great Xena.”

“Funny you should be the one mentioning brainwashing Thalkus,” said Xena with a curt smile.

“Ah, here we go.” Thalkus waved his arms widely to the crowd. “Some grand tale about how the demon spawn is innocent, that Aries is to blame.” He tisked for effect. “Maybe I’ll even get a role in her story,” he coaxed looking deliberately at the warrior. “Maybe you’ve got me worked into your conspiracy theory to explain how this all came about.”

Xena’s smile broadened, which she could see had the desired effect on the priest. His smoldering, dark eyes grew curious at first and then unnerved. He wasn’t expecting her to smile about all of this – ‘who would smile in the face of a bloodthirsty lynch mob? She’s either insane, or knows something I don’t...’ Xena could read his thoughts quite clearly on his face.

“Oh no Thalkus, you’re the only storyteller here. My job was to rescue the children, but Kaija’s done it for me. Now if you people want them back, you’d better learn to play nice or we’ll find more suitable accommodations for them.”

“You can’t keep our children!” yelled some unseen woman.

“No, but they can refuse to come to you because you look big, angry and scary. Isn’t that right kids?” She could feel the children behind her huddling closer to Kaija. “They like her, she’s been good to them, why would they want to come back to a bunch of crazed, screaming fools?”

Gabrielle looked back at the cluster of youngsters behind her. Xena’s words were right on target with their expressions. Some were clearly torn between wanting to run for their families or stay

right where they were. The boy in Kaija's arms had turned so his head rested on her chest while he looked glassily out to the crowd before them. He seemed more content and curious rather than anxious to return to his home. Kaija remained petrified facing the alley where they had been previously, her terror and helplessness as fixed as a painting on a vase.

Some of the village women pushed their way forward, eyeing the warriors before them shrewdly. Nervously the women held their dresses close to them. One of them, a youngish bronze-headed woman hissed at the men behind her to lower their weapons. "These are our children you fools, drop them!" she commanded when they did not comply fast enough. Xena lowered her own sword in hopes of encouraging them. It worked; there was a clinking of pitchforks, axes and swords as they were brought down.

Finally, one of the children broke ranks. One of the older boys ran for his family, followed and met by a stream of children and parents. Brothers and sisters were reunited as well as fathers and mothers, cousins, and caretakers. Finally, only the little boy in Kaija's arms was left. He shifted slightly to look up into her face. With a child's casualness, he lifted small, child-chubby fingers to trace around the muscles of Kaija's ossified expression. The movement jarred Kaija from her stupor. She blinked at him, and he smiled slightly, hoping she might smile, too. "You face hard when you sad. Soft when you smiye." Then he looked lazily out to the crowd, not particularly concerned with seeking out his own family.

Gabrielle, seeing no particular aggression from the mob, backed up to stand next to the pair, and was followed by Tai'gee, who watched her friend with grave concern. Xena turned slowly, like a door swinging open, to watch both parties.

As Gabrielle approached, the little boy settled his attention on her, watching her come closer and dallying his fingers around the folds and crevices of Kaija's shirt. A woman also stepped forward from the crowd, walking stoically past Xena, eyes firmly on the boy and Kaija. Gabrielle watched as his eyes flicked to the woman, and he let go of a small sigh.

"S'time to go home now, hunh?" he asked with some dejection.

Gabrielle nodded and tried to make herself smile. "Aren't you ready to go home to your family?"

"I yike Kay-sha." He swiveled to look up at her, "you can stay? Play some more."

The woman arrived, stopping a few feet away. She didn't call out to her son, made no motion; just waited expectantly.

"It is time for you to go home," Kaija finally said in a slow, cracking voice. Her internal strain was plainly evident. "I will go home, too." Kaija's tone was deliberate, stilted and tedious.

The boy nodded, then rotated completely to hug Kaija around her neck. "Yove you," he said, then slithered down and tottered over to his waiting mother. Gabrielle and Tai'gee both fought to stifle sobs at the sentiment. The woman, whose worn but clean dress flapped about her in the

mid-morning breeze, knelt to pick up the boy and once in her arms he began to play with the wisps of loose graying hair blowing about her face. They all suspected he was comparing it to Cerebrius' and Kaija's.

'Well, that's done,' Xena thought, 'Now to get out of here.'

Instead of turning to take her son away however, the older woman moved closer to Kaija, closing the distance between them. Kaija, not knowing what to do or say, simply stood there and let the woman scrutinize her. Behind her, the loud reunions quieted and the whole village watched.

Without warning, the dark stone point at the hollow of Kaija's neck burst into a new light and the woman moved the boy to one arm and with her free hand, slapped Kaija full in the face. The resounding crack echoed among the empty buildings. The woman's uncommitted gaze shifted to hate and anger, and following her strike she spit in Kaija's face.

"How dare you bring your filthy carcass here holding my child? You worthless demon. I hope they rip you apart for what you've done. I hope you burn." Then she wheeled and stalked away, her loose bun getting looser with every jarring step. The little boy looked over her shoulder wide-eyed as his mother carried him away. Kaija's arrowhead pulsed with each step, brighter and brighter, an unhappy, aggravated red – much like the red of an infected wound.

As if on cue, the group from the woods the day before came charging into the square and Cerebrius came crashing down. A whole new chaos erupted.

"The Protector is attacking!" Xena heard Thalkus yell, attempting to incite the crowds, and it worked. Panic took hold and the previously docile crowd of villagers scrambled for cover while the newly returned huntsmen drew their weapons.

Xena jumped to Cerebrius' side, sending her chakram on a round around the village to keep everyone away from him. Kaija broke from her own shock and bolted for him, reaching him just as Xena did.

"Pawpaw-"

Cerebrius huffed heavily. He lay in a dusty heap, motionless but for his labored breathing. His eyes rolled around slightly at Kaija's voice, and a dry tongue peaked out. "Kaij..."

"Come Pawpaw – time to go. Not safe." Fruitlessly Kaija tugged on his massive paw while the world rioted around them. Before the exhausted sphinx could say anymore, a huge war spear shot in past Xena's leg, piercing Cerebrius directly in the heart. The blood spewed instantly, and just as instantly stopped, as did his heart, and his life.

Xena spun, her dark locks flying around her face in hundreds of tiny whips. She spied a grinning Thalkus now fitting war arrows to a huge bow and again taking aim at them. She sneered at the man and drew her sword. Screaming her signature war cry, the Warrior Princess charged though the throng of men collapsing on their small group, barreling straight for Thalkus. The other

fighters would probably have parted for her had they realized she was coming, but blinded by her own rage, she mowed over them like a tsunami.

Somewhere in her mind she heard Gabrielle's grunts of concentration and exertion as she disarmed opponent after opponent with her staff. She realized Tai'gee had acquired a sword and a hatchet and was doing her own version of disarmament. And then there was Thalkus, finally, standing before her within easy reach of her sword. With a scream of triumph at the look of terror on his face, Xena reached back for a death blow.

Then she was thrown off balance – sent flying actually. Her sword was knocked from her hand as she hit the ground hard. A deep and deafening roar split the air around her and it was several long moments before she could hear again.

Gathering herself, Xena took a reassessment. The fighting had stopped. Bodies in various states of life, death and unconsciousness littered the ground. Gabrielle and Tai'gee were running towards her, screaming, but their words wouldn't register over the ringing in her ears. As the tinny deafness faded, she began to make out more of their calls.

“-down!”

“Kaija – down!”

She jerked around, pushing herself to her knees and the screams became clear. “Kaija! Put him down!”

Kaija had grown somehow, or maybe Thalkus had shrunk, but Xena didn't think it was the latter. The girl was in a seething, sneering, foaming rage and had the man lifted a good two feet from the ground by his throat. Beneath him lay his bow, arrow and arm. Kaija, in her fury, had ripped it off.

“Holy Hera's tits.”

Xena jumped to her feet and held back Tai'gee and Gabrielle who had every intention of running right over to them. She forced them to walk over slowly.

Thalkus hung in mid-air, whimpering, crying, screaming as blood poured from his empty socket.

“Talk to me Kaija,” Xena requested calmly as they got close. Cautiously she eyed the girl's necklace, its irritated redness had flamed to a searing white-hot that would be burning the girl's skin if the heat matched the color. And if it did, Kaija was too enraged to notice.

“Aries says I should kill you,” she said deeply and gave the man a hard shake, cutting off more of his dwindling air supply.

“I'm not going to tell you he doesn't deserve it Kaija,” said Xena, “but if you do, everything will change. You don't want that change.”



“You killed my Pawpaw!” Convulsively her huge hand squeezed, and Thalkus’ gasps matched each point of pressure and relaxation in her grip. His eyes bulged with asphyxiation.

In one quick swipe she sliced his face open, leaving claw marks just like Cerebrius’ gashes in the trees to mark his territory. It wasn’t enough for Kaija – Xena recognized the patent need for visible suffering in the person who had hurt her soul; it was the same need she’d tried to fill for years when her brother Lyceus was killed. Before Xena could reach out to stop her, Kaija ripped off the man’s left ear and threw it away like a stone. Thalkus’ scream rent the village. Behind her, Gabrielle vomited, and she couldn’t deny that her own stomach didn’t turn.

“Kaija stop. This won’t help you.” Xena gasped while she forced her own bile back down, forcibly refusing to look at the bleeding mass that was Thalkus, high priest of Cresca. “Make him tell why he’s the monster. Let the villagers deal with his crimes.”

“What do you know of crimes?” she growled. Her teeth clenched and the huge muscles in her jaw displayed her turmoil as they bunched and flexed. “My eyes condemn me. And he walks among the people clean.”

Xena looked around them. The entire village, adults, children, natives and insurgents, were latched onto the display. Even though most of them were green and nauseous watching, it was too gruesome for them to look anywhere else.

“Confess Thalkus. For gods’ sakes confess and end this,” Xena pleaded.

He complied without hesitation. “I took the children! I gave them to Aries! I put up the bounty with part of the offerings to the temple and kept the rest for myself! By the gods, let me go! Have mercy!” His voice squealed in the pitch of agony. “Please!”

“Yes Kaij’ – have mercy,” Tai’gee said gently from her friend’s side. “Show them you have mercy. Do it for love – for me and your father. He wouldn’t want this.”

“I do not have love,” Kaija said fiercely. Her body began to shake with the lasting effects of adrenaline, and the tremors reverberated to Thalkus who cried with the aggravation. Xena could see the girl’s urge to throw the man to the ground like one would beat a dirty rug – over and over again, bashing the man till he swung as limp as a rag doll. The girl was fighting herself, her own impulses, and Xena found hope in that.

Tai’gee persisted. “You do have love. Mine, Gabrielle’s, Xena’s, that little boy’s just now.”

“Kaija, what you felt at the river when you thought you’d lost Tai’gee – that was love,” Xena added.

“You are capable of a lot more than anger and rage,” said a still unsettled Gabrielle. She reached out to Xena for support as she wobbled over. “Do you really want to start your new life with killing?”

Xena held securely to Gabrielle's elbow. She thought they could keep talking, but what more was there to say? Kaija had already made her decision.

"No... I – I want to sleep."

The arrowhead's light went out. Thalkus crumbled to the ground in a pathetic pile. Xena looked at his writhing form and shook her head. She wasn't sure he'd gotten more than he deserved, but he got everything he asked for. If he didn't die of his wounds and didn't take his own life, he'd still have a very difficult time surviving. Finding some overly kind soul to adopt a mutilated cripple would be a special challenge. But as they moved away from him, Patrach and Mian came closer. "Oh Thalkus," she heard Mian gasp, followed by Patrach's equally pitiful, "Oh Brother." For an instant Xena felt an overwhelming pity as a view of just a lonely, frustrated man, hurt and scared lay before her. That was when she knew in her heart she would never go back to the ways of her youth.

~

Athena came while Tai'gee led Kaija away to seclusion. The goddess of wisdom and family made a point to reclaim her creations when they expired, and she was especially sad to be coming for Cerebrius. She was surprised to find Xena, the Warrior Princess kneeling by his body. Her little blonde sidekick stood next to her, pensive and silent. A moment of hot anger flashed through the goddess.

"Did you kill my sphinx?" she demanded at Xena's back.

"No," the raven-haired warrior answered wearily. She didn't feel like explaining. "It's long and complicated, but the point is Cerebrius is dead and his daughter could use your help."

Athena studied Xena and found no malintent in her eyes. She saw only a deep sorrow and regret in both her and her friend. Moving to see Cerebrius' face, she was saddened even more to see his stately features frozen in pain and fatigue. 'My sphinxes were not meant to suffer like this. They are noble creatures of thought and placidity.' She recalled Cerebrius' entreaty to her, explaining – or trying to explain rather – his love for a human woman, his concern for his daughter. Athena had created only a handful of male sphinxes, and of them Cerebrius had been the most different. He had chosen to travel for one thing, involving himself in the goings on of the world and human tribulation. When he'd beseeched her help in protecting the life of his daughter she spied in him a wisdom and knowing that she did not recall bestowing in her sphinxes. He was an anomaly, as was his daughter. None of her sphinxes had borne or sired offspring with humans – not one. She neither approved nor disapproved, but she couldn't say she didn't like the little Kaija. She was glad to enhance her healing powers despite condemning her great beast.

With a wave of her hand, Athena removed Cerebrius' body. In her hand remained two of his best feathers – their iridescence glimmered in the sunlight.

“Give these to her. Tell her the point of persecution is no longer necessary.”

After passing the feathers to Xena with her god-gentle touch, Athena vanished.

Xena sighed.

Gabrielle looked curiously at the feathers in Xena’s hand. “What does that mean?”

“Leave it to the gods to be vague and unavailable when they’re needed most,” she said heavily. She looked again at the feathers; their pearly opalescence was mesmerizing. She wondered what significance they had, if any other than sentimental. “Come on,” she said to Gabrielle. “Let’s go find them and get out of here.”

~

Mercifully, Kaija slept for days. Tai’gee never moved from her side for more than a few minutes, even while they traveled south to Amazon land. It had been a brief battle whether Tai’gee was to join her friend or stay in Cresca. “You really must be crazy to think I’m staying here,” Tai’gee had said with an almost hysterical laugh. Gabrielle had offered her a kind smile and said it was only a suggestion they felt compelled to make, more form than function.

Tai’gee watched them together now, Xena atop Argo and Gabrielle riding faithfully behind. ‘Even though she doesn’t like horses... How could she not like horses?’ Tai’gee wondered. Gabrielle was a traveler – she was a warrior even if she didn’t see herself as one. What warrior went on foot? Not that it mattered; as long as Xena was there with her trusty steed Gabrielle would also have a mount. Where Xena went, Gabrielle went. With an inward smile, Tai’gee looked at the sleeping form leaning heavily back against her as they rode behind their leaders. ‘Just like us.’

~

They woke Kaija up that night. They didn’t think it was a good idea to bring her all the way to the Amazon village without her having any idea what was going on; the shock might be too much. They made camp a half day’s journey from Amazon borders and Tai’gee gently nudged her friend to wakefulness. The three of them explained to her what had occurred after she let Thalkus go and Xena gave Kaija her father’s feathers.

Kaija took them. She looked at them somberly in the firelight, said nothing.

She remembered lying on her father’s back as a child, stretched out and as comfortable as if she had been lying on a bed. While she’d lie there, warm and cozy, she would study his feathers. She never touched them, only looked at them, marveled at his wings. She’d asked him once if she would have wings like his, and he had chuckled and said he didn’t think so. “That is probably a good thing – you are hard enough to find on the ground, how would I ever keep up with you in the air, too?” She’d always felt a certain respect for his feathers, she’d felt they were something very special. Unlike eagle’s feathers, which she found often in the woods, Cerebrius

did not shed anything from his wings. And unlike any other bird she had observed, Cerebrius' body was huge, heavy and didn't seem at all balanced for flight. Yet his wings supported him. Her father was special, beyond all other creations she'd seen. And all that was left of him were two feathers.

'This *dead* is forever,' she realized. 'Athena has taken him and I will never see my Pawpaw again.'

She sensed something strange happening to her body, strange and uncomfortable. It was just like back in the woods of Cresca when Tai'gee had told her she wasn't human. The same confusion and strange prickling on her skin, the odd tingling in her throat. She did not like it. She wanted to tear the sensation out, slice open her throat and cut out the aggravation that made it itch and throb. And there was pressure behind her eyes, behind the bridge of her nose. The muscles around the edges of her mouth began to twitch downward, which did nothing to alleviate the pressure, but was reflexive somehow – she couldn't stop it.

They all watched as Kaija struggled. Her confusion was obvious, but they weren't really sure how to explain to her what she was experiencing. The trade mark frown of true suffering was all Tai'gee could take however – she moved closer to Kaija, sitting right next to her. She could feel the tension radiating from her body as though she were on fire. "It's ok Kaija. It's sadness. Let it come."

But Kaija didn't know how to let it come. She didn't want to be in this body any more – the body that had betrayed her to prejudice among people she'd served, the body that failed to withstand trickery and treachery, the body that succumbed to human emotion. Sadness? *Sadness*? Her body failed her to an intangible, inexplicable, *human* shortcoming? Hadn't her father preached to her how useless humans were *because* of their emotions? How in moments of preservation, moments of greatness, moments of necessity they backed off or crumbled, they second-guessed, they reasoned, they plotted all to appease a weakness. That was after all what had been Thalkus' motivation, what had prevented Xena from killing the hunters attacking them, what had encouraged the villagers to stand against her. Her body was betraying her to the same thing. Passion. "Human's aren't to be trusted Kaija – because they cannot trust themselves. They do not know themselves, they cannot control the disease that permeates their bodies. Passion overcomes their senses and that is what makes them unpredictable and weak. You must resist that passion, resist emotion, resist that senselessness that would destroy you."

'How do I resist myself?' she screamed inside her head. Her father had given her everything except that. There was no lesson for that, only a decree, an order to do it; no *how*.

She began to clench and unclench her hands, wanting to ring something, wanting to rip something, strangle and tear, but there was nothing. 'Don't kill Kaija,' Tai'gee had said to her, and suddenly that's all she wanted to do. Display her power to cover up this infirmity.

"That's frustration," Xena said in a low and calm tone.

Kaija looked up to her, and Xena was startled by the mass of – well, electricity flashing in the girl's eyes. “You have names for all these – these defects,” she said slowly through clenched teeth. “You name these flaws. What do I do with these names? They are useless and make me so.”

‘There it is,’ Xena said to herself. The same self-loathing she had experienced ten years earlier. What she hadn’t known then, what Gabrielle had helped her to recognize, was that emotion was not a weakness. Making a decision, Xena rose and beckoned Kaija to come with her. The warrior watched her hesitate but when she turned to walk into the woods, she heard Kaija rise and follow her.

~

Xena didn’t like to talk about her darkness to Gabrielle. Nor did she like to talk of it in front of Gabrielle. Dealing with it inside of herself was an everyday battle and though it was a battle she had gotten used to winning, it was, nonetheless, a constant fight. She suspected those in her past who knew her best as a younger woman, her mother, her older brother Toris, perhaps even her betrothed, had seen her come to the crossroads Kaija was approaching. She had never noticed making a decision to shut down her emotional connectivity to the world, but as she watched Kaija struggle, she was sure those around her had noticed. They had been helpless to turn her away from that path; she was much too powerful and headstrong, and her decisions, including the path to a remorseless life of destruction, were made so quickly there was no time for anyone to take her aside and remind her of love and compassion. Here was her chance to make that aside for someone else.

A full moon shown through the trees, shining down on them through leaves, branches and vines in a white cascade. It was the same light she had prayed in once before, begging whatever gods might be listening to keep the light alive in her bard who had just learned the yearn for vengeance. Now she was coming to pray again, in a way, hoping to turn *on* that light for Kaija.

Once they were well out of earshot of the camp, Xena took a breath and began.

~

“I can tell you exactly what is in your head right now. You are angry with yourself for being able to do nothing about what you’ve lost. You are furious that the only thing inside of you right now is pain and regret and questions and none of that helps you get back your father, or helps you see what to do next. You want to rip it out of yourself, and you want to rip it out of any living thing you can get your hands on because maybe then somewhere, someone will be able to comprehend how strong you really are despite that useless ache you have inside. It’s confusing – why should you hurt over something you could do nothing about, while still knowing if you could have done something you would have succeeded? Why do you have these feelings, when there was nothing you could do in the situation? That is what makes emotion so frustrating. You are physically helpless, so why are there all of these... sentiments coursing through you that really only make you feel that much more helpless. Pisses you off, doesn’t it? Anger – now that’s something you can work with.

“That’s what I chose to focus on, anger. Ooooo every time any one of those stupid little emotions poked up it made me so mad, it was so easy to forget I’d been helpless, that I’d hurt, that I’d doubted, that I’d lost. Rage was my refuge, and all the while I let myself hide in that refuge I tortured the world around me. I maimed, murdered, masterminded unbelievable destruction; I honed myself to be the ultimate vessel for fury, and every decision I made was to make sure my fury got more to feed on. I got strong. I got skilled. I was the Destroyer of Nations and,” Xena hummed in ecstasy, “as the Destroyer I ripped apart every life brought before me for my anger’s hunger. There was nothing I could do about it but feed it, because not only was I continuing to cover my own pain, but the pain in the eyes before me. I wasn’t battling my own emotions any more; I had added to them the helplessness of thousands of men, women and children; the only way to deal with the turmoil was to get angrier.

“Then one day I met a man I could hurt, but not destroy. He stood against me like a great wall and let my anger beat against him. And by the gods I did, as hard as I could, just like one of Poseidon’s tempests. And eventually my anger failed me – I was left with nothing else to defend myself with, nothing left to cover up that original helplessness. I had to look at it, I had to have it in my heart without a shield.

“And then I met a girl who had never lost like I had. She’d never suffered like I had. She’d never retaliated like I had. And she followed me – all the while I felt worthless, unguided, weak, she followed me and looked to *me* for help and answers. *Me?* I was sickened at first at the hypocrisy of it all; I deserved no such faith – I couldn’t answer for myself or my actions, how could someone dare to look to me for counsel or even company? I tried to get rid of her, but everywhere I went, she went. So I decided to watch her, and listen to her, and just see what I felt like when she was around.

“It never ceases to amaze me the real power I felt the moment I realized the gift Gabrielle had given me. Not only had she accepted me for what I saw as weakness and perversion, but she taught me to accept myself. She showed me what I was really fighting, and it wasn’t a lust for killing and pillaging – it was fear of emotion. She taught me what emotion really was, and it’s because of her I’m able to stand with you today and share this.

“Do you want to know?”

Kaija stood beside Xena, quiet and still. They both faced out to the woods before them, not looking at each other or anything in particular. In her periphery Xena saw Kaija dip her head in assent.

“Emotion is just a reminder, Kaija. Emotion reminds you of what and who is important to you, and why. It’s the tool your soul uses to identify what is important to it. There is no need to cover it up or hide from it or try to force it away, because there is no need to be ashamed that you care for something or someone. The positive emotions let you know you’ve found something that makes you happy. The negative emotions remind you how much you want to protect that happiness. You asked what you should do about them: You don’t need to do anything about them; emotions are there for you, not against you.”

“But... No. I do not understand them.”

“You know fear?” Kaija nodded. “You know happiness?” Again Kaija nodded. “You know anger? You know safety and danger?”

“Yes.”

“Those are emotions Kaija.” The girl seemed to chew on that for a moment. Xena continued, “And sometimes, aren’t there some things in between those? Things that don’t seem like quite happy or quite fearful?”

“I... I do not know...”

“When you would take the children home, did you feel angry they were in the woods? Did you feel danger?”

“No. I knew they needed to go home; I wanted them to get there without getting hurt.”

“That’s concern, another emotion. When you would watch the hunters set traps and then tripped them without getting caught, did you feel safe?”

“I – it was not safe, it was... I was...”

“Enthusiastic. Another emotion. You were interested, curious, excited. When you released Thalkus, when you let me release the hunters you had captured, when you told Aries to return the children, were you afraid?”

Kaija’s nose flared. “No. Not afraid. Tired. I was – there was something, I did not want them hurting anymore.”

Xena withheld her smile, even though inside she was delighted. “Kaija, that is one of the hardest emotions to encourage in one’s self. That is compassion.”

“There are so many...”

“Yes... Many have names, and believe it or not, many don’t. But I have one more for you. When you are with Tai’gee, in those times when you don’t hear anyone else but her, when you don’t want anyone else around or to touch you but her, do you feel happy?”

“N-no... well yes, but she is the only one... I trust her.”

“You love her.”

Kaija looked blank.

“It’s ok to love, Kaija.”

“No... Pawpaw said it is confusing. I- I do not understand.”

Xena laughed a little. “Yeah, that one’s a toughie. But it’s there. There are different kinds of love, like we talked about before. There’s liking – little bits of happiness from things you do for others, things they do for you, things that are pleasurable to you – like meat and not vegetables.” Xena laughed again as Kaija wrinkled her nose.

“What about instincts? Are they emotions? Aries said to trust them.”

“Yes... instincts are important, and you should trust them – *all* of them, not just the ones that tell you to fight.”

“I do not have other instincts.”

“Of course you do – instincts are the impulses you experience throughout your day. I’ve seen you deny them; like when you want to touch Tai’gee. When you want to smile or laugh. When you want to comfort someone. You jumping into the river after me and Tai’gee, you did that on instinct, and I, for one, am very glad you didn’t ignore that one. You have an advantage with your instincts that most of us don’t have, and that is that yours are very strong, you can hear them easily over your emotions in situations that require action more than reflection. Humans do have a tendency to get mired in their emotions, I admit.”

“So I am supposed to feel the emotions, and not do anything about them, but not listen to them?” Kaija was doubtful, and Xena could feel the girl’s frustration building again.

“In a way. Your instincts are your first reaction to a situation; you shouldn’t ignore that. Your emotions can help guide you to decide what to do in the situation sometimes, but you have to remember to take care of the circumstance first. Once it’s over, whatever lingering emotions you have, let them be, experience them; you can learn from them.”

“I do not want to learn from them. I want them to go away.”

“Even the good ones?”

Kaija frowned and dropped her head slightly.

Xena let the girl stand in silence for many long moments. Then, “the situation is over now Kaija. There’s nothing for you to *deal* with. Let your emotions be.” Carefully, she took a couple steps backwards before turning and leaving Kaija there to work with herself. She hoped she’d done the right thing.



“What do you suppose they’re talking about?” Tai’gee asked Gabrielle after they’d sat together in the flickering darkness for many long minutes.

“I’m not sure,” Gabrielle admitted. “But if I had my guess, Xena’s probably encouraging Kaija to mourn.”

Tai’gee looked at Gabrielle questioningly, but didn’t ask for a clarification. Gabrielle decided to give her one anyway. “A long time ago – well, it feels like a long time ago now – I lost someone very close to me. All I wanted was revenge, all I felt was hatred, all I lived with was anger. Xena tried to tell me to mourn, to hold on to my love for my husband, but I couldn’t understand it at the time. Didn’t stop her though. She kept telling me how important it was. I could have done some awful things if she hadn’t finally gotten through – actually, more than likely a lot of awful things could have happened to me because I just couldn’t function being angry and vengeful.”

They both nodded together as Gabrielle’s words faded. They weren’t sure what else to say or do. They’d eaten already, and spread their camp, so there was really nothing with which to occupy themselves. It was times like that Gabrielle and Xena might play games or talk, Xena might tend to her weapons and gear, but it just didn’t feel right to do any of that at the moment. So they sat with their own thoughts and watched the fire burn.

Finally Xena returned, with a grave and sober look on her face. As she walked across the camp, Tai’gee looked up to her and asked aloud the main question that had been bouncing around in her head for the last couple days.

“Do... do you think she’ll be... she’ll turn into what Aries wants anyway? Do you think she’ll want to...”

“Deny her humanity?” Gabrielle finished for her.

Xena pursed her lips.

Somewhere, out in the woods, someone howled in pain and anguish. It was a cry, a scream, a yell, primal and agonized. It brought tears to all of them. But Xena smiled while her eyes glassed over and looked at her two companions. “No. I don’t think she will.”

~

Tai’gee had been anxious, wanting to go into the brush and find her friend, but Xena had strongly advised against that. She’d explained that Kaija needed some time to recognize she had emotions, try them on, see how they felt, and more than likely she would shuck that effort the minute someone showed up, feeling either embarrassed or threatened with the observation.

“But what about Aries? What if he’s out there right now playing with her mind?” Tai’gee added, worried about the War God showing up at any moment to try and corrupt Kaija’s emerging sensuality again.

“No, he won’t do that – not with both Athena and Artemis watching over Kaija,” Xena supplied with confidence.

“How do you know they’re there? You said the gods were unreliable.”

“I told Artemis we were coming,” said Gabrielle. “She said she would watch over us personally.”

“As did Athena before we left.”

Tai’gee let that placate her, but she wouldn’t really be comfortable until they had crossed Amazon borders.

Kaija returned to the camp many hours later. They were all still awake, poking at the fire, sitting in thought, pretending to tend to their equipment and belongings. Very quietly, the youngest of the travelers re-entered their company. She chose to sit on a log facing the fire, content to keep the peace. The others joined her one by one and they found themselves sitting in an awkward silence.

“How about a story,” suggested Gabrielle in an attempt to lighten the mood. Tai’gee was the most enthusiastic, but the others didn’t seem disinclined to listening.

“Once, a not so long time ago, there was a young woman named Dimetra, and she was granted one wish from the gods. She didn’t take much time to think about her wish, and said she wanted to have the most beautiful hair in all the world, so every man would be attracted to her. She was a very vain woman, and when her wish was granted, although she was very beautiful, she spent all her time obsessing over her hair. Her vanity in turn repulsed all the men, and she lived to be the oldest maid with beautiful hair in the world.”

“That is a story? But it is unfair to the woman. She only wished for what would be necessary to find a mate,” said Kaija.

“No, you missed the point. The moral is not to be vain. Always thinking only about one’s self is wrong.”

“It is wrong to do what is necessary to carry on your life line?”

Gabrielle looked to Xena for help, but got nothing but a shrug. The warrior leaned back to turn down her sleeping skins and snuggle under them, tired now after a long and taxing day.

“But Dimetra didn’t really do what she needed to get a mate Kaij’, because they weren’t interested in her beautiful hair. She should have chosen more wisely.”

Kaija considered this and then shrugged. Gabrielle gave Tai’gee a thankful look.

“So what would you wish for?” Tai’gee asked of Gabrielle.

“Me? There’re so many things I would like to wish for – peace, happiness. I think it would be too hard for me to decide.” Tai’gee and Kaija merely waited for an answer. “Ok, ok. I think I would wish that everyone realized they didn’t have to solve their problems through war and violence. They can be solved with love and understanding.”

The two young friends nodded, absorbing her choice without commentary. Tai’gee turned the same question to Xena.

“Yeah, what would you wish for Xena?” Gabrielle grinned.

Xena peeked at them from under her sleeping skins. “Right now – at this very moment?” At their nods, she said, “A good night’s sleep,” and rolled over.

“Come on, we’re serious!” Tai’gee protested.

“I am too,” she threw back over her shoulder. “I’ve already got the most important things in life – except rest.”

Gabrielle shook her head. She turned to Kaija and asked, “What about you? What would you wish for?”

Kaija had acquired a stick and was dragging it lazily through the forest debris at her feet. Calmly, and without looking up from her idle task, she said “To know this love that makes you two so happy. I want to know why love is worth humans fighting and dying when they do not have to; and how it makes friendship.”

Gabrielle could not help the beaming smile. “That’s a wonderful wish. I’m sure you’ll get it.” The blonde shot a happy glance to Tai’gee who was considering her friend quietly.

“Yeah... maybe.”

Tai’gee was tempted to reach out and hold Kaija, hold her hand, wrap an arm around her shoulder, anything just to be in contact with her. She’d held back though, not wanting to invade whatever new found space Kaija had acquired. She was surprised when, after holding back the third such impulse, Kaija had very casually raised her arm and held open an inviting space by her side for Tai’gee to move into – which she did immediately. She curled into her friend’s embrace and tucked her head into the crook of Kaija’s arm and shoulder, ignoring Gabrielle’s smug smile.

“Love is very special Kaija. And you are very special – there’s no reason you can’t have as many friends as you want.”

“She’s right,” Xena added over her shoulder again. “You just have to trust people a little bit. Let them know who you are. Living with the Amazons will teach you a lot about all that. Passions abound there.”

“Xena!” Gabrielle could hear the impish smile quirking the edges of Xena’s mouth. Impudently, the warrior only raised a shoulder to shrug and hunkered down further into her blankets.

~

The four friends stood together just outside of the Amazon mainstay. Gabrielle and Xena had spent a couple days hanging out in the city and were leaving now that Tai’gee and Kaija had been introduced. Tai’gee appeared incredibly excited about the entire affair. Kaija looked apprehensive at best.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine,” Xena said with a gentle pat to Kaija’s shoulder. “Tai’gee’s here, Ephiny’s here for you as well.”

“And we’ll definitely be back to check on you two!” Gabrielle added.

Tai’gee hugged both of them, enthusiastically, and thanked them for giving them this chance. “For everything. For saving our lives.” Xena, to Gabrielle’s immense delight, blushed.

Kaija stepped up as well, though choosing to practice the forearm shake she’d learned in the last couple of days rather than hugs. There was a power in the girl’s grip neither bard nor warrior could deny, and the energy they felt in her grasp was something they hoped would always be there for her.

Gabrielle glanced down as she finished her handshake with Kaija, and noticed the arrowhead still hanging around her neck. “Athena said you didn’t have to wear that anymore... You can heal on your own now.”

“I know, but it is a gift from my Pawpaw. I will wear it.”

“If you’d like, Ephiny can help you get your feathers mounted and you could put those on your necklace as well,” Gabrielle suggested. Kaija accepted it with a gracious nod.

“She’s going to be a force to reckon with,” Gabrielle said to Xena as they departed.

Xena hummed in agreement.

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